

Maximizing attention

We, as adults, use various strategies to stay focused when attention and concentration is needed. These strategies and behaviours may include chewing foods or gum, fidgeting in our seat or with an object in our hand, such as a pen. Similarly, changes in the environment and regular movement breaks can help us become more attentive and focused.

Some children have difficulty focusing at home and school, making it much harder for them to learn. This can be seen in different ways e.g. frequent fidgeting or movement seeking, slumping in their chair, playing with objects in their hands.

Suggested strategies

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

- Marching on the spot
- Arm windmills
- Jumping Jacks
- Jumping up and down
- Chair push-ups
- Regular changes of body position e.g. lying on tummy, propping on elbows, standing

Encourage younger children to “march” from one activity to another. The rhythmical body motion and sensory input to the feet can ‘wake up’ their body and mind.

Within school and at home encourage errands and helpful tasks throughout the day e.g. returning the register, taking messages to another part of the school, carrying heavy books etc. This will also provide opportunities for praise and increase self-confidence.

Sensory Input to the mouth through drinking or eating chewy or crunchy foods impacts on focus and organisation. Although food is not generally encouraged during class time, certain snacks may assist a child to calm and focus. If you feel that this would be beneficial, consider discussing access to the following with the school

- Dried fruits (raisins, apple slices, banana chips).
- Crunchy snacks (raw vegetables, apple slices, pretzels, rice cakes).
- Water bottles – sucking through a straw or a water bottle with a sports top.

People often “fiddle” with small objects such as erasers, blu tac, fidget pencils, and paper clips as a way to maintain attention. If it is not interfering with classroom learning, allow “fiddle” objects during listening activities.

General considerations at home and school

- 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?
- White/black board – to be kept clean when not in use to reduce distraction.
- Noise – keep it to a minimum. For some, background music can be helpful.
- Use of voice either quiet/varying the tone/enthusiastic.

Useful resources

Fidget items – www.specialdirect.com

Sensory Circuits: A Sensory Motor Skills Programme for Children by Jane Horwood