

# KNOWLEDGE & ACTION SHEET: ATTENTION

## What is Attention?

The ability to deliberately direct and maintain focus over a period of time on a desired activity or element despite distractions.

What we focus on, how we focus on it and the duration of our focus determines the quality of our outcomes. In human beings, the ability to sustain focus gradually increases as we grow and develop, as does our ability to shift focus from one thing to another, and to maintain focus on more than one things at a time.

## What Does It Take to Concentrate?

Every moment we're alive we are bombarded with information from the world and from within our bodies. Whether we're awake or asleep, our minds are busy managing enormous amounts of information.

To maintain sanity and function it's necessary for every living being to pare down this huge volume of information to a manageable level to pay attention to what's most important at any point in time. In other words, we have the ability to automatically delete any incoming stimuli that aren't immediately meaningful or useful to us. The remaining information is either generalised, deleted or distorted as it's processed.

As children grow and develop, they are able to sustain attention for increasing durations and during more complex tasks.

## Rule of Thumb

If you have noticed that your child "concentrate when they want to", you're quite right. Children are naturally much more capable of concentrating on activities that they really want to do – so are we! Tasks that are imposed or perceived as work however challenge children's ability to focus. As a rule of thumb when introducing a new task or skill, children can normally best handle 1 minute per year of life plus 1 minute.

So if you are trying to teach your 4 year old child a life skill such as doing up buttons, unless it's something that they are keen to learn, it's best for teaching episodes to be no longer than 5 minutes.

## Why Do Some Children Have Trouble with Paying Attention?

The ability to pay attention to any particular task can be impacted by several factors, either independently or occurring together:

1. **Health and nutrition** – difficulties with digesting and processing foods; allergies, ear infections, breathing difficulties (including snoring) and injuries (especially to the head) can have an impact on a child's ability to pay attention. Diets high in processed sugars, preservative and additives can contribute significantly to inattention and hyperactivity.
2. **Sensory processing** - children can be under or over sensitive to sensory information, this can make it difficult to pay attention appropriately.
3. **Sleep** – amount and quality: Preschoolers require 10 hours of non-interrupted sleep on a nightly basis. They should go to sleep within 10-20 minutes of going to bed, and wake up refreshed, alert and happy. If this is not the case for your child, please discuss your child's sleep habits with your family doctor.
4. **Screen exposure & level of physical activity** – these 2 often go together, modern children spend more time inside and on screens than at any other time in history. Yet research tells us that daily active movement indoors and out is very important for the development of a range of executive function skills, including attention.

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## Does My Preschooler Have Attention/Concentration Problems?

Please complete the checklist below to understand what, if any attention problems your child might be experiencing:

Does Your Child... Rarely   Sometimes   Often

Seem driven to fidget and squirm?			
Have an inability to sit still for calm activities like eating and having books read to them?			
Talk non-stop or make noise excessively?			
Flit from toy to toy, barely playing with them?			
Move constantly?			
Seem to “switch off”/day dream			
Respond slowly to their name being called?			
Need directions repeated, sometimes several times?			
Display extreme impatience with others?			
Refuse to wait their turn when playing with other children?			
Interrupt when others are talking?			
Have difficulty controlling their emotions and a tendency towards outbursts?			
Force themselves into others’ play, rather than asking first to join in?			
Tend to run too fast, climb too high and take excessive risks in play?			
Have difficulty following directions?			
Become bored quickly with tasks before completing them?			
Play the same way with the same things over and over again?			

If you’ve answered mostly “rarely” – congratulations! Your child’s attention skills appear to be fairly typical for their age. The activities provided will serve to reinforce and further extend their skills in preparation for school.

If you’ve answered “often” to 3 or more questions, your child is more likely to be experiencing difficulties with underlying developmental skills that require further investigation.

If you’ve answered sometimes to 3 or more questions, follow the directions below and monitor how their ability to pay attention changes over time. If you have concerns after 3-6 months, follow up with your health professional.

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## What Can I Do About It?

1. If your child seems to have trouble paying attention to TV or books, or craft activities, firstly have their vision tested to ensure that their sight is enabling them to focus.
2. If your child doesn't seem to enjoy listening to stories or playing word games with you, a hearing test is recommended, especially if you have any concerns with the clarity of their speech.
3. Learn to use interesting vocal tones and modulation to capture your child's attention and make what you're wanting them to do more interesting.
4. Be sure to include outdoor play time in their routine for at least 30 minutes once a day.
5. Develop postural strength by playing and doing daily activities in different positions; moving from one place to another playing animal "walks".
6. Look at your child's seating for mealtimes and fine motor activities – be sure that they have back support, foot support and upper arm support.
7. Consider using a sloped surface for writing, drawing and reading activities.
8. Encourage climbing, riding scooters, tricycles and bikes.
9. Even before actively reading, involve your child in a book by asking them to look for particular images – if they have trouble, give them a paper towel roll as their personal telescope.
10. Play games such as Eye Spy to develop visual attention.
11. Encourage jigsaw puzzle play – if they are reluctant, you do most of it first and have them complete the puzzle by placing the last couple of pieces. Model approaching the task systematically, starting with the corners, then the straight sided side pieces and finally the internal pieces. Guide them by asking for specific pieces e.g "Find the dog's tail...". Put out just a few pieces at a time.
12. To extend attention at mealtimes or for quiet activities, use "cortical music" such as Baroque For Modulation or Mozart. This music has been found to improve attention while playing for some individuals (highly active children do better with Body Music such as Sacred Earth Drums or Spirit of The Forest).
13. If your child moves a lot and their vision and hearing are OK, introduce focussed tasks such as listening to stories, drawing, writing or doing puzzles with movement.

This could mean;

  - reading in a swing or turning books into stories with characters they can hold or move
  - drawing BIG, use sidewalk chalk to draw on the ground or on big vertical surfaces
  - using rhythmic movement or activities that take a lot of muscle strength to do before you get them to sit
  - using body music in the background to make it easier for their bodies to settle (e.g. Sacred Earth Drums)
14. If your child is so inattentive that they flit from one thing to the next very quickly, on a consistent basis, they could have a more significant attention problem that requires further assessment and treatment.

If you would like some specific advice about what to do, please contact us at [support@lifespanfundamentals](mailto:support@lifespanfundamentals), so we can best direct you, or talk to your GP about next steps.