

NEWSLETTER

WebParentTip, Volume 2, 11 for 8-1-01

TOO MUCH ATTENTION?

Most parents are worried about not spending enough time with their children.

Every child needs some attentive time from each parent every day. Attentive time is time when you are not doing anything else--you are giving your child your full attention. You are close to your child and fully engaged with your child, You are at your child's level--literally, as you may be on the floor and figuratively, at the child's developmental level. You are doing something the child likes to do, reading the child a book or playing a game, or you are showing the child how to do something like sew doll's clothes or hammer a nail. You aren't thinking about work or cooking.

It doesn't seem possible but parents can spend TOO MUCH attentive time with their children. Actually I can think of several reasons that parents should NOT spend every waking moment hovering over their children or giving them hours and hours of attentive time.

In the first place CHILDREN NEED THEIR SPACE. Everybody needs to be alone. Babies over a few months of age need to be left alone to fall asleep so they learn to develop their own sleep associations or they won't be able to fall asleep except in their parent's arms.

Babies over a few months of age need to learn how to SELF-CALM, which means parents should let them cry a bit after ascertaining the baby is not in pain or danger. They also need time alone to learn by doing things themselves. Of course we show them how to roll a ball but they need to practice doing it by themselves.

Toddlers and preschoolers must learn how to SELF-ENTERTAIN. They will not always have Mommy around to think of the next game. They also must learn about give-and-take. When they get to school they will not always be the center of attention. Teacher needs to spend time with other children too.

Older children must learn how to PREVENT AND DEAL WITH BOREDOM. If every time they say, "There's nothing to do around here!", Mommy hovers over them with suggestions, they'll have trouble learning how to banish boredom by themselves.

Older children also need time alone to THINK AND DREAM. They need some privacy and a private place for their possessions. They even need little secrets.

The message that "over-attention" gives to children is that parents don't trust them to be alone or to grow up by themselves--the parents have to do it for them. The best message parents can give a child is, "We trust you to be able to grow up". Obviously the way this message is conveyed must be developmentally appropriate. We can trust a preschooler to climb on the slide but not play in the street.

If you feel you might actually be spending too much time with your child, take the following steps. 1) Think about WHY you are doing this. What does your child need from you and how much? What do you need from your child and why? 2) BACK OFF from your over-comforting or over-attentiveness. 3) Begin to give your child increasing amounts of age-appropriate TIME ALONE. If your child protests or complains, tell your child that big children play by themselves for a while but when you're through paying the bills, you'll read a story together.