



Systematic ignoring: 5-8 year olds

The basics

Systematic ignoring is **deliberately withholding your attention from a child while he/she engages in a specific difficult behaviour**. It means not looking at him/her, and not talking to him/her, while he/she behaves in that particular way.

The strategy is based on the fact that attention from another person can be a powerful motivator of human behaviour. Because the need for social contact and connection is built into humans, behaviour that attracts attention is more likely to occur again in the future.

Attention from a parent is a particularly powerful reward for children. This is because of the strong attachment and bond that exists between children and parents. Parental attention is so powerful that it sometimes makes little difference what kind of attention it is. From a child's point of view, negative attention is better than no attention at all. Negative forms of attention such as scolding, yelling or even smacking can be rewarding to a child.

Reward your child with lots of attention when she/he is behaving well. But don't pay any attention to him/her when the difficult behaviour occurs. By systematically paying and withholding attention like this, you can help shape your child's behaviour.

Why use systematic ignoring?

Every day, all day, your child is learning how to attract your attention. You might as well **use your attention to help your child develop appropriate behaviour**. That is, behaviour you believe is important for him/her to learn and is consistent with your values as a family. It costs nothing, and involves relatively little effort on your part.

But be prepared – behaviour that is ignored often gets worse before it gets better. You should consider this when deciding whether to use systematic ignoring as a behaviour tool.

How to use systematic ignoring

Here are some tips for successfully using systematic ignoring.

- When you ignore, it is important to **completely ignore**. Do not look at your child or say anything while the behaviour is occurring. Subtle glances, smiles or even frowns

can be rewarding. Saying, "I am ignoring you!" is no longer ignoring. Where it's safe and practical, walk away from your child while she/he is behaving badly.

- Start ignoring when the behaviour starts. Stop ignoring when the behaviour has been stopped for a while.
- If ignoring a behaviour is going to be difficult for you, plan some ways of distracting yourself, or keeping yourself busy while you ignore. Some simple exercises to help you feel in control and stay calm might also help.
- **Systematically pay attention to the behaviour you want to see** instead of the behaviour you are ignoring. This makes systematic ignoring far more effective.

Should I tell my child that I am going to ignore the behaviour?

When you ignore your child's behaviour, you send a signal that you will not respond while he/she continues to behave in a particular way. For example, "I will not answer you while you continue to speak like that". This might be appropriate in some circumstances.

For minor behaviours, you might choose not to say anything at all. Another option is to explain to your child once that you will not respond when he/she behaves in a particular way. Then ignore the behaviour from then on whenever it happens, without saying anything further.

You just need to weigh up the usefulness of telling your child which behaviour is being ignored (so he/she understands) with the possibility that even that level of attention might be rewarding.

Before you use systematic ignoring

Ignoring is not always the best option for dealing with behaviour you wish to discourage. Before deciding to ignore behaviour, ask yourself:

- **Is this behaviour rewarded by your attention?** This is something you need to be fairly sure of before you start. If the behaviour is being rewarded by someone else's attention – for example, siblings or friends – it won't make any difference if you ignore it.
- **Should you ignore the behaviour?** Some behaviours might be rewarded by your attention, but you might not be able or willing to ignore them. Behaviour that is dangerous to your child or that hurts others or damages property cannot be ignored (for example, biting, hitting, pulling on the curtains, throwing things). Sometimes behaviour might be simply too disruptive or loud to ignore.
- **Can you ignore the behaviour if it gets worse?** Say you start ignoring the behaviour, but your resolve breaks and you pay attention when it gets worse. You run the risk of rewarding the worse behaviour. This makes it more likely to occur at this worse level when it occurs again. If you feel that you cannot ignore the behaviour if it gets worse, it's better not to try in the first place.
- **Can you ignore the behaviour wherever it occurs?** If you ignore the behaviour in one place but not another, you just get more of the behaviour in the place you don't want it.



- **Can you ignore the behaviour whenever it occurs?** This is crucial. If you ignore sometimes and not at other times, you run the risk of making the behaviour even harder to change. When a reward is valuable but unpredictable, humans tend to try harder and more persistently to get it. Occasionally rewarding your child's behaviour strengthens the behaviour even more than if the behaviour is rewarded every time it occurs.
- **Will other people ignore the behaviour?** If you have managed to successfully ignore a behaviour, but your partner, friend or relative suddenly comes in and pays attention, your good work will be undone. Get agreement in your household about what behaviour you will ignore. Sometimes others will find it difficult to understand your use of systematic ignoring and might not be able to do it. It's better not to use ignoring in these settings.

Temper tantrums, stomping, making silly noises, whining, arguing, swearing – these are all **behaviours that you might ignore**. What you eventually choose to ignore will depend greatly on the behaviour itself (minor problem behaviours) and your own frustration tolerance. Nevertheless, systematic ignoring is a great tool to have in your parenting tool box.

What happens when you ignore a behaviour?

It usually gets worse before it gets better.

Consider the following example. A man has a faulty television. He taps the box and the picture comes good. A little later the picture flickers and disappears again. He taps the box again, but this time the picture does not return. What does he do? He taps again, and again, perhaps getting harder and more persistent, until eventually he stops when the television is clearly not going to work again. We tend to stick with our previously successful behaviour, just persisting for harder or longer until we give up and look for another way of handling the situation.

Like the man's behaviour toward the television, a child's behaviour that has become well established tends to become more frequent and intense when the reward is removed. Tantrums can get louder and longer, and whining more persistent, if the attention that was once rewarding it is suddenly removed.



The upside is?

In most cases, minor behaviours that are ignored tend to go away over time. If children are systematically ignored and then praised regularly for the desired behaviour, children will often adopt these more desired behaviours, which generates a great deal of positive attention.