



## Child Development Series

### Attention

#### Common Attention Problems

Many parents report that their preschool children struggle to concentrate. These children are easily distracted by their surroundings—whether by people passing by or the slightest noise—causing their focus to shift. Parents often notice their children dawdling, taking excessive time to complete tasks, and even when tasks are finished, the work is frequently riddled with mistakes. This leads to poor school performance and criticism from teachers for being inattentive or unserious. In social situations, some children become unpopular with peers because they often make errors during games due to not following instructions. At home, parenting becomes frustrating as these children may seem disobedient, prone to daydreaming, or forgetful, straining the parent-child relationship over time.

#### What is Attention?

Attention is the ability to sustain focus on a task despite external distractions. The frontal lobe of the brain's cerebral cortex plays a critical role in regulating attention, which is essential for children's learning, behavior, and social interactions.

Children's concentration skills improve with age. Children under 3 years old focus spontaneously and have very brief attention spans. Starting from ages 3 to 4, parents can intentionally design tasks to help children manage and direct their attention. By ages 5 and 6, children start to independently control their attention with a longer attention span<sup>1</sup>.

Physical conditions also influence attention. Illnesses (e.g., bronchial issues, skin conditions, or nasal allergies), medications, and certain foods or drinks (e.g., caffeinated beverages or items with artificial colours or additives) can affect sleep quality. Insufficient sleep directly or indirectly impairs a child's ability to concentrate.



## Analysing and Improving Children's Attention Problems

A variety of factors may contribute to a child's inattentiveness. Identifying and addressing these underlying causes is crucial for developing effective solutions.

### 1. Environmental Factors and Living Habits

Noisy or cluttered environments, external distractions, irregular daily routines, and ineffective parenting or training can all weaken a child's attention span.

- **Establish routines and give clear and specific instructions:** Creating a daily schedule in advance helps children mentally prepare for upcoming tasks, encouraging cooperation. Routines tailored to a child's abilities—complete with clear instructions, rules, and steps (e.g., a snack after finishing a puzzle or a short break after one homework task)—set the foundation for sustained attention.
  - ✧ Set a fixed homework time, avoiding periods when children are tired, as this reduces productivity.
  - ✧ Adjust homework duration based on the child's capacity, and allow short breaks after completing a task for water, a bathroom visit, or eye rest.
- **Promote healthy lifestyles:** A consistent schedule, sufficient sleep, a balanced diet, and regular physical activity invigorate children, enhancing their enthusiasm for learning, daily activities, and play<sup>2</sup>.
  - ✧ Adequate sleep: Research highlights a strong link between sleep and attention difficulties. Less sleep increases the likelihood of future attention problems<sup>3-4</sup>. Children aged 3 to 5 need 10 to 13 hours of sleep daily. Caregivers should foster good sleep habits, such as maintaining consistent bedtimes and wake-up times, ensuring a dark, quiet, comfortable sleep environment, and avoiding pre-bedtime activities like internet use, TV watching, or toy playtime<sup>5</sup>.
  - ✧ Balanced diet: Proper nutrition supports neurotransmitter development, which influences attention. A balanced diet includes adequate water, grains, plenty of fruits and vegetables, and moderate high-protein foods (e.g., fish, meat, eggs, and dairy), while limiting sugary, oily, or salty foods<sup>6-8</sup>.



- ✧ **Appropriate physical activity:** Studies show that exercise enhances cardiopulmonary function and brain activity, reduces anxiety and emotional issues, and boosts cognitive skills, attention, and memory. Daily park playtime or over 30 minutes of aerobic exercise greatly benefits children<sup>9</sup>.
- ✧ **Reduce electronic device use:** The fast-paced, visually intense nature of electronic products can overstimulate children, making it harder for them to focus during lessons or reading. Children under 2 should avoid electronics entirely, while those aged 2 to 5 should be limited to one hour daily and avoid use two hours before bedtime<sup>10</sup>.
- **Adjust the living environment and minimize distractions:** During meals, homework or activities, remove distracting items (e.g., turn off the TV during meals, put away toys before homework, and keep toys away from the desk). Provide a consistent, low-distraction space with suitable furniture for homework or tasks. Address physical needs—like maintaining a comfortable room temperature and ensuring children aren’t hungry or thirsty—to aid focus.
- **Increase quality family time and model good behaviour:** Parents can support development by spending time talking, storytelling, playing, or reading with their children. During play, parents should fully engage and communicate attentively, setting an example for focus that children can emulate.

## 2. Parental Care and Training

Many parents think that constantly organizing tasks and reminding young children fosters dependence. However, parents can nurture self-reflection and organizational skills to build responsibility.

- **Develop self-reflection skills:** Encourage independence by teaching children to self-check—e.g., ensuring they’ve packed everything for an outing or reviewing homework for errors. If they miss mistakes, offer hints to guide them, helping them learn to work carefully and take tasks seriously. Timely praise boosts confidence and responsibility.



- **Build organizational skills:** Start young by encouraging children to tidy toys. As they grow, teach them to store household items in specific places. Personal items like toys or decorations should have designated spots, reinforcing the habit of returning things and making them easy to find. Similarly, organizing school bags with compartments for books, homework, stationery, or cleaning supplies helps children retrieve items efficiently, enhancing focus and learning.
- **Design engaging games and activities:** Tailor games and activities to children’s abilities and interests, progressing from simple to complex. For active children, physical games like role-playing with tasks can teach self-control and focus. Offer encouragement, praise, and specific feedback during play to sustain attention.

### 3. Incentives to Stay Focused

Some children lack focus because they receive little encouragement for paying attention but frequent criticism for poor performance. Parents can boost motivation with positive feedback or rewards when children cooperate or concentrate.

- ✧ **Offer immediate, specific praise:** Describe positive behaviour clearly—e.g., “You stayed focused and sat still during your meal”—avoiding vague comments like “Well done!”
- ✧ **Explain the praise:** Clarify why they earned it, aligning with parental expectations. Avoid mentioning past failures (e.g., “If only you did this every day...”), as it undermines praise and frustrates children.
- ✧ **Use incentive programs:** Reward sustained good behaviour using incentive program with stickers. Rewards don’t have to be tangible, but hugs, quality time, a favourite snack, or small choices. These motivate children to engage in attention-demanding tasks.

### What Should I Do if My Child’s Attention Problems Persist?

If attention issues persist across multiple settings (e.g., home and school) despite these efforts, leading to ongoing complaints from teachers or instructors, parents should consult teachers and consider a professional assessment to determine if specialized treatment is necessary.



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