



## Sustained Attention

Sustained attention involves the ability to maintain one's focus and attention in the presence of distractions and other activities. It involves the ability to return to an activity when interrupted and to persist in attending to a tedious or boring task. It may also involve the process of attending to multiple sources of information and being able to selectively choose what is most important to attend to. Sustained attention is developmental, as older children may need to be able to attend for longer periods to complete more complex tasks. Displays of sustained attention are typically increased for children when they find a task to be particularly interesting or varied.

### Home and School Situations Requiring Sustained Attention

- Sitting down to complete homework in a timely fashion
- Maintaining focus in conversations and discussions with others
- Continuing to work on tasks that may be boring or dull, such as a chore
- Sitting still through a short ceremony such as a wedding, graduation, or confirmation
- Completing one play activity or homework assignment before starting another
- Ignoring surrounding noise and activities to concentrate on the task at hand
- Sitting through an entire lunch or dinner
- Watching a complete television show or movie
- Sitting or listening to an entire story or reading

### Hints and Strategies to Improve Sustained Attention

- Allow interesting and stimulating tasks to follow boring and mundane tasks. It may be difficult for your child to sustain his attention to tasks that he finds to be uninteresting or not to his liking. He may be more inclined to pay attention to and complete such tasks when he can look forward to doing something he enjoys once the task is completed, such as going outside to play after he has finished his homework or having dessert after he has eaten his dinner. Model this strategy to help your child take on greater responsibility and reduce conflicts. For example, discuss how you sometimes complete an uninteresting chore prior to an enjoyable activity (such as doing the dishes prior to relaxing).
- Be clear and concise when giving directions. Do not overload your child with too many words or directions and ask him to paraphrase what he has heard when new directions are provided. This can help him to process and reflect on new or important information. Rather than lecture about the need to wear a hat and put on sunscreen during the summer to prevent damage from the sun, provide key words, such as "hat" and "sunscreen."

- Involve your child in activities requiring social interaction and assisting others. Volunteer activities are not only self-rewarding, they also engage your child's attention. Hands-on volunteer activities such as taking care of animals at an animal shelter, Scout groups, or environmental clean-ups can be very positive experiences for starting, sustaining, and maintaining attention. Encourage your child to talk about the components of activities, such as those that keep him engaged, and use these as guides for the selection of later activities and part-time jobs.
- Encourage your child to participate in activities that require his full attention. For example, in baseball, have him play catcher, pitcher, or first-base. These positions will require him to sustain his attention more than in the outfield. In music, he could be encouraged to play instruments that are a regular part of the band or orchestra, rather than something such as cymbals, which are rarely used. Helping your child to recognize the differences in attention and involving him in activities requiring higher levels of attention could improve his choices as he matures.
- Use competition to sustain attention. Challenge your child to see who fully completes a task first. For instance, have a "race" to see if he can complete a portion of his homework prior to your completion of a task, such as putting the food away after grocery shopping. Competition often serves to help children sustain their focus. Children with a competitive nature could be encouraged to come up with their own strategies for competing against themselves or others. Attempt to engage siblings, friends, or other caregivers in these friendly "competitions."
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- Actively search for technologies in which your child can sustain his attention for extended periods of time. As you determine which technologies help your child sustain attention, see if you can find methods to use these to sustain his academic development and enhance his sense of being a learner. It is very important for your child to be able to demonstrate that his knowledge of digital technologies may simply become an appropriate strategy for teaching.
- Try out a range of technologies that can sustain attention to learning, such as listening to audio books, watching a DVD about a book being read in school, using a calculator for doing math homework, or getting an i-Phone/iPod Touch with an application that teaches a foreign language. Help your child to articulate what about the technology helps him to attend for extended periods of time and encourage him to think about ways that he can use this knowledge to help learn other materials.
- Use physical activity to enhance the brain chemistry that supports sustained attention. Emerging neuroscience research indicates that children can pay attention better and for longer periods of time after vigorous physical exercise. You may wish to encourage your child to engage in physical exercise prior to doing homework or studying for a test. Help your child chart, or at least, monitor the impact of vigorous exercise on his academic attention and performance.
- Encourage your child to identify activities and content that sustains his own attention. While many children with attention difficulties have a very limited number of things that keep them focused, such as video games, computer, television, Legos, or high-risk activities, there may be associated areas that will peak their interest on a regular basis. Work with your child to expand his interests so that perhaps he begins reading about video games or skateboarding, writing his own stories about fantasy characters, or using art materials in an innovative and unusual fashion.

### Books on Sustained Attention

Cooper-Kahn, Joyce, Ph.D. and Laurie C. Dietzel. (2008). *Late, Lost, and Unprepared: A Parents' Guide to Helping Children with Executive Functioning*. Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House. [Chapter 13]

Cox, Adam J., Ph.D. (2007). *No Mind Left Behind: Understanding and Fostering Executive Control--The Eight Essential Brain Skills Every Child Needs to Thrive*. New York, NY: Penguin Books. [Chapter 5]

Dawson, Peg, Ed.D. and Richard Guare, Ph.D. (2009). *Smart but Scattered*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press. [Chapter 14]

Faber, Adele and Elaine Mazlish. (1999). *How to Talk so Kids will Listen and How to Listen so Kids Will Talk*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.

Richard, Gail J. and Jill K. Fahy. (2005). *The Source for Development of Executive Functions*. East Moline, IL: Lingua Systems.

### Websites and Articles on Sustained Attention

LearningWorks For Kids (<http://learningworksforkids.com/EF/sustained.html>): The premier resource for executive function information, offering a detailed explanation of sustained attention, tips for parents, and activities to improve this skill.

Great Schools (<http://www.schwablearning.org/articles.aspx?r=1054>): This site offers specific tips on how to help a discouraged child.

Sutton School (<http://www.sutton.lincs.sch.uk/pages/community/parentguides/ctrate.html>): The site provides a summary of what influences a child's ability to concentrate, as well as tips for parents to assist their children in improving their concentration.

### Games and Activities That Can Practice Sustained Attention

- Guitar Hero and Dance Dance Revolution  
Games, such as Guitar Hero and DDR, in which regular repetition of tasks is required for successful game play, will help your child to improve sustained attention skills.
- Memory and other card games  
Card games that require one to observe and remember what has been discarded or held in someone's hand can be very good practice for sustained attention and working memory.
- Simon Says and Guess Who?  
Activities that require repetition or description are helpful in practicing sustained attention.

- Games such as “Find the Difference,” in which two similar but slightly different pictures are provided  
These games can be helpful in allowing your child to practice using a systematic strategy for visual searches and maintaining focus or attention during the challenge.
- Puzzles  
Increasing the difficulty of a puzzle (from 100 to 200 to eventually 1000 pieces) can allow your child to practice extending his sustained attention.
- Where’s Waldo?, I Spy, and Other Search and Find Books  
These books require sustained and organized attention and can be used by children and parents cooperatively.