



Tips to help children pay attention

Having acknowledged that many children struggle with inattention (for many different reasons) there are a range of ways in which parents and teachers can help inattentive children stay on task long enough to learn better and accomplish the tasks they need to. Remember that it's the boring, mundane activities that cause problems with inattention – fun, new, interesting activities don't usually pose such a problem. The everyday routines like getting ready for school or other outings, after-school activities, homework and the usual evening activities are where problems tend to occur. Bear in mind that school is a tiring business and that inattention is likely to be worse in the late afternoon and early evening.

In this article we will match the common difficulties with strategies to assist with them. These strategies can usefully be employed with all children – not just those who struggle with inattention.

First, inattentive children have trouble holding onto a lot of information or instructions at one time. Thus, they forget a series of instructions, possibly only remembering one; they lose track of the sequence of tasks, and may skip out important parts of a routine; and they can't hold information in mind long enough to think about it and work it out. Therefore, these strategies are helpful: Give one instruction at a time – wait until the child has completed the task before giving the next one; when there is a routine to be followed, for example, going to bed, make a "comic strip" of pictures depicting the steps in the routine – this way the child can return to the strip to check out what needs to be done, and in what order; tell the child what to do – not what NOT to do – because it may be too hard to think about an undesirable behavior and turn it into a desirable behavior, it will be easier for the child to think directly about what you want them to do.

Second, concepts of time are especially hard for children with attentional problems, and they find it difficult to judge or allow for the time available within which to complete a task. Therefore, it's very helpful to make time "visible" for them – use timers wherever you can to keep them aware of the passing of time. Inexpensive "wind-up" timers work well because you can hear and see them winding down, and they give a buzz when the time is up. For younger children or those with more severe difficulties, you can break time into smaller chunks when a complex task is demanded. So, you may give a set amount of time for each subtask, for example, brushing teeth gets three minutes, then getting into pyjamas gets three minutes and so on. Re-set the timer after each subtask is completed. Timers are also great for Timeout – when a child is sent to timeout for a fixed period, the timer keeps them (and you) aware of the passing of time.

Third, rewards for success do not seem to be successful with children who struggle with inattention. The fact is that rewards and consequences do work with these children, but have to be implemented differently. The structures of the brain that are sensitive to positive and negative consequences do not operate as efficiently as they do in children without attentional problems. Consequently, it is harder for them to learn to associate particular behaviors with rewards or negative consequences. Children with attentional problems need rewards and consequences often, close in time to the behaviors they are intended

for, and of strong significance for the child. Rewards need to be obvious and quickly available – for example, verbal praise or soft touches. Parents need to be on the lookout for positive behaviors so that they can use praise often and quickly. Praise can also be connected to a reward system that has a payoff in some material reward in the future. This helps children learn to wait for rewards by providing quick, frequent smaller rewards along the way to the bigger one.

Fourth, these children have trouble paying attention to speeches or explanations. Therefore, keep explanations to a minimum and, as has been advocated by the experts in the area – "act, don't yak"! The more you talk, try to explain why a behavior is desirable, or "yak", the further away the rewards or consequences will be from the target behavior. It's not that the child doesn't understand you, it's that the child finds it difficult to comply because her attention wanders so easily.

Fifth, inattention also means that a child finds it difficult to remember what will happen from one experience to the next. It can be hard to generalise knowledge from one situation to another. So, for example, a child may have been difficult to control at a friends' party with the consequence that he was removed from the party and had the party treats confiscated as a consequence. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that this lesson will be remembered when visiting the grandparents' house, or attending the next party. This can be particularly frustrating because it feels as though you have to go through the drama all over again when the same thing happened recently. Parents come to know what settings or places are going to be problematic, so can anticipate problems and prepare accordingly. Here is a five-step plan that helps. One, shortly before the event, review one or two rules that apply to the situation with the child (be concise!) and have the child repeat them back to you. For example, one rule for visiting other people may be that the child is not to touch the party food before permission is given by the hosts, and another may be that the child greet others appropriately. Two, set up a small immediate reward for being successful and a small immediate consequence for failure. For example, polite greetings earn public praise, and waiting for treat foods earn an extra treat. Three, as you enter the situation, begin giving praise for success before any difficulties arise. For example, comment repeatedly on the fact that the child has not taken any party food. Four, deliver rewards and consequences immediately after the target behaviors. For example, lack of greetings result in the child having to stay beside the parent (when he would rather be off playing with other children) for five minutes. Five, remember not to engage in conversations about what is happening – the child knows what the deal is, and conversations simply drag out the situation and dilute the strength of the rewards or consequences.

Sixth, keep stimulation levels down when you can as the child's nervous system has trouble trying to screen out extra sensory information that is interfering with paying attention. Keep your voice down when giving instructions, and don't try to compete with the TV or other noise. When you're speaking, make sure you have the child's full attention, with a minimum of interfering noise, light, or movement around her. Shouting can be overwhelming for these children and they won't even get the first part of what you say if you yell. You're far better off to whisper – this will make her lean in towards you and concentrate harder.

So, with these pointers, your child will be better able to grasp what is being asked of him, and better able to keep his attention going long enough to get things done.



