



## Support for Attention Challenges

By Linda Balsiger, M.S., CCC-SLP

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Attention challenges exist along a continuum. Some children meet criteria for a diagnosis of ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) that may or may not include a hyperactivity component (ADHD). Others do not meet formal criteria, but still have attention weaknesses that interfere with academic learning. Strategies and supports for attention can be helpful for both populations.

### Listening Strategies

- 1) Elicit Attention: Children with attention weaknesses attend better when they are first cued to listen, so that they can transition focus and prepare to attend. Warnings before a child has to stop a favored activity can also be helpful.
- 2) Repeat Directions: Have your child repeat back oral directions to ensure that they were attending and listening.

### Homework Strategies

- 1) Visual Schedule: For young children, a visual schedule of tasks to be performed can be helpful. Let the child determine the order, if feasible, and cross off each task as it is finished. Make sure to include breaks on the schedule, but keep them brief.
- 2) Frequent Breaks: Children with attention challenges are more successful by working in “spurts” - where they focus for short periods – interspersed with brief breaks. Using a visual timer during work periods can help your child see how much time he/she has left. For difficult assignments where focus is a greater challenge, begin with shorter focus periods and gradually increase the length over time. Breaks can be as simple as stretching, jumping up and down, or throwing a ball.
- 3) Build in physical activity – Using body movements to emphasize key points, or even chanting information can help a fidgety child to stay engaged.
- 4) Reinforcement Systems: Young children with significant attention challenges may need a reinforcement system for homework time. Tokens (pennies, beans) can be used as rewards after each activity is complete. Vary the number (1-3) based upon how well the child stayed on task. Let the child accumulate these as progress towards a bigger goal – such as a sticker on a chart that can later be redeemed for a favorite activity or something they want to buy.
- 5) Organization – In middle school, students must keep up with assignments in multiple classes. Students with attention weaknesses often have difficulty organizing papers, keeping track of assignments, working on multiple-part projects, monitoring due dates, and turning in completed homework. Organized binders for each subject, with a front page that lists due dates, can be helpful. Tutoring centers also offer programs in organization and study skills.



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### Classroom Considerations

- 1) Classroom Seating – Seating at the front of the classroom near the teacher is recommended. The seating should be away from visual and auditory distractions (e.g. not by a door or window, and not near friends).
- 2) Teaching Style – For young children, an expressive tone with body movements helps to maintain interest. Use visuals or concrete objects to illustrate new concepts where possible. Emphasize important points by tone of voice, repeating the information, or saying “This is important.”
- 3) Positive Reinforcement – Tell a child what you want him **to** do (“*Please sit down*”) instead of telling them to **stop** doing something. Provide verbal reinforcement for compliance. Point out progress you see (e.g. “*Last week it was hard for you to concentrate during math. I really like how you kept yourself on task today.*”)
- 4) Monitor Comprehension: Asking questions after instruction, or asking a child to summarize information presented, will ensure that he/she was following and understanding the topic.
- 5) Transitions: For younger children, warnings before subjects or activities are changed will be helpful.
- 6) Breaks and Extra Time – Breaks may be necessary during longer intervals of seatwork, in order to sustain focus. These can be as short as 1 minute, and can be as simple as standing and stretching. Extra time to complete classroom assignments or tests may also be needed.
- 7) Seat Cushions: Many children who are “fidgety” benefit from sitting on an air-filled cushion that provides sensory input and engages core balancing muscles. One such product is the 12 inch Fitball Seating Disc Jr. (available at [www.sportstherapyconnection.com](http://www.sportstherapyconnection.com)).
- 8) Manipulatives: Manipulatives such as “therapy putty” can give a fidgety child something to do with their hands, so that they can stay focused. Care must be taken to ensure that the object itself does not become a distraction.

### Parent Education and Resources

- 1) **Books** – The following books contain useful information and behavioral strategies:
  - o Delivered from Distraction by Edward Hallowell & John Ratey
  - o A Bird’s Eye View of Life with ADD & AD/HD: Advice from Young Survivors by Chris Zeigler Dendy & Alex Dendy
  - o How to Reach and Teach Children with ADD/ADHD by Sandra F. Rief
- 2) **CHADD website** ([www.chadd.org](http://www.chadd.org)): This organization, Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Disorder, contains information about attention-related challenges and strategies.



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- 3) **Consider an evaluation** - Attention and focus can significantly impact academic learning. It may be helpful to know if your child has ADD or ADHD, so that teachers can be aware of their challenges. A formal diagnosis may also help your child to receive a 504 plan at school, so that accommodations can be provided to support learning. A pediatrician or psychologist can diagnose ADD/ADHD.
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