

# How to Teach Your Child to Appropriately Get Your Attention

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It is hard to have a conversation with someone if you do not have their attention. This is true for both children and adults. The ability to successfully capture someone's attention—to connect with them—is a fundamental social skill and provides the foundation for future success in social settings and relationships.

Children use a variety of ways to connect and will often resort to techniques they find most effective, such as yelling or whining. For example, think about a child who wants to get Mom's attention when she is on the phone. The child knows that if they continue to yell loudly, Mom will eventually pause her phone conversation and ask what is needed. If yelling and whining gets a child what they need, they will continue to yell and whine until they learn a new way. How can you change this pattern? You can show your child the way you want them to get your attention (such as tapping you on the shoulder) and then respond when that behavior occurs. When you take the time at home to build on the skills your child is learning at school, you reinforce these positive skills and create a solid social foundation for your child which will help to reduce challenging behaviours.



## Suggestions for Families

- Model the behavior you want your child to learn—often! If you need your child's attention, tap them on the shoulder, move to their eye level and begin your communication from there.
- Practice, practice, practice! Play with this new skill. Practice with parents, siblings and friends. Your child can show their grandparent or teddy bear how to tap on someone's shoulder to get their attention.
- Remind your child of the expectation. If you are on the computer and they whine or begin to cry to gain your attention, remind them, "It looks like you need something. I will respond if you tap on my shoulder and ask me."
- Celebrate when your child displays this new skill. "Wow, you tapped me on the shoulder because you wanted some milk. What a great way to get my attention! I can definitely get you some milk."

## Suggestions for Educators

Most peer interactions start when a child wants to give or get something from a friend. Rather than grab or yell across the room, your child is learning to connect with peers and gain their attention before beginning a conversation by:

1. Moving to stand next to the person.
2. Tapping the person on the shoulder.
3. Looking at the person's eyes to see if they have their attention.

## The Bottom Line

Behaviour is meaningful and communicates a message. If a child does not have an appropriate way to communicate, they will often use challenging behaviour (e.g., hitting, screaming, whining) to communicate their needs. If their needs are then met, the behaviour is strengthened and they will continue to use behaviour to communicate. When parents show their child how to appropriately get attention, the child will be less likely use the challenging behavior to communicate.