

EDUCATION PAYING ATTENTION

ATTENTION AND CONCENTRATION

A guide to sustaining attention and concentration

Some children may have trouble sustaining their attention to a given task. This may be due to underlying anxiety, frustration and/or sensory sensitivities. It's helpful to monitor their behaviour to help you to identify potential causes and solutions.



Trying some of the following strategies might help the child to focus in class and improve their learning experience.

You as the Teacher

- Minimise sparkly/dazzling jewellery.
- Minimise patterned and textured clothing.
- Minimise bright makeup and lipstick.
- Be wary of use of perfumes and deodorants.
- Be aware of your tone of voice – some children may find a louder tone of voice causes them to feel anxious and may be misinterpreted as having done something wrong. Varying your tone (for example a sing song lilt) might help a child to stay engaged.

Learning

- Start a learning session with a strategy such as brain gym or movement activity.
- Brief lessons result in greater learning, do activities in short bursts. Adapt learning tasks into small, well-defined steps and present the information sequentially.
- Keep language simple – instructions should be clear and short. Some children find it difficult to look and listen to instructions at the same time. Using simple language such as “do this” to precede a demonstration may increase their ability to replicate actions.
- Be aware of a child's learning style.
- Modelling or demonstrating activities will allow the child to learn visually and to improve their recall.



- Use visual cues to support the classroom routine, such as visual timetables and “now” and “next” cards.
- Consider using timing prompts. Some children will find time pressures overwhelming so consider the type of timer you use, for example some children respond better to gentle reminders, others may respond to a prompt to look at the clock, and others may respond better to the visual representation such as a sand timer.
- Use the child’s first name before giving instructions. Some children may require time to process instructions before acting, therefore allow up to 7 seconds before anticipating a response.
- Encourage the child to finish an activity before moving on.
- Give positive reinforcement through praise, attention and rewards after each step. Agree with the children rewards and positive reinforcements (they must be immediate, consistent, achievable and fair).
- Use a cue for reminding them to focus on the activity e.g. a special hand gesture, or coloured cards, traffic light system, or thumbs up.
- Set class rules and routines. Ensure the child has an understanding of what is expected of them. The use of social stories may help a child to understand situations and expectations.
- Some children find it difficult to articulate their needs or ask for help. Provide a ‘time out card’, ‘toilet pass’ or other means to indicate that they may be feeling anxious and/or need out of class.
- Establish the use of an ‘emotions book’ to help the child to indicate how they’re feeling, for example having a difficult play time may impact on the child’s ability to focus in class.
- For the children who always have something in their mouths – it may be useful to offer an alternative. For example having a drink of cold water through a straw or sports bottle. They may also benefit from the use of Chewellery (www.chewigem.co.uk/ a range of necklaces and bangles are available).



Environment

Coming in to School

- Some children have difficulty coping with the noise of the bell, give warnings before the bell rings may help.
- Some children find the transitions between inside and outside, and moving through busy environments such as lining up and organising themselves in the cloakroom, difficult to manage and this can impact on their class learning. They may benefit from coming in first, to minimise distractions. Try moving the child's peg to one end of the cloakroom or allow them to organise themselves within the classroom.

The Classroom

- Decrease sensory distractions in the environment – consider noise, lighting, clutter etc.
- Reduce visual distractions on the walls in your class particularly around the board.
- Consider the impact of lighting in your classroom; for example impact of fluorescent lighting (glare, flicker, noise, etc.) versus natural lighting. Turning off lights can help the child settle and focus.
- Some children find smells overwhelming and this can interfere with a child's ability to focus. If children change their shoes, think about where these are kept.
- Be aware of food smells when children have been eating in the classroom. At the start of a lesson it might be useful to open a window.
- Noise sensitivities are common difficulties to deal with in the classroom as classrooms naturally have a lot of noise in and around them. Be aware of distraction in the room e.g. buzzing lights and fans, insects in the room, noise outside the window/corridor, ticking clocks, closing doors to corridors or windows if there is noise outside, or having a carpet/rug in the classroom as this can also dampen down the noise.
- Some children will benefit from the use of a personal music player with instrumental music, as these may filter out other auditory distractions.
- Open plan classrooms – many children struggle to focus when there is outside noise, you may need to take some children to a quiet room with a door to maximise their engagement and learning at times.



Organisation of the Classroom

- Limit number of personal belongings taken to, and kept at school.
- Allocate a consistent place or clearly labelled container to store belongings e.g., file for homework sheets.
- Schedule a set time each day to organise belongings and discuss strategies for organising belongings with the child.
- Use a colour coded system to label workbooks/files and to highlight work.
- Use a list (pictures) to order the day's activities to help organise child's day.
- A checklist attached to inside cover of workbook e.g., underline headings, name, date, and check spelling etc.



Positioning within the Class

- Create different zones in the class - creating sound partitions and different areas in the classroom through creative use of bookshelves can help to reduce the way sound travels and give a quiet area or time out space within the class.
- Provide organised/un-cluttered workstations. You may use privacy boards/partitions or reading/work areas.
- Consider the layout of the desks to reduce the chance of children being bumped or distracted by others walking past.
- Seat child as far as possible from windows or doors so that stimulation from outside noise, movement and sights will be minimised.
- Being aware of desk position, for example, sitting at the front of the class to enable good eye contact and facing the board is ideal.
- Position the child beside a peer with good attention to task and a settled approach to work (i.e. avoid children who tap or fidget being beside those that display similar behaviours).

- When floor sitting during lessons consider giving a child a visual cue about where to sit, for example spot/cushion/chair. During large group activities seating children in a semicircle is most efficient. Place Child directly across from you where you can maintain eye contact, and if possible with back to the wall.
- Consider doing work in different ways.
- If you do have them sitting at a table, consider the childrens positioning for hand written work - good sitting position with feet flat on floor, bottom back in seat, and table at an appropriate height.

The Importance of Movement

Movement breaks can be helpful for the child who has difficulty concentrating. Try to incorporate these in a regular, structured way e.g. once the child has completed part of a task set by the teacher like the 3 sums or sentences discussed previously, the teacher could suggest a movement break while she sets out the next part of the child's work. This can be repeated as often as required by the child.

- Another way to give the child movement breaks are to send them on a message or give them a job within the class, such as handing out books.
- The whole class could be offered movement breaks between tasks and some of the following activities could be used. These activities are designed to provide enhanced sensory input for the children, which should be easy to carry out within a school setting:

- Walking on tiptoes
- Walking on heels
- Wall push ups
- Desk push ups
- Chair push ups
- Hand pushes



Allowing the child to have something appropriate to fidget with e.g. a rubber or a pencil with a 'toy' on the end is often extremely beneficial to help them to focus and listen. The use of an air filled wedge shaped cushion, which allows the child some movement in their seat or on the floor can also be beneficial.

