

Attention and concentration

Children who have attention difficulties immediately compromise their ability to learn, as they are not focused on the information presented.

There are many possible reasons for children to have difficulty paying attention and/or concentrating during class. They may have a specific attention disorder (eg attention deficit disorder, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder), sensory modulation difficulties, visual perceptual difficulties, etc. Other children may not understand the information presented because of a learning/intellectual difficulty as the information may not have meaning for them. They may also have a language difficulty and cannot understand complex verbal information or they may have a memory difficulty and cannot store and hold onto information. Additionally, a child may have a combination of any of these problems.



Key principles

There are three key principles to help you increase the chances of the child maintaining their attention and concentration to a task in the classroom:

Brevity:

- Attention and concentration are greatest in short activities. Frequent and brief drills or lessons covering small chunks of information will result in greater learning.

Variety:

- Attention may flag on the second presentation of a task. Attention can be maximised by presenting the material in slightly different ways or with different applications/resources.

Structure/routine:

- A consistent routine with an organised format to complete activities is ideal for learning. Well-planned activities and smooth transitions from one activity to the next should enhance the learning environment.

How to adapt the task

- Letting children know exactly what will happen in advance and how long it will last helps children remain focused (make sure you finish when you said you would).
- Allow more time to complete work.
- Allow work breaks, ie short bursts of work.
- Allow movement breaks, such as providing an extra chair to move to or going to get resources or materials from another part of the classroom.
- Use contracts with the child (ie 'I will complete three questions before break time').
- Modify assignments, so that the child can focus on one task at a time (ie maybe each one on different pages).
- Allow the child to dictate work.
- Reduce copying from the board; ie provide handouts of work on the board so that they focus only on the work to be done.
- Use a multi-sensory approach; ie presenting the same information in different ways, such as pictures, words, videos, multimedia, music, etc, to reinforce learning and keep interest.
- Assign a study buddy that can model good attention skills and occasionally prompts to keep on task.
- Give strong visual clues to prompt the child as to what needs to be done and by when.
- Give auditory clues (as above).
- State objectives clearly and briefly.

- Use highlighter for important information to stand out on a page.
- Use double spacing/larger font size to draw attention to important information on the page.
- Provide card to cover parts of work sheet or window cut-out to focus on one area of the page.
- If the problem is with the quantity of work, consider making the assignment shorter within class, for example: how many problems does a child have to do correctly to demonstrate that he or she has mastered the concept.
- When reading, use a finger or ruler to follow text, placed directly underneath the line of text reading.
- Provide child with a 'fidget toy' such a paper clip, squeeze ball or rubber band. The child can fidget and squeeze this to help him concentrate and pay attention when listening to instructions, stories, etc.
- Provide replacements for chewing hair or clothing such as rubber tubing, an object at the end of a pencil, sugar free gum, sports drinking bottle, etc.

How to adapt the environment to maximise attention and concentration

The child may require the classroom to be less 'busy' to allow him to focus on learning. These tips inform on the subtle changes that can be made to the environment in order for children to achieve improved attention and concentration:

- Provide a quiet area in the classroom where children can go if they feel they need a quiet place to work. Reduce the amount of stimuli in that area of the class, eg remove visual distractions such as posters or hanging work and make it as blank as possible.
- Consider putting rugs or carpet on the floor to reduce the noise level.
- Provide a 'comfort zone' where the child can go to regroup if he is becoming over stimulated, eg a soft corner of the room with earplugs or music.
- Create a more calming environment around the child, including a tidy workspace and limit clutter on desks.
- Consider a shield to visually block out distracting sights/sounds.
- Check furniture is correct height, as poor posture will hinder attention and concentration.
- Encourage the child to use the same workstation, so that he becomes familiar with it and can locate materials quickly.

Communicating with a distractible child

- Give physical prompts as required.
- Speak to the child in slow even tones; brevity can aid clarity.
- Actively use more eye contact. Stop talking immediately if eye contact is lost, ie mid-sentence. Commence again when eye contact is regained. (Note: this does not apply to children with autistic spectrum disorder).
- Keep instructions short, as interrupted conversations can be more difficult to follow. Give instructions one at a time.

Following instructions

- Provide the child with written/pictorial instructions or checklists as well as verbal instructions.
- Break down work into chunks, and then ask the child to repeat back each chunk. Then, repeat the whole instruction and ask the child to repeat back the whole instruction.
- Encourage the child to tell you if they have not remembered everything or if the child wants you to repeat something.
- Ask the child to write down the instructions given.
- Break long numbers into sets of two or three digits, ie 13, 76, 29. Look for patterns or memorable chunks, eg 24 123 42.

- Organise information into smaller units; eg cutting up worksheets and presenting one task at a time.
- Use language cues such as songs, rhymes and acronyms.
- Notes on whiteboards, bulletin boards and projections should be colour coded, well-spaced and uncluttered.
- Introduce another strategy for asking for help rather than coming to you immediately or disrupting other children. Try the two T's technique. When the child receives their work sheet, he must look at the instructions and see if they can understand what to do. If they do not understand it, they must write a 'T' at the top of their paper. They then look one more time at the instructions, if they still do not understand; they should write another 'T' on their paper. When they have two T's, they can raise their hand. That lets the teacher know it is **T**ime to **T**alk.
- Make the child responsible for checking instructions themselves.

