

ATTENTION-GETTING

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology, Behavioral Science, Developmental Psychology

1. Core Definition

The term **attention-getting** describes a functional class of behavior, often contextually inappropriate or maladaptive, that is primarily maintained by the receipt of social reinforcement. This reinforcement, which functions as the consequence of the behavior, may take the form of positive attention (praise, physical contact, verbal engagement) or negative attention (reprimands, scolding, or intense emotional reactions from others). In the framework of applied behavioral analysis, attention-getting behavior serves a specific function: to obtain access to social interaction or recognition from caregivers, peers, or authority figures. The behavior itself is defined not by its physical form (topography), but by its predictable outcome--the contingent delivery of attention.

Unlike behaviors motivated purely by tangible items or sensory stimulation, **attention-getting** behaviors are inherently social. They require an audience whose reaction provides the necessary stimulus to maintain the behavior. Examples commonly cited include childhood temper tantrums, persistent questioning, or the deliberate presentation of distress or illness, such as a child claiming to have a stomach ache when no physical ailment is present, solely to gain parental focus and care. This functional distinction is critical for assessment and intervention, as the strategy for modifying the behavior must focus on altering the environmental variables that provide the reinforcing attention.

2. Behavioral Mechanisms and Operant Conditioning

The mechanism underlying **attention-getting** behavior is firmly rooted in the principles of Operant Conditioning, specifically through positive and negative reinforcement schedules. When an individual engages in a behavior (e.g., screaming) and that behavior is immediately followed by the desired attention (e.g., a parent rushes over), the likelihood of that behavior occurring again in similar circumstances increases. This is a powerful demonstration of positive social reinforcement. The individual learns that the target behavior is an effective, and often efficient, method for commanding social resources.

Furthermore, attention can also function as negative reinforcement. For example, a student who frequently disrupts class may receive immediate attention from the teacher, which results in the student being removed from a difficult academic task. While the attention itself might seem punitive (e.g., being sent to the principal's office), the true reinforcing function is the escape from the demanding antecedent task, maintained by the social interaction involved in the disciplinary process. The behavior is thus strengthened because it successfully terminated an undesirable

situation, illustrating the complexity of analyzing the true function behind seemingly simple **attention-seeking** actions.

The schedule of reinforcement plays a significant role in the persistence of these behaviors. If attention is provided reliably every time the behavior occurs (continuous reinforcement), the behavior is established quickly. However, behaviors maintained by intermittent or variable schedules of reinforcement (where attention is only provided some of the time) tend to be highly resistant to extinction. This explains why behaviors like **temper tantrums** can persist over long periods, as the sporadic "payoff" is enough to motivate continued use of the strategy.

3. Historical Context and Development

While the phenomenon of seeking social recognition is ancient, the systematic study of **attention-getting** as a functional class of behavior emerged prominently within the 20th-century behavioral tradition. Early psychological research focused heavily on motivation and social drives, but the specific operationalization of attention as a primary reinforcer was solidified by B.F. Skinner and the development of Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA). This framework shifted the focus from internal, unobservable motivations to external, observable functional relationships between environment and behavior.

In the mid-20th century, developmental psychology integrated these behavioral concepts to explain typical and atypical child development. Researchers recognized that infants and children naturally utilize behaviors (crying, vocalizing) to elicit caregiver attention for survival and socialization. However, when these behaviors become overly intense, frequent, or age-inappropriate, they transition into what is termed **attention-getting behavior**. Clinicians began employing formalized protocols, such as the Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA), to systematically test the hypothesis that social attention maintains specific problematic behaviors. This movement cemented attention as one of the fundamental "functions of behavior," alongside escape, tangible access, and sensory regulation.

4. Key Characteristics and Manifestations

Attention-getting behaviors exhibit several defining characteristics that help differentiate them from other functional behaviors:

Context Dependency: These behaviors typically occur when the individual perceives a lack of attention, or when a preferred caregiver is engaged with another activity or person.

Variability of Form: The behavior can manifest in diverse ways, ranging from low-intensity verbal disruptions (e.g., whining, interrupting) to high-intensity physical displays (e.g., throwing objects, self-injurious behaviors, dramatic crying).

Cessation Upon Attention: A key diagnostic indicator is that the behavior often quickly terminates or decreases in intensity once the desired social interaction or attention is received.

In clinical practice, these behaviors manifest across the lifespan, though they are most frequently studied in developmental populations. In childhood, common examples include the aforementioned **temper tantrums**, which are prolonged, intense, and often calculated displays of frustration or anger that cease immediately upon the delivery of focused parental engagement or a desired item contingent on the cessation of the tantrum. A classic, specific illustration is the child who tells his or her mother that he or she has a **stomach ache** when this is not the case, engaging in attention-getting behaviors designed to elicit nurturing and protective responses from the caregiver.

In older populations, **attention-getting** behaviors can evolve into more complex or socially subtle forms, such as excessive self-disclosure, dramatic storytelling, or recurring somatic complaints (feigning illness). These sophisticated tactics seek sustained social validation or sympathy, often involving manipulation of social dynamics to ensure the spotlight remains focused on the individual's perceived needs or distress.

5. Functional Behavior Assessment and Intervention

The assessment of **attention-getting** behaviors relies heavily on the Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA). FBA procedures involve systematic data collection--including direct observation, scatterplots, and A-B-C (Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence) recording--to identify the environmental conditions that reliably trigger and maintain the target behavior. The goal is to establish empirical evidence that attention is, in fact, the driving reinforcer. This process is crucial because two topographically identical behaviors (e.g., hitting) may serve two completely different functions (attention vs. escape), necessitating distinct intervention strategies.

Once the function is confirmed as attention-seeking, intervention strategies are implemented that focus on modifying the reinforcement contingency. The most powerful approach involves a combination of two core strategies:

Extinction: Systematically withholding the reinforcing attention when the inappropriate behavior occurs. For instance, ignoring a mild tantrum while ensuring safety. This is challenging because it often leads to an extinction burst--a temporary increase in the intensity and frequency of the behavior before it begins to decline.

Differential Reinforcement of Alternative Behaviors (DRA): Actively teaching and reinforcing appropriate, functional communication methods to gain attention (e.g., teaching a child to say, "Excuse me, I need help" instead of yelling). This provides the individual with a socially acceptable, efficient replacement behavior that achieves the same functional outcome.

Effective intervention also mandates the provision of high-quality, non-contingent attention (Planned Positive Attention). By providing regular, predictable positive attention throughout the day, the motivational "deprivation" that drives the need for disruptive behavior is reduced, making the individual less likely to engage in inappropriate actions to achieve that social reinforcement.

6. Significance and Ethical Considerations

The concept of **attention-getting** behavior holds profound significance in developmental and clinical psychology. Understanding this function allows clinicians to move beyond simple punishment and instead focus on meaningful behavior change through environmental manipulation. If a behavior is misunderstood or misclassified, interventions are likely to fail or even exacerbate the problem. For example, punishing a child for throwing a tantrum without addressing the underlying need for attention only teaches the child that more extreme behaviors are required to gain social reaction.

Ethical considerations weigh heavily in the implementation of extinction procedures. While withholding attention is functionally necessary, it must be balanced with the individual's need for care and safety. Caregivers must be trained to differentiate between truly problematic attention-getting behaviors and genuine distress or need. Furthermore, the goal is never to reduce the individual's need for attention, but rather to teach socially appropriate, effective methods for obtaining it, thus fostering stronger communication skills and healthier social relationships.

Further Reading

[Attention-Getting Definition and Examples](#) (Psychology Dictionary)

[Functional Behavioral Assessment](#) (FBA)

[Positive and Negative Reinforcement](#) (Operant Conditioning Concepts)