

Skill-Building Opportunities

Attention Span

Question: My child doesn't stay focused long enough to finish one thing before he moves onto something else. He takes out a puzzle, doesn't finish it, then takes out another game. How can I help him stick with an activity?

It's a fast-moving modern world and we're easily distracted, but staying on task is important. Keep reading! Focus and Self Control involves Executive Functions of the brain. These are the skills used to manage our attention, our emotions and our behavior in order to meet goals. These skills begin to develop when children reach preschool age and continue to develop through the school-age years and into adulthood.

Children learn to focus overtime and with practice.

Focus and Self Control involves paying attention, remembering the rules, thinking flexibly and exercising self-control (not going on automatic, but doing what's needed to pursue a goal). Children need this skill to achieve their goals, especially in a world filled with distractions and information overload.

1

Be aware of typical child development.

Your preschooler is still working on developing the skill of attention and self-control. At this age, it's common for children to get distracted or disinterested in an activity..

2

Watch your child and ask questions.

To learn how to help him develop focus and self-control, it's important to understand what your child is telling you with his behavior. Be a detective and watch your child in these moments. Ask yourself questions like:

- Is he bored or frustrated?
- Are the tasks too easy or too hard?
- Is he hungry or tired?

3

Praise your child's strategies.

At the Bing Nursery School at Stanford University, when children are given a hard puzzle, teachers reinforce the children's problem-solving strategies using words like: "Look, you turned that piece around and around to see where it would fit." Although the children struggled, they didn't give up. Based on studies of what helps children continue to work hard in the face of challenges, parents and other adults praised their efforts or strategies, not their personalities or intelligence.

When you recognize your child's strategies, regardless of the length of time he spends on an activity, you encourage him to keep trying, even when things are hard. Tell your child things like:

- “You were using the materials so creatively on that picture. I wonder if you can finish it.”
- “It looked like you were matching colors on that puzzle. Can you show me how?”

4

Encourage exploration.

Your child is still exploring the world through his senses and testing out his ideas. This exploration may seem chaotic to you, but your child may be taking the lead in his own learning. Here are some things to do with him to promote Focus and Self Control:

- **Extend your child's learning by looking for toys or reading material that build on his interests.** Make sure to rotate these items so he doesn't get bored. He's more likely to stay focused when he's fascinated by something.
- **Limit distractions.** Don't put too many toys out at once. In addition, eliminate distractions. The studies of Daniel Anderson of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst showed that children are more unfocused when the television is on, even it is in the background.
- **Offer a variety of ways for expression.** Does he prefer to write, draw, sing or have hands-on experiences? When he's engaged, he's more likely to be motivated and pay attention.
- **Promote your child's curiosity by asking lots of questions and encouraging him to ask them, too.** “Wh” questions, like “who,” “what,” “why,” and “when” are great prompts for discussions.
- **Doing things over and over helps build your child's memory. Even if he only plays with the same puzzle for a few minutes at a time, he's learning to master a task while building his abilities to focus and remember.**

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5

Play games that promote Focus and Self Control.

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- Play games like “I Spy,” “Simon Says,” and “Red Light/Green Light.”
- Play games with rules, like board games and sports.
- Even when you play pretend with your child, he is required to use his Focus and Self Control to stay true to his character and his memory to recall what he is supposed to do.