

Intervention Guide Parent Tip Sheet



Behavior Assessment System for Children, Third Edition

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Parents and teachers often remind children to pay attention. For example, a child pouring a glass of milk may be reminded to watch the glass instead of the television, or a student may be told to look at the teacher during a lesson instead of staring out the classroom window. These simple reminders help most children direct their attention to where it should be. But some children need more help than simple reminders alone.

Children who are often distracted, disorganized, or unable to pay attention for very long may have **attention problems**. In school, such behaviors can lead to lower amounts of learning. Time that should be spent listening to the lesson being taught (e.g., math) is instead spent on something else (e.g., what is happening outside of

the classroom). Teachers often have to interrupt a lesson in order to get a child to pay attention to what is being taught. This interruption can be disruptive to other students in the classroom. A child who is not paying attention may also do things that distract other students from learning. Children who become too disruptive often get into trouble with the teacher and may be referred to the school office for discipline.

Children with attention problems generally share a common problem: they are unable to ignore things around them that are not important to the task at hand. Hallway noises, television

shows, or thoughts about going to a party can all be too distracting for some children to ignore. Although the cause is not fully known, many experts believe that attention problems are caused by differences in how a child's brain works.

Fortunately, there are a number of ways to help children with attention problems. This tip sheet describes a few ways you can help your child. You may want to talk to your child's doctor about additional options, such as using prescription medicine. Medications of various types are often recommended for children with serious attention problems. These medications may help, but are not for all children. The decision to use medicine should be made with your child's doctor. If medication is used, it should be part of a larger plan that includes teaching listening and attention skills to your child.

Attention problems can be caused by many factors, including:

- medication or illness
- emotional or behavioral problems
- environmental conditions
- differences in a child's brain

Teaching new skills to your child is key to changing inattentive behaviors.

Dealing With Attention Problems

Children with attention problems may:

- be unable to concentrate
- get easily distracted
- be disorganized
- have difficulty following rules
- be unable to complete tasks

Strategies that can help your child include:

- paying attention to attention
- using daily behavior report cards
- rewarding attention



Dealing With Attention Problems

With the help of your child's school, you and your child can better understand and manage his or her attention problems. Research tells us that when parents and schools work together to set goals and plan strategies, children learn and grow more quickly.

The following pages discuss approaches that will help you change your child's behavior.

Working With Your Child

Talking with your child about his or her attention problems can be difficult. However, talking is an important step in understanding why these problem behaviors occur. Even if your child is not willing to talk much about them, starting a conversation shows your child that his or her behavior is important to you. Also, developing a plan for listening and helping shows that you are committed to making things better.

There are many things you can do to help make the conversation easier. For example, choose a place to talk that is **free from distractions**. Also, try to **keep the conversation short**. It may be best to keep the first conversation to 10 minutes or less.

When speaking with your child, try to maintain a **positive, calm, and objective** attitude. Your attitude can help to make your child more willing to talk about his or her attention problems. Remaining calm will also provide a positive example for your child to follow.

When talking with your child about attention problems, make sure to:

- choose a place that is free from distractions
- keep the conversation brief
- maintain a positive and calm attitude
- focus on one situation at a time

Did you know?

- Boys are six times more likely than girls to have attention problems.
- An estimated 3% to 5% of school-age children have attention problems.
- Effects of attention problems linger into adulthood for approximately 40% to 60% of children who are also hyperactive.

During the conversation, **pick one situation at a time** to discuss. For example, you might discuss how to pay attention during a classroom lesson, or you might discuss how to concentrate while doing homework. This approach will help you and your child focus on specific ways to improve his or her behavior in specific situations. Be sure to listen to your child, and avoid interrupting when he or she is talking.

When reviewing the strategies with your child, it can be helpful to provide examples. Choose examples that will be meaningful to your child. Keep in mind that examples that are appropriate for a 7-year-old child may not be for a 16-year-old adolescent. Also, use examples from situations or behaviors that your child has experienced.



Paying Attention to Attention

Children may lack the skills needed to manage their attention problems. A parent can help by teaching a child how to track his or her attention behaviors.

1. Identify the area of attention your child needs to work on. Common examples include: listening to what is being taught, completing homework assignments, and improving organizational skills. Some children can improve their attention skills by learning to show they are paying attention. These behaviors may include making eye contact with a speaker, facing toward the speaker, nodding his or her head to show he or she understands what has been said, and volunteering to answer questions that are asked by the speaker.
2. Help your child set a goal for the behavior that needs improvement. The goal should be specific, and it should be easy to tell if the goal has been met. For example, a child having problems completing homework might have a goal of working on homework during a set time period each day.
3. Choose a reward for meeting the goal. See the Rewarding Attention section of this guide for more information about choosing rewards.
4. Teach your child how to track his or her behavior. A simple, handmade tracking form can be used to do this. For example, for a child who would like to pay better attention during math class, a tracking form could be made by writing down 5-minute time intervals (e.g., 11:00, 11:05, 11:10, etc.). This small form could be taped to the child's desk.

During class, every 5 minutes (using a watch or classroom clock), the child is reminded by the teacher to record his or her behavior during that time interval.

If the child watched the teacher, he or she could write down, "Looking at teacher." If the child spent the time looking out the window, he or she would write down, "Looking out window."

There are several tools that are available to remind a child to record the behavior. You can talk with the person who gave you this form for additional suggestions.

5. Check with your child to make sure he or she is properly tracking each behavior. Daily checks might be needed at first. After a while, weekly checks may work fine.
6. Provide a reward when your child has met his or her goal. Rewards can be gradually stopped after your child has developed a habit of paying attention.

EXAMPLE:

Linda, a sixth-grade student, was moved to the front of the math class because she did not pay attention to the teacher. After a few weeks there, her attention level did not improve. Linda's mother and teacher discussed her behavior and chose three behaviors to monitor. Linda's teacher made a small chart and taped it to her desk. The chart listed the behavior Linda should follow (e.g., look at the teacher during the lesson). It also listed each time Linda should mark her behavior on the chart. Every 5 minutes, Linda would write "yes" if she was doing the behavior or "no" if she was not. Each week, Linda would track a different behavior. After a few months, Linda's mother and teacher met again to discuss Linda's progress.

Using Daily Behavior Report Cards

Children who struggle to pay attention may need feedback and monitoring from adults to make progress. A parent can help by setting up a system of daily reporting between home and school.

1. The child is told in advance that he or she will be scored or graded on attention for a specific period of time.
2. Specific attention behaviors are identified (e.g., listening when spoken to, focusing on completing homework assignments, and improving organizational skills).
3. You may use the Showing Success chart in this tip sheet as a daily behavior report card.
4. Review the report card with your child. Be sure your child understands the behaviors he or she is being graded on. Discuss possible rewards that your child will earn for meeting certain grade levels. You may choose to start by offering a reward at the end of each week. For some children, offering smaller rewards each day and gradually moving to one reward per week may be best.
5. Choose which parent will rate the child during the week.
6. Assign a letter grade (i.e., A, B, C, or D) or number score to each behavior. If your child is unfamiliar with letter grades, use a rating system that your child easily understands, like icons or emoticons.
7. Review the grades each day with your child. Whenever possible, try to mention at least a few good behaviors each day. For bad behaviors, talk about things the child could have done to earn a better grade.

EXAMPLE:

Ben, a 10-year-old boy, had trouble completing his homework. Ben's mother created a daily behavior report card. Behaviors on the report card include: (1) Starts at 7:00; (2) Stays seated while working on homework; (3) Asks for help when needed; and (4) Eyes and attention stay focused on the assignment. Each day, Ben and his mom sat down together to review the report card. During the first few weeks, Ben usually earned grades of Cs and Ds. After about one month, Ben almost always earned grades of Bs and Cs.

Rewarding Attention

Children change behavior under their control or learn new behaviors by earning rewards, achieving positive social consequences, or from experiencing improved feelings. Parents can help by setting up clear rewards or tokens for rewards that can be exchanged.

1. Identify the attention or attention-related behaviors you want to teach or improve.
2. Create a list of rewards your child would like to earn, both large and small. Explain that points or tokens are earned for using or learning the attention behavior. You may also choose to take away points or tokens for bad behavior. Be sure to set a reasonable length of time (e.g., 1 week, 1 month, etc.) for your child to earn points or tokens toward a reward. Also, keep the number of points or tokens needed to receive a reward at a reasonable level. Setting the level too high can become frustrating for the child.
3. Monitor and track your child's behavior, encouraging use of the good attention behaviors. Provide gentle reminders as needed, and keep the tally sheet where your child can see what he or she has earned or lost. Avoid arguing about losing points or tokens, and be generous in awarding them. There should always be more opportunities to earn points or tokens and fewer to lose them.
4. When enough points or tokens have been earned, your child can select a reward from the list in exchange for them.

EXAMPLE:

Caleb and his mom came up with a point system to help him pay attention when he was being spoken to. Caleb could earn one token every time he showed he was listening, without any reminders. Caleb's mom kept the tokens in a jar on the kitchen counter so Caleb could easily see how many tokens he had. Caleb sometimes would catch himself paying attention and alert his mom that he listened well and needed a token. At the end of the week, the tokens were exchanged for time playing outside. When Caleb had more than 15 tokens in the jar, he also got to have his favorite meal for dinner on Sunday.



When should I expect my child's behavior to improve?

The time it takes for a child's behavior to change depends on the severity of the attention problems and the child. Often, the first positive step in seeing change is when the child first begins to understand the behaviors he or she should do. Actual change in behavior usually follows. For most attention behaviors, some change should be noticed within a few weeks. If you don't notice improvement, you may need to try a different approach. Keep in mind that you should not expect attention problems to go away completely. Most children will probably have at least a few problem days. But after a few months, you should expect to see many more good days than bad ones.

What should I do if I don't notice any change or if my child's behavior gets worse?

Talk to your child about the behavior. You might find that your child does not understand what to do, or you might find that you need to slightly change the approach you are trying. Practice the good attention behaviors with your child. This practice can help your child better understand what he or she is supposed to do. If your child's attention does not become more consistent after several weeks or gets worse, talk with the person who gave you this tip sheet. He or she may be able to provide other suggestions for working with your child.



Where can I get more information?

Many books have been written for parents and teachers about how to understand and manage children's attention problems. The person who provided you with this guide might be able to recommend books relevant to your child's age. If you have access to the Internet, the websites of the following organizations are good sources of information.

www.apa.org

The American Psychological Association's website has information that can help you understand your child's problems or locate a psychologist.

www.nasponline.org

The website of the National Association of School Psychologists contains information for families about different childhood behaviors and about the role of school psychologists in the diagnostic and treatment processes.

www.ed.gov

Many handouts, booklets, and online resources for parents, teachers, and others who care for and teach children can be found on the Department of Education website. This site also includes a link to the "What Works Clearinghouse" that features reports on the effectiveness of educational interventions.

www.healthychildren.org

From the American Academy of Pediatrics, this website has useful information on a variety of topics related to children's growth and physical and mental development.

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