

How Can I Get My Child To Focus

Distracted. Easily frustrated. Hyperactive.

If any of these words describe your child, you're probably worried that he or she lacks the ability to stay focused.

A rare few children are born with the innate ability to concentrate, but sometimes a healthy attention span is harder to develop. These children are sometimes referred to as "dreamers," "fidgety" or even "a problem child." Society seems quick to label them as having Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

There is no dispute that the ability to concentrate is an important life skill. Knowing how to help your child develop that ability is the real key. In this report, we'll share some ideas on how to accomplish this.

Know What Is Normal

First, it's important to make sure that certain factors are in the right balance.

Is your child's daily diet a nutritious one? Does he get enough sleep? Does she get plenty of exercise? Are there other factors that are making your child sad, mad, worried or excited?

Second, it's important to make sure your expectations, and those of other adults in your life, are reasonable. For most children (and, let's face it, some adults), the ability to stay focused takes practice. It's a learned skill, not a natural reflex.

Waiting for that development to happen naturally can be more frustrating for first-time parents than for those who have experienced it all before.

Compare your child's behavior to others who are about the same age. Talk with other parents. Ask educators or your pediatrician what the average attention span is for your child's age. You may be surprised by the answers.

"A 'normal' attention span should be 3-5 minutes per year of a child's age. For a 3-year-old, that would be nine to 15 minutes; for a 10-year-old, it would be 30-50

minutes," explains Dr. Becca Harrison, resident of psychiatry at the Medical College of Wisconsin and an assistant martial arts instructor.

"It is a little more complicated than that though. Attention is thought to develop in stages," Dr. Harrison adds. "First, kids tend to be overly exclusive, focusing on one thing for a long time to the exclusion of everything else. We see this mainly in babies. Second, they tend to be overly inclusive. Toddlers tend to switch from activity to activity rapidly. Third, kids develop selective attention, the ability to switch focus when they want from being exclusive to inclusive, for instance. Some kids just take longer to reach that third stage, just like some kids walk later than others."

Still, your child may be described -- by you or by others -- like this:

- * Fidgety: Can't "sit still" for the expected amount of time that is average for his or her age; constantly gets up to do other things.
- * Daydreamer: Routinely seems lost in his or her own world; facial expression goes blank or takes on a "dreamy" look as he or she stares off into space.
- * Easily distracted: Regularly goes from one activity to another or can't stay on-topic in a conversation.
- * Hyperactive: Routinely and excessively excited; always on the go.
- * Impulsive: Constantly acts before thinking; uncontrolled physical and emotional responses or verbal outbursts.

Find a solution

There are many ways of addressing these issues. From our experience with kids of all ages and discussions with other professionals, we've found the following methods to be effective solutions in helping focus-challenged children.

1. Encourage age-appropriate "brain" exercises. Paint and color. Play board games. Put together a jigsaw puzzle. These are especially effective in helping younger children because parents and older siblings can participate. These types of activities can be completed in a short amount of time, and there is

a tangible "reward" at the end (a pretty picture to hang on the refrigerator or a finished puzzle that looks just like the picture on the box). More complicated games and larger puzzles can be introduced as your child gets older.

2. Provide a challenge. Word searches, crossword puzzles and chess let children exercise their minds on their own or with a partner. These also require self-directed concentration as the child works independently or, as is the case in a game like chess, must anticipate upcoming moves.

3. Sign up for lessons. Dance classes. Violin lessons. Cake decorating. Whatever your child's interest, consider signing him or her up for classes. While it may seem like the last thing you want to do is put your child in yet another class where he or she won't pay attention, matching the right class to your child's interest can make a world of difference. He'll want to pay attention, which will help him teach himself how to stay focused.

4. Get into sports. Exercise is the best remedy for all that pent-up energy. Solitary sports like swimming, skiing and track are even better because participants are constantly in motion without the added pressure of letting down the team.

5. Praise more than you criticize. We all work better and want to try harder when the result is positive. Children want, and need, praise. That may seem easier to do when they're adorable and tiny, but it doesn't lose its value when those tiny tots start turning into real people. Tell them when they've done something right and they'll want to do it again.

6. Turn off the TV -- and video games too. Both TV and video games cater to short attention spans. Limiting a child's time with each will ease your battle.

But here's the challenge

These all seem like good, easily-implemented ideas, but committing to them on a regular basis is difficult. Schedules are hectic and, at this point, you're as easily frustrated as your child.

The good news is that there is one solution that incorporates all the above described methods.

This one solution is Martial arts - here's why?

1. Martial arts strengthen minds and muscles

Among the many benefits of a martial art is the way it strengthens the mind. There is a certain discipline that develops quickly among students, a shift in their ability to pay attention.

2. Martial arts provides brain exercise

From the very first day in class, students are challenged to think as much as they act. Learning new forms and movements takes concentration. One reason why martial arts is so effective is that it reinforces working memory. Anthony Meyer, MD, medical director of Aurora Psychiatric Hospital in Milwaukee, Wis., and a specialist in attention deficit and child/adolescent issues, compares working memory to that of an executive secretary, taking in all the sensory information, sorting through it and compiling a list of priorities for the "CEO," or frontal lobe of the brain. If the executive secretary isn't working properly, that list of priorities isn't correct or in some cases not delivered.

To enhance working memory, Dr. Meyer says, it's important to use repetition and multi-sensory stimulation -- meaning one sees, then hears and then attempts the task at hand. Martial arts fits that bill. Students are taught by example, explanation and repetition.

3. Martial arts provides a challenge

Martial arts teaches life skills like discipline, respect and concentration. A student can't move up in rank without showing those characteristics at an age-appropriate level. And as students advance, their level of precision and even the intricacy of their movements become more challenging.

Together these factors help children retrain their brains so that, whether in class or in the real world, they are able to act and react in a responsible manner. "It's exercising their ability to focus," Dr. Harrison says. "They tune out other things

around them when they're in martial arts class, and that is transferable at school and at home because they've learned how not to be distracted so easily."

4. Martial arts provides a great class environment

Martial arts keep kids engaged physically and mentally. They have fun while in class, and take pride in knowing that they are learning something most kids don't know how to do.

Dr. Meyer explains that martial arts "enhance motivation, which is like turbo power that gives you interest to attend to something. The master is able to give one-on-one instruction or work in small groups, which helps motivate. It uses the whole body, a number of sensory modalities, and has to do with focus, centering and getting along with friends and family, as well."

5. Martial arts provides vigorous exercise

Like swimming, skiing and track, martial arts is a solitary sport. Martial art classes remove the pressure to do well in front of the other kids or to score a winning play. Students concentrate on their own movements rather than what everyone else is doing. They never have to worry about disappointing their team mates. Instruction is focused on the individual and his or her journey toward attaining the next belt rank. And every class is wall-to-wall movement. There's nothing like an hours worth of running, jumping and blocking to get rid of any pent-up energy.

6. Martial arts instructors are trained to praise more than criticize

In a sport like the martial arts, the emphasis is on learning the basic steps and techniques. Good martial art instructors use a "praise, correct, praise" approach in which the student is praised for what he or she did right, instructed on how to improve what was not quite right, and then praised for making the correction. Children also get rewards like stickers, trophies and belts.

"Martial arts require a certain amount of focus to participate. The process of them learning their forms and coordinating the movement of their hands and feet

is helpful, and the kids get tangible rewards like stickers, trophies and their next belt," says Dr. Harrison.

7. Martial arts pulls kids away from the TV

When kids are in class, they're not in front of the television. They're moving, active and engaged.

"I have heard parents say that they have seen a change," says Dr. Harrison. "They see a difference in their children's behavior, and the teachers tell them that their children pay better attention in class."

If you'd like to learn more about how martial arts can improve your child's attention span, please **contact us** and we'll be happy to answer any questions you may have.