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# Maximising attention

Some children have difficulty focusing at home and school, making it much harder for them to learn. This can be seen by; lots of incessant talking, lots of movement or fidgeting or appearing sluggish or slumping in their chair. There may be a number of reasons for this including:

- The demand of the activity is either too easy or too difficult
- The child is having difficulty understanding or processing the language being used
- The child may be having difficulty processing or using the sensory information from the environment around them – see ‘Sensory processing’ for more information about this

It is also important to remember that we all have our own ‘sensory strategies’ to help us to concentrate and focus on tasks; some people need to have background music whilst others need silence, some people need to chew or fiddle with objects and some people need to ‘doodle’. This is the same for children, although it is often seen in a more extreme way as their sensory systems are still developing.

The first question to ask is ‘is the sensory strategy that the child is using safe, appropriate for the environment and helping the child to participate (even if it is not initially evident that they are)?’ If the answer is yes then consider allowing the child to continue.

## Strategies to support attention

### Movement breaks

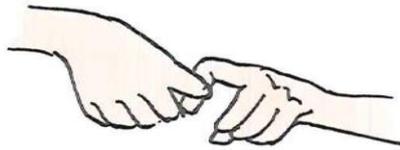
Encourage “movement breaks” before and between desk activities, or at any time the child appears lethargic or fidgety, for example:

- Regular changes of position eg lying on tummy, propping on elbows, standing
- Marching on the spot
- Arm windmills
- Jumping Jacks
- Jumping up and down
- Chair push-ups
- Have younger children “march” from one activity to another. The rhythmical body motion and input to the feet can help to be organising
- Incorporate errands into the child’s day, for example: returning the register, taking messages to another part of the school, chair monitor, door monitor, carrying heavy books etc. This will also provide opportunities for praise and increase self-confidence.
- Carry out warm up activities – see ‘Fine motor warm ups’



## Classroom strategies

- Ensure that the child has a good seating position – see ‘Good sitting’
- Have a box of fine motor activities that they are allowed to go to during transitions between lessons or classroom activities e.g. puzzles, threading, peg boards, pencil tasks.
- Provide as many opportunities as possible for active work during the day e.g. instead of sitting to do Math have them do the problem on the board standing up.
- Desk stretches; grab one side of the back of the chair with both hands and twist your torso as far as possible in that direction. Repeat on the other side.
- Finger pulls; hook the index fingers together and pull for three seconds. Repeat with each set of fingers



- Pressure push; sit up straight and clasp hands together on top of the head. Push firmly down through the top of the head. Alternatively, press flat palms together in front of the chest as firmly as possible.



- Changing position in the chair; turning the chair around and straddling it or turning it sideways for a while require different postural muscles and can be effective in ‘waking up’ the brain



- Chair press-ups; place hands on each side of the chair and straighten arms to lift your bottom off the chair. Repeat 10 times.
- Allow children to fiddle with objects such as elastic bands, tangles and blue tac or doodle as long as they are demonstrating that it is helping them to maintain attention and not distracting



- Attach stretchy material such as lycra to the leg of the chair for a child to press their legs against whilst sitting

### Environmental modifications

- Using a 'defined' spot for the child e.g. carpet square, sequencing spot during carpet time or assembly
- Sitting near the front will reduce the distraction in their visual field during carpet time.
- Allow the child to sit beside the teacher to help maintain attention.
- Work with in success; if they can stay in circle well for 20 seconds, use this as your baselines and increase your time from this point.
- Lighting – is there enough natural light?
- Displays – bright, reflective colours can be too distracting.
- Clutter – is the table/desk as clear as possible?
- Room temperature – is it too hot or cold? Is there enough fresh air circulating?
- White/black board – to be kept clean when not in use to reduce distraction.
- Noise – keep it to a minimum or allow the child 'time out' when they can go to a quieter space when needed. Sometimes background music can be helpful.

### Oral strategies

We receive a lot of proprioceptive feedback (sensation through joints and muscles) through our mouth when we chew, suck and blow and this can be calming and organising for our bodies – see 'Sensory processing' for more information – so the following ideas can help children maintain attention and concentration:

- Drinking from water bottles or through straws, particularly those which require you to suck against a resistance
- Give your child foods or thick fluids to suck through a straw like milkshakes, yoghurts or slush puppies. Curly straws are harder to suck through.



- Let your child have a number of oral toys to play with, under supervision if necessary, eg: Blowing bubbles, blowpens, harmonicas, Kazoo, pinwheels, party blowers, balloons
- Provide appropriate objects to chew instead of their clothes or pencils like chewl'ry, chew pendants and bracelets. Use safety lanyards for them to keep round their necks.
- Studies show that chewing gum and sucking sweets enhance focus. However, gum is often against school rules so discussion should be had with the school before encouraging your child to do this and be cautious about sugary sweets
- Play blowing games like:
  - ❖ Blowing ping pong balls across the floor, table or water, or scrunch up little bits of tissue paper and blow them across the floor or table.
  - ❖ Blow football
  - ❖ Blow out candles with one breath
  - ❖ Using an old 'kitchen roll' inner roll, scrunch up small pieces of tissue paper and shoot across the room using the roll as the shooter.
  - ❖ Make bubble pictures – put a little food colouring into some water in a small bowl. Provide the child with a straw and get them to blow into the water, until the bubbles come up to the top of the container. Then with a blank sheet of paper, touch the bubbles to get a pattern from them on the paper – set aside to dry.
  - ❖ Use a straw to blow bubbles in a bowl or cup with bubble solution in.



#### To alert or 'wake up':

- Foods like; Sherbet fountains, popping candy, frozen grapes, fruit pieces in ice cubes, lollipops, chewing gum, Bombay mix, food with strong flavours
- Activities like using vibrating toys around the mouth and talking against a balloon
- Use an electric toothbrush

If you would like this factsheet in another language or format, for example Braille, large print or audio, please call:

**01228 603890**

E:[communications.helpdesk@cumbria.nhs.uk](mailto:communications.helpdesk@cumbria.nhs.uk)

Or write to Engagement and Communications  
Voreda House | Portland Place | Penrith | CA11 7QQ



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