



# Why Kids Don't Need Attention but an Invitation for Relationship

by Dr. Deborah MacNamara

---

A parent asked me whether I thought her child just needed more attention from her? Her daughter was anxious, restless, easily frustrated, and prone to resistance. The mother questioned whether a lack of attention was at the root of the issue?

What this mother knew was that she needed to take the lead in finding a way out of the impasse with her daughter. I suggested a different question might be more helping in providing insight. Instead of focusing on the attention she gave her daughter I wondered if she could consider whether her daughter was receptive to a relationship with her and if not, how this could be gained or strengthened?

This caring and responsible mother had no shortage of attention for her daughter – to address when she behaved poorly, to make sure her homework got done, and to get her out of the house each morning. Mom spent a lot of time in battles with her daughter, in dealing with upset siblings, and in trying to find a way to have 'quality time' with her. Attention from this mother wasn't the source of the problem.

## **Giving kids attention**

It turns out that attention is not the place we grow from – it is fleeting and impermanent – a quick fix that diminishes as soon as the focus is no longer on you. What our kids need is something more nourishing that can go the full distance into adulthood. They need an invitation for relationship that dances them to the resting point.

Humans come with an innate drive to seek contact and closeness with others. The late neuroscientist, Jaak Pankseep, called it the 'seeking instinct' and said it could be found in all mammal species. The seeking instinct is behind a child's desire to be close and drives them to hold onto us. Their high need for affiliation isn't a mistake but part of nature's plan to keep them close for the purpose of caretaking. The old adage that a child is simply trying to get some attention doesn't understand this instinctive hunger for connection.

It is natural for a child to demand attention in a myriad of ways from physically clinging to us, emotionally demanding our focus with eruptions, or simply telling us – "I need some Mommy time." The problem is not with their hunger for connection but rather in how it is fulfilled. Giving a child what they ask for and simply responding to their demands doesn't help them rest in our care, in fact, it can make them more restless and insatiable. They were not meant to be in charge of commanding our attention but rather taking it for granted.

Debates on the quality vs. quantity of time misses the mark and traps us into conversations about time spent instead of focussing on the invitation given to a child. Relationships cannot be broken down into units of time and seconds. What is missing in these units of measurement is whether we impart a desire to be with a child, a warmth that comes from being together, and a genuine enjoyment that our time is well spent with them.

If our time with a child is based on counting down minutes or moving from one event to the next, then time becomes the unit of measurement instead of the emotions between us. What we need to ask is:

- Do we have a desire to understand them, to take their emotional pulse, and to see the world through their eyes?
- Do we do more than simply respond to their demands and instead, take the lead in caring for them?
- Do we count down the hours we spend with a child or do we consider a deeper question as to whether our child is counting on us?

### **The invitation for relationship**

We cannot release our children from their hunger for relationship by simply responding to their calls for our attention. We need to seize the lead in providing for them, to give more than is being pursued, and to take responsibility for fulfilling their hunger for connection. If they have to work to get our attention, then they cannot rest in it and can become enslaved to the performance required to get it.

When this mother started to understand that giving her daughter attention wasn't the answer, she found her way to offering her an invitation for something much deeper. She gave her a generous invitation to rest in her care and to be released from the greatest hunger the human heart has. It was an invitation for relationship that her daughter didn't have to work for, nor be good enough in order to keep. It was an invitation to be heard, to be seen in a vulnerable light, to matter, to be held onto, and to share secrets.

Limits, restrictions, and saying no to her daughter's requests were also included in this mother's invitation for relationship. The mother's generosity went to her daughter's emotions – for her frustration, resistance, and upset without fixing or changing it. While guidelines for behaviour and treating others were conveyed, there was also room for her daughter to have her feelings about what did not go her way. As her mother became better able to invite her daughter's upset without getting triggered, as she was more calm in the face of her daughter's resistance, and conveyed that no behaviour nor emotion could tear the relationship apart – her daughter felt a deeper sense of what it meant to be held onto.

Children don't just need our attention although this may be part of what we do to convey an invitation for relationship to them. What they need to feel is an invitation to be close even when they have fallen short of our expectations. What they need to see is that our desire to be with them endures, is generous, unwavering, unconditional, personalized, exclusive, and protected from competing attachments.

### **What do we give our attention to?**

Growth in a child is fuelled from a place of rest, that is, when they can take for granted that they don't have to work at getting an invitation for a relationship with us. We cannot meet their needs if we simply respond to their demands. When you have to work for love, you cannot rest in it as Gordon Neufeld states.

We need to extend a deeper invitation for relationship that stems from that place inside of us that yearns to be the answer to a child's needs. It means we will need to stretch to be more gracious and forgiving in light of all the things they do not do. It means we will need to be generous in inviting their emotions when we thwart their agendas and take the lead in caring for them. It means that we will need to convey to them that this relationship is for life and is the foundation upon which they can rest.

When we work at giving our kids relational rest then nature will push them to play and grow. They will be free from the deepest hunger that lives inside each of us and one that can only be answered by resting in someone's invitation for care taking. Love was meant to be a gift that is freely given by people who care for us and this is something that is worth paying attention to.

*Copyright Deborah MacNamara*

**Dr. Deborah MacNamara** is the author of ***Rest, Play, Grow: Making Sense of Preschoolers (or anyone who acts like one)***, is on faculty at the Neufeld Institute, and Director of **Kid's Best Bet**, a counselling and family resource center. For more information please see [www.macnamara.ca](http://www.macnamara.ca) and [www.neufeldinstitute.org](http://www.neufeldinstitute.org).