You don’t have to spend much time around parents, teachers, or experts to hear the phrase, “They’re just seeking attention.” While tricks abound about how to suppress attention-seeking, what continuously baffles me is the lack of interest in what lies behind the behavior. Yes, children can sometimes be irritating, rude and sometimes downright naughty, but why? Biologically, what is going on for the child?

All becomes clear when we realize that so-called attention-seeking is actually a child trying to communicate a need and feel connected. The need to feel connected is fundamental to our biology. Many of us have had times of feeling isolated and alone. In the past, to be alone would have meant death, or at least great danger.

Children are biologically driven to connect with the significant adults around them. Their survival depends on our understanding their needs—if they feel no sense of connection, they have no faith in us understanding and meeting their needs. The more disconnected they feel, the higher their levels of stress hormone. They will act up until they achieve some sort of connection, and then their bodies can naturally calm again. Some disconnections are inevitable (some are even valuable), but how we handle them and, more importantly, how we handle the reconnection phase is fundamental to parenting. The more we muck this process up, the more often we have irritating, rude and naughty children. Fact.

(Note: Some children are so suppressed, behavior-wise, that they appear to be managing. They’re not, of course, if they’re emotionally disconnected. Rebelling tweens and teenagers or college-age and adult children who go “off the rails” or shut down are signs this has happened.)
Attention-Seeking is a Big Fat Lie

Written by Karyn Van Der Zwet
Saturday, 01 December 2012 00:00 - Last Updated Tuesday, 30 July 2013 11:00

I now have to write when my young son is asleep. If I don’t, he is continually pulling on the mouse and tapping at the keyboard, and the noise he makes gets louder and more urgent. He is annoying, and as rude as a 17-month-old can get…and yes, I could interpret his behavior as naughty. Sometimes I find it difficult not to snap at him—often my task would only take 10 or 15 minutes of concentrated effort. His interruptions are damned frustrating! But he is showing his sense of disconnection. As soon as I reconnect, he’s quiet and calm again.

Unlike natural separations (which they choose), children feel a sense of disconnection every time we force a separation—when we choose to be on the computer or speak to someone else; when we go the bathroom or take a shower without them; or even just by being on the phone. Many people treat these as times for discipline, star charts or other forms of training, when there’s a much healthier way to manage. It’s all in how we use our eyes.

When you greet your children first thing in the morning, at the end of the day, or whenever they’re waiting for your attention, try this:

1. Focus your eyes on theirs.
2. Stretch your eye sockets as wide as you can, and
3. Immediately afterwards, crinkle the muscles around your eyes to make them smile. (You might have to practice)
4. Then greet them for a few minutes. Let them tell you something, show you something or give you a hug. That concentrates all your attention, away your thoughts, on them.

If reconnecting properly—this is biology, not opinion—is new for your children, they’ll initially not believe what they are experiencing, and it might take a while for you all to get used to it. Conscious eye-contact still feels unnatural to me, but for our children it’s now normal, and the results are fantastic. Aside from everything else, they behave better.

There are three regular daily times of disconnection for most of us. Firstly, immediately after they wake: Consciously reconnect, and it will be a smoother process getting out the door. Secondly, when on the phone. If you can see your children, use your eyes to keep contact. Even so, don’t spend too long chatting. If they’re out of sight, make it as snappy as you can without being rude. You’ll save yourself a lot of bad behavior and bother by making this little sacrifice. Truly serious phone calls happen rarely.

The other common disconnection happens, particularly for small children, when you’re in the bathroom or taking a shower. For these times, please consider putting aside your discomfort and allowing them in the room with you. They are going to feel anxious otherwise, and most children will do a-n-y-t-h-i-n-g to get you to reconnect. If they appear to be managing, what’s their behavior like afterward? Well-trained children show their stress afterward, not during. They’re still having the same biological reaction, but it manifests at a different time. Besides, with all the anxiety around bodily functions, the better it is for them to see more normal, misshapen, baby-stretched ones.

The stranger the child, the shorter the amount of time it takes for them to experience disconnection, and the longer it takes to reconnect. Children instinctively know they could not survive without us; any time we are “away,” they experience it as disconnection. It’s like everything else with parenting. The better the results over time, the bigger the right sort of commitment in the early years. (Hint: if it involves the words “training” or “self-esteem” it’s not the right kind of commitment.)

Temperament matters. One of our children has a much smaller tolerance for separation from me, and he generally needs longer to reconnect than our other, more sociaable kids. We could train him not to show us his stress—when with stickers, praise or punishment—but then it wouldn’t go away, it would只是。Instead, we choose to use the above techniques to show him it’s ok for him to be in and to help him to manage the stress better when he has to be. Children are wired to handle separation and disconnection, and the more they are allowed to experience it, the better they are able to handle it. If done properly, children can develop a healthy tolerance and love for separation from parents and caregivers. They learn not to dislike separation, and therefore less likely to show attention-seeking behavior. Even, by recognising how excited they are when they are reunited after separation, having fun or school—this is a good sign, not a reason to make them reconnect.

The younger the child, the shorter the amount of time it takes for them to experience disconnection, and the longer it can take to reconnect. Children instinctively know they could not survive without us; any time we are “absent,” they experience it as disconnection. It’s like everything else with parenting: The better the results over time, the bigger the right sort of commitment in the early years. (Hint: if it involves the words “training” or “self-esteem” it’s not the right kind of commitment.)

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There are two key ways to tell if children are well-connected, and therefore less likely to show attention-seeking behavior. First, by recognizing how excited they are when they greet their parents after daycare, kindergarten or school—the more excited, the better. And second, by checking how easily they make eye contact with their mothers. Calm, steady and expressive, and all is well.