



ST. MARY'S HOME FOR CHILDREN

AGENCY CHAT

CHANGE HAPPENS WITH AWARENESS OF TRAUMA

FEBRUARY, 2019

REFRAMING:

~~ATTENTION SEEKING~~

ATTACHMENT SEEKING BEHAVIOR

We encourage you to take a few minutes to CHAT with your colleagues, friends (and children if appropriate) about important issues we all face in our world, and here at our trauma-informed agency.

Our CHATs are designed to introduce topics and start conversations, not to be a substitute for training or consultation with a professional. Please talk to a professional at St. Mary's if you're concerned or have questions about any topics introduced in our CHATs.

If you have ideas for a CHAT, please contact any Program Director or the Executive Director. We strive to make CHATs meaningful and relevant to the issues facing children and families, as well as reflecting trauma-informed best practices.

If you are interested in learning more about Attachment Theory, you can research the British psychoanalyst John Bowlby or American Psychologist, Mary S. Ainsworth;

Attend a St. Mary's Trauma Informed Care training;

Talk to your St. Mary's Clinician or Case manager about your own individual situation, relationships, stressors or attachments. Ask for personalized ideas that might help in your family or situation.

Our mission is to create an environment of healing and hope for those we serve. Children and families are empowered to develop healthy, trusting relationships. Through an array of residential and community based services, we create effective, lasting partnerships that enable children and adults to lead fulfilling lives.

The Problem:

Sometimes when youth are seeking attention, it can feel as if they are monopolizing a caregiver's (e.g. parent, foster parent, grandparent, teacher, counselor) time. When the identified caregiver's attention is focused elsewhere, away from the youth, the youth might demonstrate an inability to tolerate that. This will often cause the youth to feel as if they are "unwanted" or "less important", leading them to engage in behaviors that might elicit a response from the identified caretaker.



The youth might present with "attention seeking" behaviors including behaviors we might even label as "negative" attention-seeking behaviors. These behaviors might include the persistent asking of questions; crying, screaming, or yelling; wandering or threatening to run away; threatening to self-harm or engaging in self injurious behaviors; physically searching for the identified caretaker; becoming overly dramatic and exhibiting over-the-top reactions to minor requests; lashing out physically/aggressively at an individual or identified caretaker.

These situations can be challenging for any caretaker, especially during times of stress. It is not uncommon for these behaviors to increase stress, nor is it uncommon for these behaviors to provoke damaging responses from the caretaker. Unfortunately, these behaviors and the responses they provoke can often damage relationships. In order to strengthen and rebuild relationships, it is important that we re-frame "attention-seeking" behaviors for what it actually is—"attachment seeking"!

The Reframe:

First, remove the term "attention-seeking" from your vocabulary, and replace it with "attachment seeking"! This will not eliminate the behavior, but it will begin to help us better understand—and therefore react to—what is actually going on:



The youth is really struggling with an evolutionary programmed need to know that the caretaker is there to protect and keep them safe... the child is seeking an attachment to you...an attachment to a person the child views as one so important you will provide them with support, protection and care...they just really want to know you will keep them safe.

When the child is presenting with attachment seeking behaviors, they are letting you know that they view you as a safe and important person! When we can better understand the youth's needs, it is often more natural to react in a positive and nurturing manner. This understanding will not only allow the youth and caretaker to develop a deeper and more positive relationship, but it will also satisfy the youth's need to feel safe and supported. Based on your unique situation, consider the following before reacting to an attachment seeking behavior (and also consider trying them while there is no disruption at all):

- Give a supportive smile; send the message "I see you"
- Remain positive; ask questions; send the message "I hear you"; "You are wanted"; "You are important"
- Ignore the behavior, but not the child
- View conflicts as an opportunity to build a better relationship; send the message "I am not going anywhere"

Always remember, consistency is key! If you consistently react in a positive and nurturing manner, the youth is able to feel confident that he/she is safe and important.