

Improving your children's concentration

Concentration skills are a key part of child development – and succeeding in any field, whether artistic, sporting or academic requires the ability to concentrate on the task at hand.

All children have the ability to concentrate; it is just a case of being interested in something. However, the ability to concentrate on any task can be a tougher skill to learn. Even as adults we find it difficult to concentrate from time to time – so it really should be no surprise that children struggle too!

There are several factors which can affect a child's concentration:

Interest: It is difficult to get a child interested in some subjects. However if they can concentrate on a task:

- They will get it done much quicker and can then move on to something else
- Time spent concentrating on something (even if they don't find it all that interesting) can go a long way!
- Taking an interest in what they are doing will help to motivate them
- Offer praise when they've done well.

Age: The age of a child has a large impact on the length of time that they can concentrate. Providing short bursts of concentrated activity may work better for your child. Estimates for sustained attention to a freely chosen task range from about five minutes for a two-year-old child, to a maximum of around 20 minutes in older children and adults.

Surroundings: there are some things which can make concentration more difficult; e.g. if there's lots of other things going on around you. Make sure your child has the best possible environment to concentrate in – try to create an environment conducive to work!

It is important to make sure that certain factors are in the right balance.

- Is your child's daily diet a nutritious one?
- Does he/she get enough sleep?
- Does he/she get plenty of exercise?
- Are there other factors that are making your child sad, mad, worried or excited?

For most children (and some adults), the ability to stay focused takes practice. It's a learned skill, not a natural reflex.

After losing attention from a topic, a person may restore it by taking a rest, doing a different kind of activity, changing mental focus, or deliberately choosing to re-focus on the first topic.

Children with signs of inattention

Will on a regular basis:

- **Fail to give close attention to details**, or make careless mistakes, in school work or other activities
- **Have difficulty sustaining attention** in tasks or play activities
- **Not seem to be listen** when spoken to directly
- **Not follow through on instructions**
- **Fail to finish school work or other duties** (but not because they are being wilful or do not understand instructions)
- **Have difficulty organising** tasks and activities
- **Avoid, dislike or be unwilling to do tasks that need continuing mental effort** (such as school work or homework)
- **Lose things needed for tasks or activities** (such as toys, school assignments, pencils, books or tools)
- **Be easily distracted**
- **Be forgetful in daily activities.**

It will help if you:

- **Develop consistent routines** at home and at school.
- **Keep rules clear and simple**, and give reminders calmly.
- **Make sure you have the child's full attention when you talk.**
- **Give your child only one or two instructions** at a time.
- **Praise your child** and notice when they do something good.
- **Try to ignore minor irritating behaviours.**
- **Be clear about discipline for behaviour you find unacceptable.** For example, use 'time out' (between the ages of 18 months and six years) or logical consequences (for older children).

Developing concentration skills

The best way to develop focus and concentration is to practice it, and the best way to let them practice is to not interrupt children (even infants). When you see your infant or toddler looking or playing intently with a toy, resist the urge to join in.

- Watch as they focus on that item.
- If they need you they will let you know, but until then give them that time and space to concentrate and explore.
- At first, the object may only hold their attention for a few minutes at a time.
- Given time and space without interruptions, you'll notice these periods gradually lengthening
- This independent, focused play will support development and creativity
- The more they practice it the better and easier it will become.

How to support your children in developing concentration skills

1. Encourage age-appropriate “brain” exercises.

- Painting and colouring
- Play board games
- Jigsaw puzzle - especially effective in helping younger children
- More complicated games and larger puzzles can be introduced as your child gets older

2. Provide a challenge

- Word searches
- Crossword puzzles
- Sudoku
- Chess - exercises their minds and requires self-directed concentration as they work independently and anticipate upcoming moves.

3. Sign up for lessons

- Dance classes
- Music lessons
- Art classes.

If your child is interested in the activity they will want to pay attention, which will help to teach them how to stay focused.

4. Get into sports. Sports like swimming, skiing and track are good because they are constantly in motion. Martial arts will strengthen minds and muscles and teaches life skills like discipline, respect and concentration

5. Praise more than you criticize. Children want, and need, praise. Praise and they'll want to do it again.

6. Turn off the TV — and computer games too. Both TV and computer games cater to short attention spans. Limiting a child's time with each as it may appear that they are concentrating on a program however television does not require children to focus for more than a few seconds on an image.

7. Diet – avoiding sugar: Children consume a lot of sugar through snacks, breakfast and other food items, which results in them getting a sugar rush! This will fade away in a span of 3-4 hours and leads to them becoming lethargic and irritated, hampering their ability to have good concentration.

8. Taking down notes in lessons helps:

Make a note only after you have heard the teacher say something important

This note making helps your child reinforce what has been taught. To reflect on the lesson and improve his concentration as he has to pay complete attention to what the teacher is saying and later concentrate on trying to re-call what his notes say!

9. Avoid Multi-tasking:

Multi-tasking ensures that we cannot concentrate on one single task

Computer, television and other gadgets should be avoided when studying as they reduce concentration

Allocate a certain study time for a certain subject as this will help the child concentrate on one subject and understand it properly.

10. Break it up:

Allow 20 minute study time per subject as this will help your child develop their concentration levels.

The break will revitalise your child's sagging interest and concentration levels when it comes to studying, as taking a few moments off the subject at hand can freshen up the mind.

11. Watch the habits:

- See if some family members are listening to music or TV too loudly?
- Supervising every aspect of your child's studying may be affecting his concentration
- Also checks whether your child is eating well, are they under any kind of stress at all?
- They must study in a well lit room with good ventilation and little noises in the background.
- Try and sort out situations which might be stressing them out, as stress tends to interfere in one's concentrating ability.

The main thing to be kept in mind here is that you mustn't seek to improve your child's concentration only from the academic point of view but from an overall point of view.

Good concentration will ensure that even as an adult your child will be able to concentrate better and have a chance at a better professional as well as personal life!

Games and activities that can be used to help develop concentration skills among school age children

- 1. The Coin Game:** It improves memory and sequencing as well as attention and concentration, and children enjoy it because it's fast-paced and fun.
 - You will need a small pile of assorted coins, a cardboard sheet to cover them, and a stopwatch (or a regular watch with a second hand.)
 - Choose five of the coins from the pile and put them into a sequence.
 - Tell your child to "Look carefully at the coins arranged on the table."
 - Cover the coins with the cardboard & start the stopwatch
 - Ask them to make the same pattern using the coins from the pile
 - When finished, mark the time with the stopwatch and remove the cardboard
 - Write down the time it took them to complete the pattern and whether or not they were correct.
 - You can increase the difficulty of the patterns as you go.

2. Relaxation and Positive Imagery: Combining simple relaxation techniques such as deep breathing with positive visual imagery helps the brain to improve or learn new skills. So children can “imagine” that they’re paying attention in class or able to handle teasing, and this can in turn change their behaviour at school.

3. Mind - Body Integration: Have your child attempt to sit in a chair without moving. Then time how long the child is able to accomplish this and repeats this over several weeks. The neural connections between the brain and body are strengthened, providing improved self-control.

4. Visual Images: Have your child close their eyes, and imagine a triangle. Then have them draw the triangle, with their eyes closed, on a piece of paper, slowly, and accurately. Then do it again, and watch if there is any improvement in the triangle they have drawn. The slower they do it, the better. It is practically impossible to perform this task, without concentrating and focusing on it. When they can draw perfect triangles, advance to more complicated figures, i.e. a square, a star.

5. The breathing game: Have your child breath in very slowly, counting to ten, paying attention only to his breathing. Then have him exhale as slowly as he can.

6. Crossword Puzzles and Picture Puzzles: Crossword puzzles improve attention for words and sequencing ability, while picture puzzles—in which your younger child has to look for things that are “wrong” in the picture or look for hard-to-find objects—also improve attention and concentration.

7. Memory and Concentration Games: Children’s games such as ‘pairs game’ or ‘Simon says’ are great ideas for improving memory and concentration. ‘Pairs game’ motivates the child to remember the location of picture squares and ‘Simon says’ helps them memorize sequences of visual and auditory stimuli. Through repeated playing, brain circuits are “exercised” and challenged, which strengthens connections and thus improves function.

8. Board and card games: Begin with games that are easy to play before moving on to those with more complicated rules. Not only do games require concentration, but they're also fun.

9. Read to your child: Asking questions before you read to focus attention on a story. Then get them to let you know when you read the answer to the question. What you are doing is helping your child become an active listener.

10. The finger game. Have your child hold his hand out, and bend each finger very slowly, focusing only on that finger. When all fingers are bent, start straightening the fingers one at a time, very slowly. You can play this game with a toddler or a baby, too!

11. Have a competition, who can gaze at an object the longest. You can put an object at the centre of the room, and have your child and yourself, or a group of children, gaze at the object. The person who can gaze at it for the longest without taking their eyes off the subject is the winner.