

Attending to Independent Play

Many parents of behavior problem children complain that they are unable to do things, such as talk on the phone, cook dinner, visit with a neighbor, and so forth, without the child interrupting what they are doing. The following steps were designed to help you teach your child to play independently when you must be busy with some other activity. It is a very simple procedure that requires you to pay attention and praise your child for staying away and not interrupting you. Many parents provide a lot of attention to a child who is interrupting them but almost no attention when the child stays away, plays independently, and does not interrupt. No wonder kids interrupt parents so much! To teach your child to not interrupt you when you are busy, do the following:

1. When you are about to become occupied with some activity, such as a phone call, reading, or preparing dinner, give your child a direct command. This command should contain two instructions. One part of it tells the child what to do while you are busy, and the second part specifically tells him or her not to interrupt or bother you. For instance, you can say, "Mom has to talk on the telephone, so I want you to stay in this room and watch television and don't bother me." Remember, give the child something to do that is enjoyable and tell him or her you do not want to be bothered while you are busy.
2. Then, as you begin your activity, stop what you are doing after a moment, go to the child, and praise the child for staying away and not interrupting. Remind the child to stay with his or her assigned task and not to bother you. Return to what you were doing.
3. Then wait a few moments longer before returning to the child and again offering praise for not bothering you. Return to your activity, wait a little longer, and again praise the child.
4. Over time, what you are trying to do is gradually to reduce how often you praise the child for not bothering you while you increase the length of time you can stay at your own task. Initially, you will have to interrupt what you are doing and go praise the child very frequently, say every 30 seconds to 2 minutes. After a few times like this, wait 3 minutes before praising the child. Then wait 5 minutes before praising the child. Each time, you return to what you are working on for a slightly longer period of time before going back to praise the child.
5. If it sounds like your child is about to leave what he or she was doing and come to bother you, immediately stop what you are doing, go to the child, offer praise for not interrupting you, and redirect him or her to stay with the given task. The task you give a child should *not* be a chore, but some interesting activity, for example, coloring, playing with a toy, watching television, or cutting out pictures.
6. By gradually decreasing how often you praise the child, you will be able to stay with your own task for longer and longer time periods while your child does not interrupt you. As soon as you finish what you are doing, go and provide special praise to your child for letting you complete your task. You may even periodically give your child a small privilege or reward for having left you alone while you worked on your project.

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Attending to Independent Play *(page 2 of 2)*

Following are some common activities during which you should try this method to keep your child from bothering you:

Preparing a meal

Talking to an adult

Writing a letter

Doing paperwork

Talking at the dinner table

Talking on the telephone

Reading or watching television

Visiting others' homes

Housecleaning

Accomplishing any special project

You should choose one or two of these types of activities with which to practice this method this week. If you choose talking on the phone, you might want to have your spouse or a friend call you one or two times a day simply as a time to practice this method. That way, when important calls do come in, you have already gotten your child to begin to stay away from you so you can handle these calls with fewer interruptions.