

# Attention

## What is attention?



Attention is the ability to obtain and sustain appropriate attention to a task. This can be influenced by motivation, self-esteem, sensory integration, practice, language difficulties and any existing diagnosis.

## Why is attention important?

Effective attention is what allows us to screen out irrelevant stimulation in order to focus on the information that is important in the moment. This also means that we are able to sustain attention which then allows us to engage in a task for long enough to repeatedly practice it. Repeated practice is crucial for skill development. Attention also allows us to pay attention to the important details (e.g. in language: “do this, then...that before your brush teeth”).

## **What are the building blocks necessary to develop attention?**

- Sensory Processing
- Executive Functioning
- Self Regulation
- Receptive (understanding) Language
- Auditory Processing difficulties
- Hearing impairment
- Learnt helplessness
- Limited motivation
- Environment

## **How can you tell if my child has problems with attention?**

If a child has difficulties with attention they might:

- Not attend to a task when required/requested to do so.
- Miss details in instructions.
- Repeatedly makes the same mistakes (due to not learning from past attention).
- Be unable to listen to all of the information presented.
- Find it physically difficult to either calm down (as they are too physically active) or to 'wake up' as they appear sleepy and lethargic.
- Begins a task but then gets distracted by something else and then 'forgets' to complete what was asked of them.

## **What other problems can occur when a child has attention difficulties?**

When a child has attention difficulties, they might also have difficulties with:

- Learning new skills.
- Successful social interaction.
- Learning and broadening a repertoire of play skills.
- Inability to follow instructions.
- Receptive (understanding) language.
- Auditory processing (accurately understanding verbal information)
- Hearing.

## What can be done to improve attention?

- **Repeat instructions:** When you have given an instruction to a child, encourage them to repeat it back to you to ensure that the child has grasped/understood what is expected.
- **Sensory Integration therapy:** To addresses attention difficulties that are sensory in nature.
- **Eye contact:** Get close to the child to ensure they are able to hear you and see your face; get down to their level.
- **Simple language:** Use clear, specific language when making requests and, if necessary, show them what you want them to do.
- **Reduce background noise and distractions:** To help a child maintain attention long enough to grasp the information required to complete a task.
- **Develop Receptive Language:** Improve your child's receptive language (i.e. understanding of language) so that they are better able to understand expectations and information and are therefore better able to respond to information.
- **Alert (Engine) program** to promote self-regulation through sensory and cognitive strategies to help improve attention and concentration.
- **M.O.R.E program** uses physical (motor) components, oral organization, respiratory demands, and eye contact to assist with sensory regulation to help improve attention.
- **The Wilbarger Protocol (Deep Pressure Proprioceptive Technique)** is a therapy program designed to reduce sensory or tactile defensiveness and assist with sensory regulation and thus attention.

## What activities can help improve attention?

- **Sensory diet** activities such as:
  - Obstacle courses of physical tasks such as the below:
  - Wheelbarrow walking
  - Animal walks
  - Trampolining
  - Cycling and scooting
  - Swings (forward and back, side to side, rotary)

- Rough and tumble play / squishing or sandwiching with pillows or balls
- Wearing a heavy backpack
- Weighted items (wheat bag on lap while sitting or heavy blanket for sleep)
- Chewy toys
- **Engine (Alert) program** is the use of well considered individually tailored and consciously planned sensory motor (physical) activities to help achieve self regulation and better attention.
- **Discrete skills:** Activities that have a defined start and end point such as puzzles, construction tasks, mazes, and dot to dots.
- **Narrowly focused tasks:** Activities that are very specific and require very focused attention such as sorting, organising and categorising activities (e.g. card games such as *Uno*, *Snap* or *Blink*).
- **Visual schedules** enable a child to see and understand what is going to happen next. Schedules also help people to organise themselves, to plan ahead and thus to attention more effectively as they know the end is coming.
- **Timers** (ideally visual) help with transitions as they tell the child for how long and when they are going to have to do an activity. Timers allow us to pre-warn the child that a task or demand is coming.
- **Talking/question counters:** For a discrete period of time where the child is engaged in an activity, implement a structure that gives the child a limited number of questions or statements that they can ask/make. Give them (for example) 5 'talking' counters. Each time the child asks a question/makes a statement the adult takes a counter from them. When the child has no more counters, adults do not respond and the child learns to hold onto questions or statements and learns *when* to ask.
- **Auditory processing:** Gradually increase the amount of distraction whilst your child completes a task. Start by doing the task in silence, then introduce 'white noise' (e.g. static on the radio), then classical music, then commercial talk back radio and finally with conversation between others in the room.
- **The Listening Program:** Helps develop a child's attention skills by teaching them how to attend to an activity whilst listening to specifically designed 'therapeutic' classical music.

## **Why should I seek therapy if I notice difficulties with attention in my child?**

Therapeutic intervention to help a child with attention difficulties is important to:

- Ensure the child is able to engage in/complete academic tasks for long enough that they learn mastery.
- Develop social interaction, behaviour and play skills.
- Help further develop receptive and expressive language skills.
- School transition may be difficult if they are unable to follow instructions within the educational setting (e.g. classroom instructions, academic task requirements).

### **If left untreated what can difficulties with attention lead to?**

When children have difficulties with attention, they might also have difficulties with:

- Anxiety and stress in a variety of situations leading to difficulty reaching the child's academic potential.
- Behaviour, such as the child being unable to regulate themselves appropriately to settle and attend to a task for extended periods of time.
- Challenges working in small groups with others for play or academic projects.
- Following instructions at school and later in life, in the work environment.
- Accessing the curriculum because they're unable to attend to tasks longer enough to complete assessment criteria or practice to mastery level.
- Making friends, coping in social settings and possible mental health issues in later life.

## **What type of therapy is recommended for attention difficulties?**

If your child has difficulties with attention, it is recommended they consult an Occupational Therapist.

If there are multiple areas of concern (i.e. beyond just attention) both Occupational Therapy and Speech Therapy may well be recommended to address the functional areas of concern. This is the benefit of choosing Kid Sense which provides both Occupational Therapy and Speech Therapy.

Contact us today to make an initial enquiry or book an assessment for your child  
on 1800 KID SENSE (1800 543 736)

