

Helping your Child Pay Attention

Teachers and parents often tell children to “pay attention” because they realize that students will not remember information unless they stay focused on the task at hand. The ability to focus your attention may seem simple to you, but paying attention is a skill and, like all skills, it may be learned. Many students have never learned how to block out distractions and direct their thoughts and energies. Parents can help children improve their ability to concentrate by teaching them a few simple techniques:

1. Use Positive Images and “Self-Talk”

Many people can improve their attention span by controlling the images they have in their mind’s eye. For example, when runners are halfway through a race, they may picture the victory of crossing the finish line; or dieters may imagine a slim new appearance when tempted by ice cream cone. These images help keep attention focused on a difficult task. “Self-talk” is similar to this - you give yourself a mental “pep talk.” A child might tell himself, “I know I am getting distracted, but I can fight it. I will study for another half-hour and then take a break.” Children can use both “self-talk” and images to direct their attention away from distractions and toward the task at hand, whether it is homework, classwork or a test.

2. Ask Questions

Another way to direct attention is to ask questions while studying. Some general questions you can suggest your children ask themselves are...” What is this paragraph about? Who did what and why? What is the evidence that supports the main idea? Is this true or false, and why?” Asking themselves questions serves two purposes. First, it helps students bring their wandering attention back to the task at hand. Second, it helps them keep their attention on the task.

3. Set Specific Goals

One activity that often improves attention is to give your children specific goals to work toward as they study or read an assignment. The goal you set will depend, of course, on the lesson and on your children’s ages. You might want them to study until they can tell you the main idea of a paragraph, until they can solve a specific problem or until they learn the specific names, dates and places mentioned in the text. When setting studying goals, remember that many small goals, presented one after another, are better than a single large one. As your children become more used to using specific goals to guide their studying, you can ask them to construct some of these goals themselves. Encourage them to divide their study tasks into small segments, with a goal for each. (“I will read this section until I understand its main point. Then I will go on to the next section.”)

These three strategies - positive images and “self-talk”, questions related to the task, and specific study goals - will help your children develop better skills for paying attention to their school work.