

Overcoming Problems with Inattention

Attention is the process a person uses to focus thinking on a particular stimulus while ignoring others. Throughout a school day, a student must pay attention to the teacher, the instructions being given, what must be done, and what specific materials are needed, while ignoring other students talking, students playing outside the window, and a cart rolling by in the hall. Attention processes allow a child to selectively focus on things heard or seen and resist being distracted by irrelevant sights and sounds. Focused attention is direct concentration on something, such as a specific math problem. Selective attention involves the resistance to distraction, such as listening to the teacher and not the cart in the hall. Sustained attention is continued focus over time.

Some children have difficulty with focused thinking and resisting distractions. These children fit the description of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), predominantly inattentive type (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Children with the inattentive type of ADHD are different from those with the predominantly hyperactive-impulsive type of ADHD, which is described by Barkley and Murphy (1998) as a delay in the development of inhibition, disturbed self-regulation, and poor organization over time. Children with ADHD, hyperactive-impulsive type cannot control their behavior and have inattention problems that are related to a failure in the process of planning on the Cognitive Assessment System (CAS; Naglieri, 1999).

How to Help a Child Overcome Problems with Inattention

The first step is to help the child understand the nature of his or her Attention problems, including

1. Concepts such as Attention, resistance to distraction, and control of Attention
2. Recognition of how Attention affects daily functioning
3. Recognition that the deficit can be overcome
4. Basic elements of the control program

Second, teachers and parents can help the child improve his or her motivation and persistence:

1. Promote success via small steps.
2. Ensure success at school and at home.
 - Allow for oral responses to tests.
 - Circumvent reading whenever possible.
3. Teach rules for approaching tasks.
 - Help the child to define tasks accurately.
 - Assess the child's knowledge of problems.
 - Encourage the child to consider all possible solutions.
 - Teach the child to use a correct test strategy (Pressley & Woloshyn, 1995).

4. Discourage passivity and encourage independence.
 - Reduce the use of teacher solutions only.
 - Require the child to take responsibility for correcting his or her own work.
 - Help the child to become more self-reliant.
5. Encourage the child to avoid:
 - Excessive talking
 - Working fast with little accuracy
 - Giving up too easily
 - Turning in sloppy, disorganized papers

Third, teachers and parents should give the child specific problem-solving strategies.

1. Model and teach strategies that improve attention and concentration.
2. Help the child to recognize when he or she is under- or overattentive.

Who Should Receive Help with Overcoming Problems with Inattention?

This instruction benefits students who have problems maintaining attention and/or who are over-active. These strategies may be particularly helpful for children who demonstrate low scores in Attention and children who show weaknesses in Attention along with problems with Planning. Because a student who has a Planning weakness may have a particularly difficult time monitoring and controlling his or her actions, these strategies may be useful to provide structure and help the student follow specific plans to increase his or her self-control and focus of attention.

Resources

Sources for information on Attention problems and other educational problems can be found at <http://www.chadd.org>.

American Psychiatric Association. (2000). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4th ed., text rev.) Washington, DC: Author.

Barkley, R.A., & Murphy, K.R. (1998). *Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder: A clinical workbook* (2nd ed.) New York: Guilford Press.

Naglieri, J.A. (1999). *Essentials of CAS assessment*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Pressley, M., & Woloshyn, V. (1995). *Cognitive strategy instruction that really improves children's academic performance* (2nd ed.). Brookline, MA: Brookline Books.

Welton, E. (1999). How to help inattentive students find success in school: Getting the homework back from the dog. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 31, 12–18.