

# Hungry for Attention

## The Reward Campers Crave Most

STEVE MAZZA, PhD

Let's start with a riddle. As a camp counselor, you carry a powerful reward for campers with you wherever you go. Whether you realize it or not, you will distribute this reward to campers throughout the day. You'll tend to give this reward most often when campers are acting out, which could lead them to misbehave more. While all children crave this reward, they develop different strategies to acquire it: some have learned to be helpful and respectful, while others have learned to whine, complain, and stir up trouble. What is this mysterious and potent reward?

If you haven't guessed it yet, you're not alone. You're among millions of caregivers who are also in the dark about their most dynamic tool when working with children. My mission is to teach you how to harness what might be the most underutilized and misused resource in camp: your attention. Attention is the reward that counselors provide campers *all day long*, so using it strategically is extremely important.

I'm referring to any form of communication that is directed toward a camper. Attention includes facial expressions (smiles, grimaces, raised eyebrows), emotional expressions (pride, anger, worry), verbal expressions (praises, criticisms, commands), and physical expressions (high fives, thumbs up, hugs). In other words, attention includes all of the ways you interact with campers. The following advice applies to *every interaction* you will have with kids this summer.

### Attention Is Like Candy

To children, your attention is like candy (or their other favorite sugary treat). There's nothing else quite as sweet. Your campers crave your eye contact, your words, your warmth, and your praise. They even crave your anger, your scolding, and your criticisms. Negative attention is better than no attention, just like sour candy is better than no candy (Gallimore, Tharp, & Kemp, 1969). In fact, some kids prefer it, because negative attention tends to be more intense.

So, if an attention-seeking camper walks out of line and a counselor screams "Johnny! Get in line now," that child has just been rewarded for his wandering feet. Frequently yelling at Johnny is like handing him a Butterfinger every time he breaks the rules. In my experience, many counselors unknowingly feed their campers metaphoric Skittles, Starburst, and Sour Patch Kids

in response to their misbehavior. If I were Johnny, I would be sure to meander out of line more often — after all, it worked last time.

This is how children learn to escalate their behavior. You may have experienced campers going "from zero to one hundred." These children have learned that if they become disruptive enough, they will be rewarded with attention from their counselors while also delaying or avoiding an activity they dislike (perhaps due to anxiety, boredom, or a skill deficiency). As a counselor, it is your responsibility to be strategic about when and how you give your attention.

So, will you be the kind of counselor who provides your attention when children speak and act respectfully? Or will you be the one who delivers attention when campers scream loud enough, complain hard enough, and behave aggressively enough? You will notice that some campers misbehave more

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around certain staff members. This is because campers quickly learn which counselors will reward disruptive behavior and which counselors won't. Reward only positive behavior and your campers will behave for you.



### **The Candy Diet: Sweet and Sour Attention**

Candy can be sweet or sour, and attention is the same. *Sweet attention* (smiles, praise, warmth) is the good stuff — it's high-quality, delicious, and feels great to take in. On the other hand, acts of *sour attention* (yelling, eye-rolling, scolding) are like Extreme Sour Patch Kids: they are harsh on the tongue but can quickly become an obsession once the taste is acquired. Sour attention is like a guilty-pleasure food that people can't stop eating but then feel sick about afterward. Disruptive campers will eat up sour attention all day long and then feel ashamed when it's over. Everyone loses in this scenario.

To properly emotionally feed your campers, the majority of their diet should consist of sweet attention. Positive attention

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boosts campers' self-esteem, strengthens the counselor-camper relationship, and motivates campers to behave respectfully (Hembree-Kigin & McNeil, 2013). Give your campers sweet attention after all desirable behaviors. In other words, "catch your campers being good." Find moments when they are sitting quietly, asking politely, socializing appropriately, and praise them for those specific behaviors. Your relationships with your campers will flourish if the majority of your interactions are warm, positive, and encouraging. The sweetest attention includes getting down on the child's level, making eye contact, using an encouraging tone of voice, speaking kindly, using specific praise, and using appropriate physical touch (like putting your hand on a camper's shoulder).

Sour attention, on the other hand, both rewards undesirable behaviors and tarnishes the counselor-camper relationship. Bitter sarcasm, raising your voice, and calling out campers' disruptive behaviors are common forms of sour attention. These will reduce campers' self-esteem and lead them to act out more over time (Patterson, 1976). Furthermore, disruptive behaviors naturally call more intense attention to themselves than respectful behaviors do, so children



can easily get addicted to negative attention. Counselors tend to give sour attention out of frustration after other strategies have failed, but an ideal summer camp is sour-free.

### STRATEGIC IGNORING

How, then, should you respond to disruptive behavior if sour attention is off the table? The

answer is *strategic ignoring*. Strategic ignoring is simply the withdrawal of all attention from the camper while the inappropriate behavior is occurring. Ignoring requires that you refrain from making eye contact, facial expressions, sighs of exasperation, and that you withhold all verbal responses to the disruptive behavior.

I recommend strategic ignoring for mild attention-seeking, disrupting, and inappropriate behaviors. This includes when campers repeatedly whine, sass, complain, and negotiate after being asked to do something (see the “Don’t Ignore This Behavior” sidebar, below, for behavior you should always stop immediately). Strategic ignoring relates to a popular catch phrase from camping expert Bob Ditter (2011): “Drop the rope.” Whereas I tout that every counselor carries around the reward of

attention, Ditter cautions that every camper carries around a rope used to lure counselors into games of verbal tug-of-war. (See Bob Ditter’s May 2017 *Camping Magazine* article “Six Habits I Wish Every Counselor Had”: [ACAcamps.org/resource-library/camping-magazine/six-habits-i-wish-every-counselor-had](http://ACAcamps.org/resource-library/camping-magazine/six-habits-i-wish-every-counselor-had).) Combine our advice and strategically ignore campers’ attempts to provoke you into negotiations. Otherwise, you risk accidentally rewarding them for arguing with you.

### NEUTRAL RESPONDING

Strategic ignoring can be challenging. We’re all human, and we often react automatically and emotionally. When your own frustration is building it makes staying disengaged especially difficult. When ignoring is too challenging, use a technique I call “neutral responding.” Neutral responding, which involves providing short, emotionless, to-the-point comments, is like sugar-free licorice: it’s bland and just not that satisfying. A neutral response should be concise, boring, and robotic (e.g. “I’ll discuss it when you speak respectfully.”). A calm tone of voice is essential here. Remember, disruptive campers are trying to get a reaction out of you by behaving inappropriately. If your camper has a habit of pushing your buttons, this is because your buttons consistently work. And the bigger your reaction, the better your attention tastes. By remaining neutral, your emotional buttons become nonfunctional and, as a result, campers will stop pushing them.

### Don't Ignore This Behavior

Many disruptive behaviors should *not* ever be ignored, including acts of physical aggression, sexually inappropriate behavior, destruction of property, and threats of violence. These behaviors should be stopped immediately and then addressed in collaboration with your camp leader or a senior staff member.

### Public Displays of Attention

The holy grail of the candy diet is what I call the “public display of attention” (PDA). PDA, besides being a slightly off-color acronym, is an announcement to the *whole group* praising one camper’s commendable behavior. If your attention alone is like a Skittle to campers, PDA is like an ice cream sundae steeped in hot fudge.

Let’s go back to the example of little Johnny stepping out of line. A skilled counselor will strategically ignore Johnny’s misbehavior and instead focus on publicly catching campers being good. With this approach, the counselor loudly gives sweet attention to those campers who *are* in line. By enthusiastically announcing praise for the children in line, the out-of-line campers notice. Suddenly, these campers

will scurry into line in hopes of getting their own delicious shout-outs. Here's how it might play out:

*Johnny and a few other campers are straying out of line, but Adam is staying in line.*

"Adam is doing an awesome job staying in line! Let's hear it for Adam!"

*Jane, one of the out-of-line campers, quickly steps back in line.*

"Jane just got back in line! Great listening, Jane!"

*A few other campers jump in line and tighten up the formation.*

"Dave and Doris are superstar line members!"

*Noticing the commotion and all of the other campers in line, Johnny finds his place in line.*

"Johnny, great job getting in line, buddy! I love when you are in line with the others!"

As you can see, PDAs are effective at motivating all campers to get in line using *only sweet positivity*. The sour approach ("Johnny, you are always out of line!") would have a negative effect on the counselor-camper relationship and also accidentally rewards Johnny's "out-of-line" behavior.

The most important implication of the candy diet I'm prescribing is that when sweet attention is abundant, sour attention becomes unnecessary. As a counselor, you can most effectively promote respectful and adaptive camper behavior by using only positivity, enthusiasm, and warmth, with occasional strategic ignoring and neutral responding. There really is no need to get sour with your campers. In truth, relying on negativity doesn't help you or them in the long run, but instead continues the cycle of disagreeable interactions.

### Just Children

One final note about campers who frequently act out. They are not "bad." They are not "problems." And they are not "manipulative." They are children in need of compassion and empathy, who have learned the wrong lessons from well-intentioned caretakers and counselors. They are often emotionally vulnerable, anxious, or impulsive, and they need extra care and support to be successful at camp. These campers require more warmth, positivity, and understanding than we often realize, and it is your responsibility

as their counselor to provide it. You have a precious opportunity to teach them new, adaptive behaviors and life skills. It is perhaps the most important aspect of your work at camp.

Your attention, sweet or sour, is what campers crave most. They simply can't get enough of it. You are a walking vending machine, distributing Skittles, Starburst, and Sour Patch Kids to your campers throughout the day. With such appetizing rewards at your disposal, I advise you to distribute them wisely. Use your attention to positively influence your campers' lives, not to reward them for bad behavior. This summer, harness the power of your attention every day. Your campers are hungry for it, and they *will* manage to get it one way or another, so prepare yourself. When your campers press your buttons this summer, how will you respond?

*Photo on pages 74–75 courtesy of Yosemite Sierra Summer Camp, San Clemente, California.*

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### Discussion Questions

1. How do you usually respond when someone is trying to push your buttons? How might your response accidentally reward a camper's behavior?
2. Because disruptive campers are often addicted to sour attention, how might you use sweet attention, strategic ignoring, and neutral responding to change their behavior in a positive direction?
3. Your camp group is changing for swim and some of the campers are dilly-dallying while others are changing quickly. How might you use a public display of attention to reward the quick-changing campers while motivating distracted campers to hurry up, using only positive attention?

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