

Special Time

by Mary Trickett, former SYC Teacher

Children in need of attention can exhibit a variety of behaviors that are hard to understand and hard to live with. It might be difficult to believe that they could need more attention when so much time is spent taking care of physical needs and providing routine care. However, there is a real emotional need for another kind of attention that children require. This kind of attention, when received, says to the child, "I respect the person you are now," "I see you clearly," "I like you," and "You matter to me." Developmentally, it is crucial that these messages are conveyed to them for positive self-imagining and in the building of strong, loving relationships.

There are many ways to do this in the course of a day. Validating feelings, giving them *focused attention* for even just a minute, listening to their ideas, and playing with them are all good ways to give this kind of attention. Sometimes it's hard to give enough of this stuff when parents are pulled in so many different directions, with work and other small children. It's also hard to give something that few of us saw modeled when we were children.

When I came to SYC as a parent, I heard Jan Waters talk about a thing called Special Time. This has been an important tool for me in providing the structure for making sure my kids were getting quality time from me or my husband, at least sometimes! Here's how to do Special Time:

- Set aside time—20 to 30 minutes, once a week or more.
- Tell your child this is time for just you and him/her—you will not allow anything to interrupt you during this time (including crying babies or siblings, the phone, the computer, or banging on the door).
- Tell your child that during this special time you will do whatever he/she wants (within reason). You may have your own limits here. For instance, my son wanted to go to Toys R Us to buy something for his special time. My limit was that we needed to stay at home for special time. Jan tells the story of her little girl wanting them to eat paper together. Jan's limit was that she would chew, but not swallow it.
- It is important to take their requests seriously and come as close as you can to what they want. They often will test your seriousness about the whole thing at first.
- Let them know with a timer or a clock when special time ends (unless you're into something you both want to continue).
- Try to make it the same time each week, so that it is predictable and can be counted on by the child. This one was really hard for me to do. I just did it as often as I could.
- Have some fun.

That's it! I found this was a safe and appropriate way to turn power over to my child. It was fun to switch roles like this. We got to know each other better. I found that inappropriate attention getting tactics let up almost immediately. And all this told me my child's attention needs were being met.