

ATTENTION, FOCUS and TASK COMPLETION



Attention is crucial to the learning process. A child who is easily distracted and unable to concentrate for more than a short period of time on any one thing is likely to under-achieve and not reach their potential.

This often leads to a negative cycle, a lowering of self-esteem and confidence, and reduced motivation.

Do not consider giving children drugs until you have checked the following reasons for poor attention and tried all the strategies suggested!

Reasons for Poor Attention

- Trauma and corresponding hypervigilance - children who have experienced abuse and/or family violence are often in a state of trauma
- Loss - this could include family breakdown
- Tasks at inappropriate level – too hard, too easy or no prior knowledge
- Requests to focus on task perceived as threat to self esteem
- Depression and/or anxiety
- Lack of experience and training
- Life experiences which have not instilled a sense of sequence
- Over stimulated environments and inability to focus on required stimulus
- Lack of motivation – not seeing tasks as meaningful or achievable
- Poor emotional regulation possibly resulting from attachment difficulties
- Nutritional imbalance - especially high levels of sugar
- Unhelpful models
- Self-fulfilling expectations / self-concept as someone without self-control
- Physical expression / communication difficulties / male behaviour (8:1 male/female for communication difficulties, same for behaviour difficulties)
- Poor health
- General learning difficulties
- Immaturity.

Different Attention Challenges



Children who need intervention to improve their concentration may have one or more of the following difficulties:

- a short attention span on directed tasks but can focus on self-directed activity
- fragmented thought - quick shift in attention from one thing to another (this could be in activity and/or in conversation)
- pre-occupied thought
- easily distracted by other things happening in the classroom
- general learning difficulties
- on the autistic spectrum
- naturally high levels of energy and not enough opportunity to run this off.

Sometimes children are overlooked as 'absence' of behaviour does not require the same immediate response from teachers as 'excessive' behaviour does.

Useful assessment will include:

- observation of what the child can do in different contexts
- how they see themselves
- whether they understand sequence
- what might be pre-occupying their thoughts.
- is this a chronic difficulty (gone on for a long time)? or an acute one (started at a specific time – in which case what was happening at the time)?
- anything that has been tried at home or at school and how long for?
- anything that has been even minimally affective that can be built on.
- the child's strengths.
- diet and exercise regimes.

This will give clues as to what is actually going on and what might be worth trying.

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Suggestions for Intervention



Children with attention difficulty work better in more highly structured situations where there is clarity about:

- a. what they are expected to do
- b. the order in which they do things
- c. what constitutes something being done.

A reminder for children at the beginning of each session about the expectations may help - a written reminder may be useful in supporting pupils who are already literate.

With entrenched difficulties, daily assignments that can be completed quickly will provide initial success and promote motivation.

Tasks may initially need to be broken down into smaller steps with the completion of each step receiving teacher attention. For some children a change of activity at the completion of each step may prove useful.

Verbal instructions need to be kept short and checks made to see if the pupil has understood.

Older children need to develop greater independence and more responsibility for completed tasks. Keeping a checklist of completed tasks and/or a simple tally will encourage this.

Converting this checklist into a graph so that there is visual evidence of improvement may also be helpful

In initial stages, even the slightest increase in attention skills should be noted and positively reinforced. A brief comment and smile may be sufficient. A more extensive task completion programme with a system of graded rewards may be useful for some students.

Parental involvement in such a programme may increase the chance of success if the child is getting regular positive attention for progress.

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Using a timer – when time is up the child may move or change task.

Saying the child's name may bring them back to task. Asking them a simple question about what they have achieved so far may also help.

Where children are pre-occupied to the extent that they become peripheral to the class they need to become more central. A focus on the pupil's special interests or abilities may do this. Teachers need to be able to harness the child with attention difficulties into class discussion and whole class activities by giving them some responsibility or reporting function.



Group size is important. Larger working groups enable attention to wander unless the child has a specific, clearly stated function. Where there is more than one child in a group with an attention difficulty the problem is exacerbated and this should be avoided where possible. Working pairs are probably better.

Pupils need to be reassured that it is their efforts that are required in the first instance. Sometimes work is not completed because of anxiety about what to do and getting it right.

At the initial stage of intervention where there needs to be a great deal of positive reinforcement for progress, teachers may find it useful to have a system to remind them to give short but regular attention to the child.

For younger children there are many excellent games and activities directed towards increasing listening skills that can be encouraged both in the classroom and at home. Asking parents to do formal tasks with children may be problematic and decrease motivation.

Reducing external distractions, e.g. not sitting next to a window when there is a lot going on outside

Change self-concept by giving opportunities to do interesting activities that require high levels of physical control and being given feedback for success.

Give regular opportunities for physical activity, i.e. briefly every half-hour.

Teach calming strategies, including mindfulness.