

## Learning to Focus Attention

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by John Hoffman

No one will be surprised to hear that learning to focus attention is a very important school skill. And most of us know from experience that some children seem able to focus their attention fairly easily, while others struggle with it. In fact, an estimated 7 to 12 percent of children have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, which is partly characterized by major difficulties with sustaining attention, and it is thought that an even higher percentage have some sort of attention deficit disorder (without hyperactivity).

If some children seem to find it more difficult to focus, is there anything we can do to help them develop this ability?

Learning to focus attention is, in fact, a learned skill that develops gradually. Babies and toddlers start to learn to focus their attention when we do things to capture their attention like talk to them in a high-pitched, animated voice they find attractive, sing to them, or show them interesting things to look at such pictures in books.

As children grow, they get more practice when we ask for their attention by telling them something, reminding them to listen, or making situations more interesting or fun so it's easier for them to sustain their attention. These parent-child interactions work with a child's natural brain development to gradually increase their ability to focus.


Other normal childhood activities give children practice in focusing their attention, for example, listening to stories and participating in programs like Brownies, Cubs, soccer, or music or swimming lessons where they have to listen to instructions and follow rules.

If your child has trouble with attention, the first thing you need to understand is that you can't fix this problem right away. While you want to keep asking your child to focus her attention, you also need to understand that she has difficulty, not because she doesn't care or isn't trying, but because focusing attention is harder for her to manage.

Research shows that some children have to use up a lot more energy than others to focus their attention. This might be because they are more sensitive to noises, or visual stimulation, or even because they have to work a little harder to sit still. These children are trying. It's just harder for them, so they either give up or get distracted more easily. Try to accept your child as he is and try not to get overly frustrated. He's probably more frustrated than you are, even though it might seem like he's not trying very hard.

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Also understand that your child may not be able to focus attention to do homework, chores, games, or other tasks for as long as other children. Look for gradual improvement of his or her own ability, rather than comparing him or her to other children.

It's better for children with attention problems to experience success in focusing their attention for shorter periods of time than to struggle unsuccessfully to sustain attention for longer periods of time that we might think are "normal" for their age group. Children with attention problems might need to do homework in two short stints rather than one long one. They may need more breaks and you may need to work a little harder to make tasks a bit more interesting. Keep in mind also that certain factors in a child's daily life, such as hours of video-game playing and not getting enough sleep, can make it hard for them to focus attention, while other factors like getting enough exercise and eating a wholesome diet can have a positive effect.

But, whatever you do, don't give up. Don't stop asking your child to focus his or her attention in a way that's realistic for him or her. Children with attention problems can gradually build their ability to focus attention for longer periods of time, but it does take practice and it will take longer.