

ATTENTION & Concentration

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

Effective attention is what allows us to screen out irrelevant stimulation in order to focus on the information that is important in the moment and for that specific task. 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... and then brush your teeth").



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

Auditory processing
(accurately understanding verbal information)



Learning and broadening a repertoire of play skills



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 grasped/understood what is expected.
- **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 for long enough to grasp the information required to complete a task.
- **Develop their 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.
- **Practice discrete skills:** These are activities that have a clear start and end point such as puzzles, construction tasks, mazes and dot to dots.
- **Narrowly focused tasks:** These are activities or games that are very specific and require very focused attention such as sorting, organising and categorising activities (e.g. card games such as *Uno* and *Snap*)
- **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 maintain their 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.

Programs available from All Star Occupational Therapy that address attention:

- **Sensory Diet prescription**
- **The Wilbarger Therapressure Protocol:** a therapy program designed to reduce sensory or tactile defensiveness and assist with sensory regulation, thus improving attention.
- **The Alert Program** which promotes self-regulation through sensory and cognitive strategies to help and improve attention and concentration.
- **Listening Programs** such as Quickshifts which help to develop a child's attention skills by teaching them how to attend to an activity whilst listening to specifically designed 'therapeutic' music.

Attention and concentration is also one of the building blocks necessary for developing organisational skills. If a child has difficulty with organisation they might struggle to find clothes or items, even if they're in the same place; require assistance to pack/unpack their school bag; show poor ability to organise materials for classroom activities or be slow to complete tasks, and needing instructions repeated.

Turn over for more information about organisation and using visual cues to improve your child's organisation!





Organisation is the ability to plan ahead; pull together the required materials, perform a task in the appropriate order, stick with the task long enough to follow it through and complete it in an appropriate time frame.

This is typically something that needs to be specifically modelled to a child at some point. It needs to be supported by sensible and age-appropriate structures (such as diaries, visual charts or labelled storage containers), and reinforced with realistic routines (pack away one toy/task before starting another).



What other areas are difficult for a child who struggles with organisation?



Self care task performance (also age influenced), including toileting, dressing and eating



Academic performance including starting a task, working through a challenge, planning a project



Developing social skills



Independence in activities such as daily living

Visual cues and organisation

Visual cues are anything that provides visual information. Specifically related to organisation, visual cues can give a child more information about how and when to do a task. They can help a child to sequence the steps involved, as well as reduce any anxiety about what is coming up.

Many children have strengths in visual areas compared to other areas, particularly those with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). For many children, a visual cue or a picture remains constant long after the word or sign has been completed. Research has suggested that a multi-sensory learning environment gives many children the best opportunity to reach their full potential, which is why it makes sense to support one sensory system (i.e. hearing) with another, sight.



Strategies that can help improve organisation through visuals

- **Visual schedules** enable a child to see and understand what is going to happen next. Schedules also help people to organise themselves and plan ahead.
- **Timers** help with transitions as they tell the child how long and when they are going to have to do an activity. Timers allow us to pre-warn the child.
- **Small achievable parts:** Break tasks down into small, achievable steps and use the visual schedule to guide through the process.
- **Academic templates:** Use a template for layout with space for headings, diagrams and written work.
- **Limit resources**, and only have materials necessary for the task at hand. Keep the working space as clear as possible of non-relevant materials
- **Storage:** Store work in separate containers within the desk tray or have a separate space specifically set aside for the child's belongings. Organise these into specific containers so they do not need to search through their entire belongings to find an individual item. Remember: have them help you so that they know where to look for things, but also to allow you to model organisational skills to them!
- **Labels:** use pictures or words on the outside of container to identify what the inside items should contain. Store pencils and the like in a clear pencil case so that items can be easily found.



Tips for using visuals to improve organisation

- **Use the right type of visual:** Visuals can include real objects, photographs of the actual object or similar objects, drawings, computer generated symbols and words. Some children will prefer or relate to each type differently. Trial and error will help determine which one your child will prefer.
- **Actual objects:** Generally younger children and those who have additional difficulties need visual that most closely resemble an actual object. For example, these children are likely to respond better when you show them a puzzle rather than an electronic symbol of a puzzle.
- **Use speech and language:** Always use visuals with words, as they are designed to help your child understand spoken language, not to substitute it.
- **Consistent labelling:** It is recommended to print the name of the visual at the bottom of the card to ensure that everyone calls the object the same thing (is it a mug or a cup?).
- **Develop their 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.
- **Allow processing time:** Allow the child time to process and point to the desired visual (if that's what you're using them for).
- **Persevere.** Your child may need a fair few attempts before they make the connection between the visual and the real object.
- **Achievable expectations:** Start with small achievable tasks or routines and reward immediately until they have grasped the idea of what they need to do. Don't forget to reward them for successfully using the visuals!