



American College of Pediatricians

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Patient Information Handout Series

Help! My Child Can't Concentrate

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If inattention is interfering with your child's academic performance, take an inventory of your child's life and lifestyle before pursuing a diagnosis or medication to correct the problem. Many times following the simple advice mentioned below will produce amazing results.

Slow down! Promote order in the life of the family. Allow some margin in your family's lifestyle. Limit your child's extracurricular activities to no more than one per season.

Enforce an appropriate bedtime.

Most students today are getting too little sleep. Lack of sleep is a proven cause of inattention in school. A reasonable target bedtime for an elementary aged child is **7:00 to 8:00**, a junior high child is **8:00 to 9:00**, and for a high school child is **9:00 to 10:00**. Homework or an extracurricular event may occasionally push this time later, but keep the target time in mind. Avoid digital stimulation (TV watching, tablet, phone or computer) within 45 minutes of the target bedtime on school day nights. Restrict video or tablet gaming to weekend days only.

Make the bedroom a screen-free sanctuary. Remove the TV from the bedroom; this has also been shown to be associated with insomnia and poor school performance. Don't allow screens (phone, tablet) in the bedroom during the night; this is associated with poor quality sleep and less sleep in the night. Avoid drinking caffeine-containing drinks with or after dinner. Reading a non-digital book for the 10-15 minutes prior to bedtime helps prepare your child's mind for sleep.

Limit television watching and video game playing.

Excessive digital entertainment at home has been linked to attention problems in the classroom. Limit recreational screen time on school day nights to 30 minutes or less. Restrict video game play to weekend days only. Do not allow a TV or tablet in your child's bedroom! Limiting recreational screen time will encourage your child to go outside and play.

Eat a healthy breakfast on school days.

In the rush to get ready for school, breakfast may be missed. Research has shown that eating a nutritious breakfast improves memory, improves attentiveness, and reduces depression, anxiety and hyperactivity. Ideally, a healthy breakfast should contain complex carbohydrates, fiber, protein and healthy fats (primarily omega 3's). Examples of healthy breakfast foods include whole grain cereal, fruit, eggs, granola cereal, yogurt, oatmeal with nuts/raisins, bagel with cream cheese, banana with peanut butter and whole wheat pancakes or waffles. Always eat something for breakfast!

Eat a balanced diet.

A balanced diet is helpful for optimal mental performance.

- Encourage the eating of vegetables and fruits, instead of frequent fast foods and sweets.
- Eat together as a family whenever possible. This strengthens the parent-child relationship.
- Offer healthy snacks after school, including fruits.
- Severely limit drinks or candy containing caffeine; only 0-2 soft drinks per week.
- Eat breakfast daily. This is essential, even if it is just orange juice and a piece of toast.
- Take a multivitamin if there is poor variety in your child's diet.
- Eat more fish (ideally 2-3 servings a week) or take a fish oil supplement. Research has shown that essential fatty acids (known as omega-3) found in cold water fish can enhance learning and attention in children whose intake is low. Cold water fish include Atlantic salmon, tuna, and Atlantic mackerel.

Encourage some physical activity after school.

Thirty minutes of exercise (riding a bike, fast walking, or playing a sport) after school is refreshing and stimulating to the body, mind and emotions. Exercise has been shown to improve classroom attentiveness.

Require eye contact when giving instructions.

When giving instructions, make sure you make *eye contact* with your child. If you aren't sure he is listening, ask him to *repeat* the instructions.

Do homework in a low distraction area of the home.

Study in a low stimulation area like the bedroom, not in the kitchen or family room where activity is high. Use calming background instrumental music, if necessary. Avoid the TV, radio or heavy music while studying. Begin studying before dinner and get as much completed as early in the evening as possible.

Help your child get organized.

Some children are quite disorganized and need help in creating a system for studying. Organize your child's notebook with dividers, and use a three-holed pouch for pencils, erasers, and calculator. Help organize your child's desk at home and at school. Help your child prioritize the homework by importance and logical order of completion.

Use an assignment book for homework.

Teach your child to use an assignment book for homework accountability. If necessary, ask the teacher to sign it each day and then have the teacher check for your signature each morning to ensure assignment communication.

Gradually transfer schoolwork responsibilities from your shoulders to your child's.

Most children who need academic assistance will prefer that parents continue to "spoon feed" them as long as possible. Once productive habits for doing homework have been taught, allow your child to fly or fall. The reality of failure can be motivating.

Consider enrolling in a martial arts class or go fishing.

A Karate or Tae kwon do class can help a child develop self-control, concentration and respect for others. Soccer provides a release of energy in a controlled fashion. Going fishing provides a get-away from the stimulation of the modern-day, electronic world.

At School**Seek a calm and controlled classroom.**

Inattentive children benefit from good classroom control by the teacher. This will involve an effective discipline policy, a patient yet authoritative teacher, a reasonable classroom size, and appropriately challenging curriculum.

Sit close to the teacher.

If inattentiveness is a problem, the child should be moved to the front of the class and away from talkative classmates.

Provide written instructions and visual aids.

Consult with the teacher about using more oral instruction. Visual aids can help capture a child's attention and reinforce oral instruction. Use an assignment book or daily checklist of tasks.

Break up tasks and homework into small steps.

Inattentive students are easily overwhelmed by lengthy instructions. When possible, instruction should be offered to the class in small segments with ample opportunity for questions.