

Improving Your Child's Concentration

Everyone needs to be able to focus and concentrate in order to complete tasks. The length of time for which we are able to do this depends on age and on the activity we are doing. Young children in schools – and at home – need to develop the ability to focus on a task, and also to stay still long enough to listen to and follow instructions.

Most children, especially younger ones, will find this difficult from time to time. Teachers in primary schools are actively discouraged from keeping children sitting and listening for too long. Other factors such as tiredness, hunger, over-stimulation or emotional upset will also affect a child's ability to concentrate.

There are many things that you can do at home to help your child to develop their concentration – a vital skill for all, not just those who may find it difficult. Here are a few ideas to try:

Make Sure Their Basic Needs Are Met

Children and teenagers need a decent amount of good quality sleep every night, so make sure your bedtime routine is a good one. Reduce sugar intake as this can lead to sudden spikes and dramatic falls in energy levels. Increase protein intake with good quality lean meat, fish, nuts and eggs, which stimulate levels of dopamine, a hormone which makes concentration easier. Ensure your child is carrying out some form of physical activity on a daily basis, preferably outdoors.

Remove Distractions

Think about what things may be preventing your child from concentrating and remove or minimize them. Examples might include noise, people, lighting, tiredness, hunger or interruptions.

Check the Tasks

Tasks need to match a child's maturity levels. Make sure what your child is doing is neither too hard nor too easy. However, it's worth also reminding your child that we all have to do tasks that are tedious, and the sooner we tackle them, the sooner they will be done!

Play 'Beat the Clock'

Find an egg timer or use the timer/alarm function on a clock or phone. Start with small time intervals such as five minutes and challenge your child to concentrate on an activity until the alarm goes off. Gradually increase the time intervals.

Break It Up

Break big tasks up into bite-size pieces, to be tackled one at a time. Useful alongside 'Beat the Clock'. Also encourage goal-setting, perhaps with rewards for each goal completed (a reward can be something as simple as a 5 minute run round outside).

Create the Mood for Concentration

Find out what helps your child to concentrate. It may be calming music, softer lighting – some people even believe a fish tank with some fish helps concentration.

Try Some Sequencing and Organisation Activities

Sequencing things really supports concentration. Try following a recipe, setting the table or putting objects in alphabetical order. Alternatively, try a board game or card game.

Try Memory Games

There are lots of cheap 'lotto' style activities in the shops - games where players have to find matching pairs of cards. Alternatively, play 'Kim's Game' where items on a tray have to be memorised and then listed, or 'I Went To Market And I Bought...'

Find Out What Motivates Your Child to Concentrate

Everyone learns in different ways - some people are visual, others verbal, some prefer physical, 'hands-on' activities - and the same is true for concentration. Find out which style suits your child and provide activities that go with it. What activities does your child 'get lost in'? Provide similar activities to help them to concentrate. Caution: most children can 'get lost in' time spent watching TV or using electronic devices. However, this is often not true concentration, rather a zoning out. Overuse of electronic devices can actually reduce a child's ability to concentrate, so make sure you are limiting screen time to a reasonable amount.

Don't Overwhelm Your Child with Activities

Make sure your child has proper 'down time' every day to enable them to recharge their batteries.

Trying these simple tricks may well have a significant impact on your child's ability to focus. Concentration and memory are like a muscle - the more you work them, the stronger they become. Don't expect too much too soon; instead look for small gains, and don't forget to praise your child for the efforts they make to improve their concentration.

Please note: some children may have physical or psychological issues which make it hard for them to concentrate at an appropriate level for their age. If you have concerns about your child, make an appointment to speak to their class teacher and also speak to your GP.