

Tip Sheet

Attention and Concentration

Students with sustained attention and/or concentration difficulties have challenges focusing their attention, persisting in activities, and staying on task independently. They may become easily distracted and overwhelmed by large amounts of information or stimulation. These students may have trouble sitting still and can be restless or fidgety.

There can be many reasons why students present with attentional or concentration issues. However, it is important to remember that students with these types of difficulties are generally not displaying these behaviours by choice. Strategies that may assist students to concentrate and maintain attention are outlined below:

1. Preventative and Environmental Adjustments

When used consistently, planning ahead with proactive and preventative strategies often has the best outcomes – plans for these can be made via a Prevent-Teach-Reinforce (PTR) approach.

- Explicitly teach and model desirable social and academic behaviours to all students. Include strategies that have been found to increase perseverance, improve attention, self-control, motivations, and that reduce negative self-talk.
- Proactively schedule preventative movement (attention) breaks for the student at regular intervals during the day. Ideally, these are listed with the proposed activities in a support plan.
- Minimise potential distractions – ideally, position the student at the front of the class and away from windows or high traffic areas and remind students to declutter their workspace.
- Students with these types of difficulties do not do well in unstructured and unpredictable environments. Develop and adhere to a daily classroom routine which is visually displayed in the classroom.
- For students who have difficulty sitting for extended periods, allow the opportunity to stand or use other seat aids such as a Disc'o'Sit, or sensory cushion.
- Have a designated 'chill-out' spot that students are allowed to go to if required.
- If extended mat time is an issue, have alternate options for seating, or schedule breaks accordingly.

2. Student Focused Adjustments

When students struggle with aspects of regulating their own behaviour, including task initiation, staying focused, and maintaining their own attention, they often require support or scaffolds at different times of the day to be successful. Ideally, the student should be involved with selecting and reviewing effective strategies which allow them to engage with their curriculum more easily.

- Students may require scaffolds to start a task or in prioritising least to most important items when planning.
- Constant fiddlers are generally using this movement to get their sensory needs met, which helps them to regulate their own behaviour. In these cases, the student may not be able to inhibit this behaviour, so if it is disruptive, try to replace it with more pro-social strategies such as squeezing a stress ball, blue-tack, or other pocket fiddle toy.
- Pre-negotiated 'Take a Break' cards or 'Parachute passes' could be used by these students to help build independence and prevent escalated or more challenging behaviours.
- It may be necessary to prompt the student through each stage of a process by providing them with a structured framework.
- Aim to keep the student's desk free of unnecessary material.

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- Ask students to perform errands (e.g., wipe the board, or get a drink) or structured tasks (e.g., class stretches) allowing them to move around the class or building.
- Aim to build self-management and independence via increased awareness and self-monitoring.

3. Other Teaching Strategies

- Start lessons with a task that the student is able to complete successfully then increase the task demands incrementally.
- Teaching needs to be explicit and direct.
- Schedule important and demanding activities early in the day or after an extended break. Alternate activities regularly, particularly between demanding and less challenging or physical tasks.
- Pre-teach and use scaffolding activities like KWL charts with cooperative learning opportunities.
- Keep activities brief or structure longer tasks into short blocks, providing a clear beginning and end, and suggest times and expectations for completion.
- It is important to provide targeted feedback and reinforce improvements.

4. Giving Instructions

- The student may not always remember a series of verbal instructions so keep them brief or break them down. If this is not possible, reinforce instructions with visual cues or checklists on the board. Having approved peers to ask questions regarding this may also be of assistance.
- Present one activity or idea at a time.
- Obtain the student's attention first by calling his/her name and making eye contact.
- Provide direct prompts/signals to get back to task and positively reinforce on-task behaviour.
- Use cue words (e.g. "listen", "look") or non-verbal cues (e.g. eye contact, tap on shoulder) to alert the student to pay attention.
- Ask the student to repeat instructions or summarise major points soon after presentation. Also, encourage him/her to request clarification when needed.

5. Develop an Individual Behaviour Plan

- An Individual Behaviour Support or Management Plan (IBP/IBMP), or sometimes called a Personal Learning Plan (PLP), is useful in the classroom to support, plan for, or reinforce specific behaviours. A School Psychologist can provide advice regarding IBPs or may be able to assist with conducting a Functional Behavioural Assessment (FBA) to help understand and plan for any challenging behaviour.
- It is important to emphasise the student's strengths as well as their challenges.
- Set 'SMART' goals – **S**pecific **M**easurable **A**chievable **R**elevant **T**ime-bound.
- Regularly review and update the plan.
- Ideally, the student is involved in understanding, trialling, and offering suggestions for their plan.

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General Classroom and Whole School Considerations

- **Provide structure.** Students perform better if there is a routine and they know what is expected of them, how they are expected to achieve a goal, and how much time they have.
- **All students benefit from 'brain breaks'.** Research shows that learning and engagement increases if students are given regular breaks that include movement or physical activity of some sort.
- **Track and keep data and progress map student achievements.**
- **Whole school.** Any behavioural program works best when students know what is expected of them, and the strategies are consistent across the classroom as well as school.

Organisation and Planning

Students with organisation and/or planning difficulties often don't start tasks because they don't know where to begin or are overwhelmed with what is required. They tend to attempt tasks in a haphazard way and complete things slowly or inefficiently. They frequently have trouble coping with complex tasks and organising their ideas, and tend to jump from one topic to another, or go off on tangents. They also have greater difficulty learning new information and prioritising work.

Suggestions to assist the student's organisation include:

- Help to break down a task or problem into its component parts and devise a structure to follow (e.g. *first* you do this, *then* you do this).
- Before students begin a task, help them to complete an outline or plan to practise organising an activity, and make the goals of the tasks explicit.
- Clearly set out a step-by-step plan that can be followed to complete a task, and/or establish a template for common activities such as writing a story.
- Written checklists that set out the steps of a task, multiple tasks to be done, or things to bring to certain events, which can be 'ticked off' are good, concrete prompts.
- Establish structured routines that can be learned for everyday activities.
- Provide structure when teaching by first teaching a broad outline and pre-teaching new vocabulary, and providing details later.
- Teach memory chunking strategies and encourage the student to relate newly learned information to previously learned concepts.
- Regularly remind students to declutter their bag, locker, and importantly-their workspace.
- Provide the student with colour-coded materials for each class (e.g. blue folder for maths).

For younger students:

- Create a visual timetable where images can be removed as the tasks are completed. This gives the child a sense of achievement and encourages independence.
- Take pictures of items the student needs to remember to bring to (or take home from) school. Ask parents to attach these pictures to their child's school bag.
- As the student becomes older, encourage diary and timetable use to organise things such as appointments, school events, or when schoolwork is due. Electronic diaries or calendars in mobile phones or computers can be easily programmed with reminders.

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The regions of the brain responsible for these types of tasks continue to develop into the late teens and, at times, early twenties. However, some individuals continue to display ongoing difficulties that persist into adulthood. These may be identified as Executive Functioning deficits, which can loosely be described as the 'air traffic control' system of your brain. Executive Functioning enables individuals to plan, organise, prioritise, problem solve, pay attention, and stay focused despite distractions.

Additional information of importance

- Sleep plays a critical role in how well we can concentrate, focus and learn.
- Different types of trauma, and ongoing stressful environments, can not only impact an individual's functioning during the time of the events, but also have longer lasting effects on an individual's behaviour and attentional skills.
- In the same way that some children need additional support and instruction, in order to learn how to read or write successfully, some students require explicit teaching of the skills necessary to promote a stronger attention and concentration capacity.
- For students who have persistent difficulties in attention and concentration, the school day can lead to cognitive overload. Students will often have more difficulty concentrating and sustaining attention as the day progresses.

References and Useful Resources

- *Harvard University's Centre on the Developing Child* www.developingchild.harvard.edu/resourcetag/executive-function/
- *The Behaviour Guru – Behaviour Management Solutions for Teachers* by Tom Bennett
- *Executive Functioning in the Classroom* by Christopher Kaufman
- *The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL): Source for knowledge regarding high-quality, evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL)* www.casel.org/