

8th August 2015

Concentration and Children

It may sound simplistic, but young children learn to concentrate by doing things that interest them. However, what interests children can vary greatly. An ideal program offers a balance of activities that effectively teach the curriculum and reflect children's interests giving everyone opportunities to make choices and time to get involved in the experiences.

Factors in Concentration

Children's cognitive, linguistic, and motor-skill levels also affect their willingness and ability to concentrate. If an activity is too challenging in any one of these areas, children either may choose not to participate or may stay with the activity only for a short time. For example, children who choose blocks over art tend to feel more confident in and comfortable with large-motor skills than small-motor skills. Our role as teachers is to support children in developing concentration for activities of their choosing (by providing ample time for them to choose each day). At the same time, we need to gently encourage children to experiment and stay with activities that challenge skills they're not as comfortable with (by providing entry-level activities that are both inviting and potentially successful).

As you know, children's moods also have an effect on their ability to focus. If a child comes to school upset, tired, or overly excited, he may be too distracted to concentrate on an activity, particularly a new or challenging one. By understanding that his lack of concentration is related to a mood, you can help him deal with the cause (the mood), not the symptom (the lack of focus). Once the cause has been sensitively addressed, the symptom just may improve.

What You Can Do

Here are some tips to help children learn to concentrate:

- **Provide extended periods of time for children to do independent activities.** Offer a wide variety of activities on different skill levels from which children can choose during independent activity time.



- **Be aware of individual differences.** Find ways for children who tend to do only those activities they feel comfortable with to be successful in a variety of learning experiences.

What to Expect Next

- Many 6- and 7-year-olds have an enormous capacity to remember the smallest details about what adults have said they can do and for how long. ("But you promised ...") They can also keep going for great lengths of time when they are involved in something important. ("Just a few minutes longer, p-l-e-a-s-e!")
- At the same time, many feel a growing pressure to achieve academically. In fact, sometimes the pressure to learn to read is so great (even from within) that their ability to focus is compromised. Children need frequent breaks from academic work to keep their attention focused.
- A great number of 6- and 7-year-olds want to spend more and more time socializing. They notice one another in new ways and often want to just hang out. This is a great age for children to work in small groups on independent projects.



Focusing on a task for any length of time isn't easy. There's a lot of busyness and commotion in life, so helping your child to concentrate and focus is a critical life skill. Here are 10 ideas to try.

- Set tasks according to your child's maturity level. Often, the reason kids lose focus on a task is because it's either too easy or too hard for them. Take a close look at the activity and make sure it's the right skill level for your child. Also, it's a fact of life that we all have things to do that are tedious, boring, or not challenging. Help your child understand that sometimes we have to do things that are not fun or interesting. It's also helpful to point out that the sooner your child completes the less-than-interesting tasks, the more time he or she will have to do more enjoyable things.
- Divide big projects into small tasks. A great tactic to help increase your child's concentration is to split the task up into smaller pieces. Big projects can overwhelm. We've all had that feeling of "I don't even know where to start." Splitting the task up will give a child the feeling of progress as the pieces are completed.
- Minimize distractions. Give your child a quiet place to work when focus is necessary. Remember that kids haven't developed the same ability to screen out distractions that adults have acquired. Television, even coming from another room, is hard for kids to screen out. Soft music played in the work area can help mask distracting sounds.
- Play "beat the clock." Set a timer for a particular task that your child can work to "beat." Sometimes setting a short period of time will help them focus longer. One rule of thumb is that a child can focus on a single activity for about one minute per year of age. This is just a guideline — there are plenty of exceptions.
- Teach how to set goals. Goals can be a great way to increase your child's ability to focus. When your child makes his own goals (with your guidance and rewards for reaching them) they can become a great motivator.
- Offer praise. When you see your child paying attention to a task, notice and compliment him for it.

- Healthy lifestyle. Good nutrition and enough sleep are huge factors in helping your child be able to concentrate on a task. We all know the sleepy effect a carbohydrate-heavy diet can cause (think of Thanksgiving dinner). Complex carbs, protein and fresh fruits and vegetables will help improve your child's ability to concentrate.
- Memory games. The ability to focus is like a muscle. With practice, a person can experience longer and more effective periods of concentration. Use memory games as a fun way to increase your child's ability, and have fun at the same time.
- Avoid overscheduling. Kids that are whisked from activity to activity can feel overwhelmed. Be sure to allow for downtime to allow their young minds to recover from an activity.
- Give advanced notice about changes in activities. One mom always faced a melt-down from her 5-year-old when it was time to leave the park, Grandma's house or a play date. She discovered that giving him advanced notice helped make that easier.

When you want your child to switch focus from one activity to another, give a few minutes warning time. For example, if a child is playing a memory game but will need to begin practicing the piano soon, give him a five-minute warning. The transition will be easier and your child will be able to refocus on the new task faster.

The ability to concentrate for long periods of time takes time and practice. Try these simple ideas for increasing your child's concentration. It's something that he or she will benefit from for life.



AGES

Up to the age of three, a child's concentration skills are limited as their attention is caught by many things at the same time as they explore and learn from their environment. Between the ages of 3 and 7, attentiveness improves dramatically and they will be able to focus more selectively and ignore distractions. As a general rule of thumb, a child should be able to sustain their focus or attention for 2 to 3 minutes for every year of life, so a 3 year old can concentrate for approximately 6 to 9 minutes, while a 7 year old can focus for 14 to 21 minutes. This span is determined by a number of factors but is not static and can be positively influenced and strengthened by practice.

GAMES

Here are some games and activities designed to improve your child's concentration. Remember to eliminate as much background noise, such as music, television, etc. as possible before starting these games. Also bear in mind that it's not possible for a child to always sustain their focus and never be distracted, so start off with shorter, easier games and make them progressively longer and harder.

- Tap a rhythmic pattern on the table top and get your child to repeat it.
- Search for a letter, or word or picture on a book or magazine – commercial books and games are available for this but it can just as easily be done at home with everyday things.
- Place some items on the table, let your child look at them for 30 seconds or so then cover them up and get your child to remember what was there. You can also take an item away and they need to look again and identify what was missing. Teach your child strategies to play this game, such as touching each item as they look at it or naming each item.
- Build patterns with blocks of different colours and shapes and then scramble them up and ask your child to repeat the sequence. This can be done with picture cards, toy animals (for little children), paper shapes, etc.

- Cut up a cartoon or comic strip and get your child to put them in the correct order. This can be done with pictures only for younger children. If the sequence they create is wrong, ask them to tell you the story as they may see the pictures differently but their story may make sense.
- Play card games, such as pairs using pictures first then number cards.
- Learn songs and rhymes.
- Get your child to close their eyes and listen to all the noises they can hear and ask them to identify the noises – you could make a noise when they have their eyes closed for them to identify.
- Read to your child daily and ask them questions about the story, either at the end or as you are reading.
- Learn tongue twisters.
- Play “Simon Says”.
- Try playing the shopping game (‘I went to the shops and bought a loaf of bread’ the next person must repeat this and add one item to the list and so on).
- Say the days of the week, months of the year, numbers or colours of the rainbow out of order and get your child to put them in the right order for you or leave out one of the words and they have to identify the missing word.
- Show your child a picture for 30 seconds and then ask them to describe it to you in as much detail as possible.
- Get them to look at a room and memorise where things are, send them away and move one object and they must come back and identify what was moved.
- Design a treasure hunt game. They need to listen to 2 to 3 instructions at a time to find clues, then return to you for next instruction and then final find a treasure. Alternatively you can start introducing a treasure map so they need to slow flow instruction /lead after lead to get to treasure.
- Fun statue game with reward at end. An example of this technique would be to have your child attempt to sit in a chair without moving. The parent times how long the child is able to accomplish this. Repeated practice over several weeks will show improvement. Through this activity, the neural connections between the brain and body are strengthened, providing improved self-control.
- Missing Numbers game, for any child who can count. You count from one to ten (or one to twenty, depending on the age of the child), leaving out numbers every so often. When you leave out a number, the child should call out the number you left out. For example, you might go "One, two, three, five," and by the time you're saying "six", your child should have called out "four".
- Opposites game. You call out a word (hot, light, soft, etc.) and the child gives you the opposite. With young children especially, be sure to pick concepts they know. And remember that some words will have more than one opposite. If you say "happy", for example, the child may say "sad", or they may say "angry". Remember to incentivise them.
- Tongue Twisters, those beloved tongue twisters we all remember from our childhood. These include perennial favorites such as. She sells sea shells by the sea shore Rubber baby buggy bumpers Betty bought a bit of bitter butter Etc.

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**I've been told
that I have
A.D.H.D. but I
don't think I
-hey look, a
squirrel!**

