

**Tips for Parents** by Susie Kohl

## *Honoring Children's Need for Attention*

“**W**ow, look what you're doing!” “Will you watch me?” a four-year-old boy asks as he fits bristle blocks together. He's not inviting me to play. He just wants me to sit down and appreciate his actions. Remember yelling “Watch this!” when you attempted a summersault as a child or tried “pumping” a swing? An accepting gaze fills a child's budding sense of self with vital nutrition to strengthen and grow.

However, if I start inserting corrections into his building plans, the flow of positive support can be impeded, like dimming a light. As an example, research shows that 90 percent of children who play sports want parents to attend their games. On the other hand, those same players report feeling deflated when parents call out plays or criticisms from the stands. How fortunate the child who can count on adults to simply watch, whatever the stakes, with approval.

I'm delighted this little boy can put his need for attention into words. Children unwittingly learn so many techniques for pulling adult energy in ways that elicit our negative responses—whining, screaming, deliberately breaking rules—when they're craving attention. We want to nurture their ability to ask for what they need, and we need to have faith that “filling their cups” allows them to feel more independent.

When children are busy, our tendency is often to tiptoe away and get something done. We may also hold back involvement, fearing that demands for attention will be insatiable. It feels easier to wait to give praise for a “real” achievement. It's helpful for children to learn a balance of playing alone and being with others. However, when children keep repeating “Watch me!” or asking us to play, they're often signaling that they need encouragement just as a plant needs water, light, and nutrients.

Watching an infant work his muscles almost ceaselessly to develop new skills gives us a glimpse of the hard work of development and the inner resources required for growth. Our willingness to stop and appreciate children's learning, however minute, actually ignites more initiative and helps them internalize ways to encourage themselves in the future.

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