

Strategies for attention and concentration difficulties

At home

As a parent, you can help your child cope with these deficits and meet the challenges school creates. You can provide the most effective support: equipping your child with learning strategies for the classroom and communicating with teachers about how your child learns best. With support at home and teaching strategies at work in the classroom, there is no reason why kids with attention and concentration difficulties can't flourish in school.

Remember that your child's teacher has a full plate: in addition to managing a group of children with distinct personalities and learning styles, he or she can also expect to have at least one student with varying needs. Teachers can do their best to help your child with attention difficulties learn effectively, but parental involvement can dramatically improve your child's education. You have the power to optimize your child's chances for success by supporting the work done in the classroom.

Below are strategies to implement at home for yourself and the family that will be of benefit to your child, home life and assist in improvement at school.

Stay positive and healthy yourself

As a parent, you set the stage for your child's emotional and physical health. You have control over many of the factors that can positively influence the symptoms of your child's disorder.

The power of a positive attitude

Your best assets for helping your child meet the challenges of attention/concentration difficulties are your positive attitude and common sense. When you are calm and focused, you are more likely to be able to connect with your child, helping him or her to be calm and focused as well.

- **Keep things in perspective.** Remember that your child's behaviour is related to a disorder. Most of the time it is not intentional. Hold on to your sense of humor. What's embarrassing today may be a funny family story ten years from now.
- **Don't sweat the small stuff and be willing to make some compromises.** One chore left undone isn't a big deal when your child has completed two others plus the day's homework. If you are a perfectionist, you will not only be constantly dissatisfied but also create impossible expectations for your child.
- **Believe in your child.** Think about or make a written list of everything that is positive, valuable, and unique about your child. Trust that your child can learn, change, mature, and succeed. Make thinking about this trust a daily task as you brush your teeth or make your coffee.

When you take care of yourself, you're better able to take care of your child

As your child's role model and most important source of strength, it is vital that you live a healthy lifestyle. If you are overtired or have simply run out of patience, you risk losing sight of the structure and support you have so carefully set up for your child.

- **Take care of yourself.** Eat right, exercise, and find ways to reduce stress, whether it means taking a nightly bath or practicing morning meditation. If you do get sick, acknowledge it and get help.
- **Seek support.** One of the most important things to remember in rearing a child with attention/concentration difficulties is that you don't have to do it alone. Talk to your child's doctors, therapists, and teachers. These groups offer a forum for giving and receiving advice, and provide a safe place to vent feelings and share experiences.
- **Take breaks.** Friends and family can be wonderful about offering to babysit, but you may feel guilty about leaving your child. Next time, accept their offer and discuss honestly how best to handle your child.

Establish structure and stick to it

These children are more likely to succeed in completing tasks when the tasks occur in predictable patterns and in predictable places. Your job is to create and sustain structure in your home, so that your child knows what to expect and what they are expected to do.

Tips for helping your child stay focused and organised

- **Follow a routine.** It is important to set a time and a place for everything to help the child understand and meet expectations. Establish simple and predictable rituals for meals, homework, play, and bed. Have your child lay out clothes for the next morning before going to bed, and make sure whatever he or she needs to take to school is in a special place, ready to grab.
- **Use clocks and timers.** Consider placing clocks throughout the house, with a big one in your child's bedroom. Allow enough time for what your child needs to do, such as homework or getting ready in the morning. Use a timer for homework or transitional times, such as between finishing up play and getting ready for bed.
- **Simplify your child's schedule.** It is good to avoid idle time, but a child with attention and concentration difficulties may become more distracted and "wound up" if there are many after-school activities. You may need to make adjustments to the child's after-school commitments based on the individual child's abilities and the demands of particular activities.
- **Create a quiet place.** Make sure your child has a quiet, private space of his or her own. A patio or a bedroom work well too, as long as it's **not** the same place as the child goes for a time-out.
- **Do your best to be neat and organised.** Set up your home in an organised way. Make sure your child knows that everything has its place. Role model neatness and organization as much as possible.

Set clear expectations and rules

- Children with attention and concentration difficulties need consistent rules that they can understand and follow. Make the rules of behaviour for the family simple and clear. Write down the rules and hang them up in a place where your child can easily read them.
- Children with attention and concentration difficulties respond particularly well to organised systems of rewards and consequences. It's important to explain what will happen when the rules are obeyed and when they are broken. Finally, stick to your system: follow through each and every time with a reward or a consequence.

Don't forget praise and positive reinforcement

- As you establish these consistent structures, keep in mind that children with attention deficits often receive criticism. Be on the lookout for good behaviour—and praise it. Praise is especially important for children who have attention/concentration difficulties because they typically get so little of it. These children receive correction, remediation, and complaints about their behaviour—but little positive reinforcement.
- A smile, positive comment, or other reward from you can improve the attention, concentration and impulse control of your child. Do your best to focus on giving positive praise for appropriate behaviour and task completion, while giving as few negative responses as possible to inappropriate behaviour or poor task performance. Reward your child for small achievements that you might take for granted in another child.

Rewards	Consequences
Reward your child with privileges, praise, or activities, rather than with food or toys.	Consequences should be spelled out in advance and occur immediately after your child has misbehaved.
Change rewards frequently. Kids with short attention spans can get bored if the reward is always the same.	Try time-outs and the removal of privileges as consequences for misbehaviour.
Make a chart with points or stars awarded for good behaviour, so your child has a visual reminder of his or her successes.	Remove your child from situations and environments that trigger inappropriate behaviour.
Immediate rewards work better than the promise of a future reward, but small rewards leading to a big one can also work.	When your child misbehaves, ask what he or she could have done instead. Then have your child demonstrate it.
Always follow through with a reward.	Always follow through with a consequence.

Encourage movement and sleep

Physical activity can help your child with attention/concentration concerns:

Children often have energy to burn. Organised sports and other physical activities can help them get their energy out in healthy ways and focus their attention on specific movements and skills.

The benefits of physical activity are endless: it improves concentration, decreases depression and anxiety, and promotes brain growth. Most importantly for children with attention deficits, however, is the fact that exercise leads to better sleep, which in turn can also reduce the symptoms of attention difficulties.

Find a sport that your child will enjoy and that suits his or her strengths. For example, sports such as softball that involve a lot of "down time" are not the best fit for children with attention problems. Individual or team sports like basketball and hockey that require constant motion are better options.

Your child may also benefit from martial arts training, tae kwon do, or yoga, which enhance mental control as they work out the body.

Better sleep can help your child with attention/concentration difficulties:

Insufficient sleep can make anyone less attentive, but it can be highly detrimental for children with attention/concentration concerns. Kids with attention/concentration difficulties need at least as much sleep as their unaffected peers, but tend not to get what they need. Their attention problems can lead to overstimulation and trouble falling asleep. A consistent, early bedtime is the most helpful strategy to combat this problem, but it may not completely solve it.

Help your child get better rest by trying out one or more of the following strategies:

- **Decrease television time** and increase your child's activities and exercise levels during the day.
- **Eliminate caffeine** from your child's diet.
- **Create a buffer time to lower down the activity level for an hour or so before bedtime.** Find quieter activities such as colouring, reading or playing quietly.
- **Spend ten minutes cuddling with your child.** This will build a sense of love and security as well as provide a time to calm down.
- **Use lavender or other aromas in your child's room.** The scent may help to calm your child.

- **Use relaxation tapes as background noise** for your child when falling asleep. There are many varieties available including nature sounds and calming music. Some children often find "white noise" to be calming. You can create white noise by putting a radio on static or running an electric fan.

Parenting tip 5: Help your child eat right

Diet is not a direct cause of attention problems, but food can and does affect your child's mental state, which in turn seems to affect behaviour. Monitoring and modifying what, when, and how much your child eats can help with attention span.

All children benefit from fresh foods, regular meal times, and staying away from junk food. These tenets are especially true for children, whose impulsiveness and distractedness can lead to missed meals, disordered eating, and overeating.

Teach your child how to make friends

Children with attention and concentration concerns often have difficulty with simple social interactions. They may struggle with reading social cues, talk too much, interrupt frequently, or come off as aggressive or "too intense." Their relative emotional immaturity can make them stand out among children their own age, and make them targets for unfriendly teasing.

Don't forget, though, that many kids are exceptionally intelligent and creative and will eventually figure out for themselves how to get along with others and spot people who aren't appropriate as friends. Moreover, personality traits that might exasperate parents and teachers may come across to peers as funny and charming.

Helping a child improve social skills

It's hard for children to learn social skills and social rules. You can help your child become a better listener, learn to read people's faces and body language, and interact more smoothly in groups.

- Speak gently but honestly with your child about his or her challenges and how to make changes.
- Role-play various social scenarios with your child. Trade roles often and try to make it fun.
- Be careful to select playmates for your child with similar language and physical skills.
- Invite only one or two friends at a time at first. Watch them closely while they play.
- Have a zero tolerance policy for hitting, pushing and yelling in your house or yard.
- Make time and space for your child to play, and reward good play behaviours often.