

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR PARENTS -

MAKING SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH PRACTICAL FOR FAMILIES



INATTENTION

Do you have concerns about your child's behavior? Do you wonder which behaviors are normal for your child's age and which behaviors indicate a problem?

Many children in America are being medicated to address behavioral concerns, especially inattention, leading parents to wonder whether their children would benefit from medications. Inattention is one of the diagnostic criteria for ADHD, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that the diagnosis of children with ADHD has increased approximately 42% between 2003 and 2011.

Children's behaviors are often impacted by environmental factors - so evaluating the child's home and school routines and environment is an appropriate first step if you are concerned about your child's ability to pay attention.

In one study in Connecticut, the risk for inattention increased as the number of sugar-sweetened beverages, especially energy drinks, increased. *Deborah L. Schwartz, Kathryn Gilstad-Hayden, Amy Carroll-Scott, Stephanie A. Grilo, Catherine McCaslin, Marlene Schwartz, Jeannette R. Ickovics. Energy Drinks and Youth Self-Reported Hyperactivity/Inattention Symptoms. Academic Pediatrics, 2015; DOI: [10.1016/j.acap.2014.11.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acap.2014.11.006)*

This is just one example of how nutritional, environmental, and medical factors can affect a child's behavior.



INFANTS and TODDLERS

Erratic behavior is normal

Infants and toddlers normally and routinely have rapid changes in their behaviors and their emotional states. Every parent has experienced the amazingly quick reversal young children show - crying one minute and laughing the next.

Infants and toddlers do best when their days are organized by routines and their environments are safe to explore.

The brains of your infants and toddlers are rapidly developing. The brain cells are making connections and learning by imitating you. Provide some quiet times during the day when there is less stimulation.

Enjoy reading books together

A busy toddler may enjoy books as part of his bedtime routine at night.

Chose a quiet place. Turn off all media, including your own cell phone.

Take time to look at your toddler's face, and enjoy his expressions



PRESCHOOLERS

Attention span should be gradually increasing now.

Here are some ways you can help increase your child's ability to pay attention.

1. Maintain most of your home in an orderly state. Our brains respond positively to order, so try to have a few rooms that are clean, uncluttered, with a "space for everything and everything in its place".

2. Avoid prolonged exposure to loud noises, flashing lights, fast moving screens of video games and television.

3. When you want to give your child an instruction, make sure you have his attention first. "Please look at me. I need your attention."

4. Give your preschooler directions that are simple and easy to understand.

State one instruction at a time. Giving too much information at once will cause your child to disregard the instructions.

5. Wait for your child to complete the first instruction and praise



NON - DRUG INTERVENTIONS

Daily routines

Routines help all children (and adults) feel more secure in their environments. We function better when we know what to expect - and what is expected of us.

Follow the same schedule every day. "Get dressed, eat breakfast, brush your teeth, and pick up your backpack."

Make a "to do" list for your child and place where your child can easily see it.

Allow your child to mark off the tasks that are completed, and consider a small reward - a sticker, for example - for each task completed.

Family structure and rules

Psychologists who studied family structure and discipline methods found children did better when nurturing, loving parents set appropriate expectations and rules for behavior with consequences for misbehavior.

Organize your child's room, work space, and school work.



WHAT CONDITIONS MIGHT CAUSE INATTENTION?

Learning disabilities may cause or increase difficulties with attention.

Medical conditions such as hypothyroidism and obstructive sleep apnea may also contribute to inattention. **If your child snores loudly or seems to have a low energy level, please consult with your pediatrician.**

One form of seizures can appear during the elementary years and was formerly called petit mal seizures. Now termed Childhood Absence Epilepsy, these seizures look as if the child is having "staring spells" that last for approximately 10 seconds during which time the child is not responsive. The child quickly returns to normal activities and does not experience abnormal movements of arms or legs. **If your child is having frequent staring spells, please see your physician as soon as possible.**

Hearing or vision problems may also contribute to attention problems. Make sure your child has been properly evaluated.

Older children and teenagers may have difficulty paying attention, especially at school, when they are anxious,

as he interacts with the pictures in the book.

Tell a short story about a picture in the book, or read a short book. See if you can read a longer story as your child develops her attention span.

Teach your child the concept of "no"

Learning the concept of "no" teaches your child's brain to learn to stop doing one behavior and start another behavior. This learning is crucial for your child's development and ability to pay attention in the future.

For additional information on teaching the concept of "no", see

the effort. "I am glad you stopped coloring when I told you to put your crayons down."

6. Now give your child the second "command" - "Please put your crayons in the box." "Thank you for listening to me."

Play memory games

Children who have difficulty paying attention also have difficulty remembering.

Play memory games with your preschooler and older child. Make up a list for grocery shopping and see who can remember each item.

Give your child "memory aids". "I remember we need to buy something red, something yellow and something green - just like the traffic light."

Teach your preschooler your phone number, home address, birthdates, and other important information. Constant repetition will help your child remember.

Practice patience

Help your child learn to wait - for your attention or for an object. You can make this a game.

"I'm going to pretend I am talking on the phone. You can use your crayons to color a picture while I talk. If you can color until I am finished talking, I'll give you a sticker (or read a book to you, or color with you.)"

Now you can gradually

Make sure your child's clothes and school work are always kept in the same place so they are easy to find.

Help your child break down projects into smaller tasks that are more easily accomplished. "Let's look at your homework assignments. Which one can you do first? Tell me when you finish the first page."

Importance of eye contact

When talking with your child, ask her to look at you so you are assured she heard you.

Importance of sleep

We all function better when we have slept! Help assure your child is able to sleep at least 10 - 12 hours at night.

Set appropriate bedtimes:
7:30 - 8:30 p.m. for your child in elementary school;
8:30 - 9:00 p.m. for those in middle school, and
9:30 - 10:00 p.m. for high schoolers.

Avoid screen time for one hour before bedtime - and no "screens" in the bedroom.

Diet

We have previously discussed the importance of nutrition in relationship to behaviors.

Remember - the importance of breakfast

depressed or stressed. Please pay attention to this "call for help".

WHEN ELSE SHOULD YOU BE CONCERNED?

Children you have other behavioral concerns should be evaluated. These include:

Aggressive behavior

Disrespect for authority - consistently argumentative and defiant

Inability to control "antisocial behaviors" after age 5 years - physically hurting others

Persistently angry or irritable, often losing temper and easily annoyed

Spiteful or vindictive

Anxiety / depression - not interested in participating in fun activities with friends or family

increase the amount of time you are "talking on the phone" and improve your child's ability to pay attention to coloring while waiting for your attention.

DECREASE SCREEN TIME and TV VIEWING

A study of over 1000 children in New Zealand who were followed for 10 years showed that viewing television during childhood led to difficulties paying attention during adolescence.

Landhuis CE, et al. "Does Childhood Television viewing Lead to Attention Problems in Adolescence?" Pediatrics 2007; 120:532.

- and protein.

Children may also benefit from adding a multi-vitamin as well as a fish oil supplement.

and now we learn - limit or eliminate sugar-sweetened beverages!

Decreasing screen time, noise / distraction

Increasing outdoor time

Children especially benefit from 30 - 60 minutes of physical activity (hopefully outdoors) after school before sitting down to homework.

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