



## When it's hard to pay attention

It's 8.20 on a school day and 8-year old Josh isn't ready for school. Each time he's given a list of instructions, he completes the first one and then seems to wander off and get involved in something completely different. He is half-dressed, hasn't had his breakfast or cleaned his teeth, and doesn't know where his homework is from last night. His father is ready to leave for work and is frustrated that Josh is late – again! His dad complains that Josh has the attention span of a flea, is easily distractible, doesn't "listen", and never finishes anything. He's always been like this, but as he's got older, the increasing demands of school are highlighting the problems and the strain results in lots of shouting and punishment for Josh and frustration for his parents.

Difficulties like these are not uncommon, and generally fall into the descriptive category of attentional problems. When a child of this age seems unable to maintain focus long enough to follow a simple series of instructions or finish a task; when he seems forgetful and disorganised a lot of the time – his parents and teachers might suspect that he has difficulties with attention and concentration. Often, the child manages reasonably well when in a one-on-one situation or when he is particularly interested in the activity, but without constant re-focusing, he wanders off less interesting tasks easily. This is often apparent when children have to settle down to homework tasks. When persistent difficulties with attention and distractibility have been present from early childhood, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) may be suspected. But Josh's parents say that he doesn't behave like other children they know who have ADHD – he isn't "on the go" or hyperactive like they are – in fact, he seems a "bit of a daydreamer" and "lazy" rather than a "busy bee". The fact is that ADHD can be present in a predominantly Inattentive subtype – that is, the child does not manifest that hyperactivity and impulsivity associated with ADHD, but is inattentive and distractible. ADHD is a neurological disorder of the brain, which makes it harder for these children to stay on task without constant feedback and rewards. They need extra supports for sustaining attention and concentration and for maintaining self-control – they do not need labels of "unmotivated" or "spoiled".

The assessment of ADHD requires specialist knowledge. A child psychiatrist, a clinical psychologist and a paediatrician are trained to make this diagnosis, and will gather information from a number of sources in order to arrive at such a diagnosis. The pattern of inattention needs to be present across situations and lifelong. In some cases, the child's behavior will be monitored over a period of time to see whether the diagnosis holds up across time. This is because children may be inattentive for a variety of reasons other than having ADHD. The treatment of ADHD should involve multiple strategies – learning strategies, parent management training specifically for ADHD, school accommodations and medication. A child psychiatrist or paediatrician is the best person to attend to the medication issues, and a psychologist can address the other issues. Teachers play an important part in the treatment of ADHD and can make an enormous difference to these children's academic (and social) progress.

The cause of the inattention may not be ADHD, however. Other factors can result in inattentive behavior. Parents can think about these factors in their children's lives and see if changing them makes a difference to the child's inattention and concentration difficulties.

Those who are anxious find it difficult to pay attention for any length of time. Worrying that someone at home is ill or in any kind of danger, worrying about whether one will make the grade academically, worrying about being teased or bullied, worrying about whether someone will be there to collect you from school – these are all good reasons to be distractible or inattentive. How can you concentrate on the task at hand when these worries are running through your mind?

Children who have an intellectual disability also have a short attention span. A child whose intellectual functioning is significantly lower than his age-mates will struggle to keep focussed on any task. This is simply a function of the developmental state of his brain.

Some children whose intellectual functioning is in the average (or above average) range may suffer from a specific learning disability (SLD), for example, a language or mathematics disability, which can interfere with attention and concentration. A child with a specific learning disability often has attentional difficulties, which may be associated with the SLD itself, or with the anxiety that inevitably accompanies the SLD.

Those who are oversensitive or undersensitive to the sensations provided by their environments can struggle to maintain attention and concentration. For example, some children are acutely sensitive to noise and find background noises very distracting; others need to move constantly or fiddle with objects in order to achieve a satisfying level of sensory stimulation for their brains; and some children are sensitive to their clothing, finding labels or seams very irritating. Difficulties with integrating the sensory information from the world can interfere significantly with attention and concentration.

Developmental dyspraxia (Developmental Coordination Disorder) may present as though the child has attentional problems. Sometimes, difficulties with planning and sequencing their motor activities look like the disorganisation and distractibility associated with ADHD, and anxiety about not being able to keep up with peers can impact on the ability to stay focused.

Children who have been exposed to dangerous situations, for example, severe domestic conflict or other traumatic events, may be hypervigilant for signs of threat, and find it difficult to stay focused when they are scanning the environment for signals of danger. Thus, children who have experienced significant danger may present as restless and unsettled – unable to attend to tasks long enough to finish them.

When disruptive behavior has not been managed in appropriate and consistent ways, children may also find it difficult to stay focussed. When boundaries to keep behavior within safe and manageable limits are not consistently provided from infancy, children cannot learn to manage their own behavior and stay focused when they need to.

Given all of these alternative reasons for the presentation of inattention and distractibility, it is important to exclude them as possible reasons for a child's attentional problems before ADHD is considered as the only possibility. However, this is not to say that ADHD cannot occur at the same time as these other problems, making the situation more complicated. What it does mean is that parents can check that their child's attentional problems are not caused primarily by anxiety, learning difficulties, planning and sequencing problems, sensory integration difficulties, stresses associated with home life or social functioning, or simply poor self-management.