

Slow Processing Speed Strategies for Elementary School Students

Many children seen at our South County Child and Family Consultants practice are highly capable and grasp new material quickly, yet struggle to keep up with the pace of school. This difference often isn't noticeable until later in elementary school, when schoolwork becomes harder and slow processing speed starts to stand out. These processing speed challenges are often identified through our neuropsychological evaluations. One example is John, who, despite his intelligence, had trouble finishing his schoolwork on time, especially tasks that involved handwriting. His story illustrates the difficulties many children face and the strategies that can help.



Mother helping her daughter with her homework because her daughter struggles with handwriting and slow processing speed.

John's slow pace was clear early on, but his academic potential covered up the underlying issue. At 9 years old, he was often the last of his parents' four children to be ready

for school and lagged behind his older siblings when it was time to go to bed. His teachers and parents were impressed by his knowledge and learning ability in school, but his inability to finish work on time, especially handwriting tasks, became a significant obstacle.

This led his parents to seek occupational therapy to improve his handwriting speed, which resulted in modest improvements, although it also increased arguments around homework. John's assessments showed measurable gains in writing speed, but John still struggled to write quickly and neatly, and frustration often followed. School psychologists later suggested focusing on complementary skills instead of *just* handwriting. Implementing strategies for executive functions, self-monitoring, time management, and stress reduction led to improvements, although John remained one of the slower students at completing his work. However, this approach increased his compliance and allowed him to apply new skills in other areas.

To help children like John with slow processing speed, his teachers and parents applied several strategies that could be employed at home or school:

1. **Improve Complementary Skills:** Address issues increasing slow processing speed, such as perfectionism, poor planning, and organization. Teach brainstorming, clustering, and mind-mapping to help with generating ideas and starting projects. Encourage "writing badly" to get ideas out, and use dictation to reduce the burden of writing or typing. Editing skills can help transform drafts from speech recognition software into finished products.



Child learning how to use dictation and typing skills to help him with his slow processing speed.

2. **Teach Prioritization:** Tests are often challenging for children with slow processing speed. Teach them to skip difficult problems and tackle easier ones first. This applies to other tasks as well; start with what is known and easy, then move to more time-consuming items. Encourage scanning assignments and tests beforehand to identify what will be easy or take longer.
3. **Schedule Tasks During Peak Energy Levels:** Low energy can worsen slow processing speed. Help children manage their time by scheduling homework and projects for their most active hours. Observe and note when they are most energetic, as this can vary greatly.
4. **Establish Time Trials:** Engage children in timed activities to beat their own best times. This sharpens their brain and helps them process information faster. Examples include finding a phone number in an online directory or a word in a dictionary, counting change, or playing fast-paced card games like slapjack.
5. **Make Important Tasks Automatic:** Over-learning tasks, until they become automatic, reduces the need to actively process information. Draw an analogy to athletes practicing daily. Focus on skills that will be useful in the long term, such as timetables. In a digital world, handwriting practice may be less

beneficial than typing.

For those seeking additional support and resources on processing speed and related cognitive functions, South County Child and Family Consultants offers a wealth of information and expertise. By visiting our website, you can access a curated selection of books and materials, connect with knowledgeable specialists, and find tailored advice to help you or your child navigate the challenges associated with slower processing speed. Whether you're looking for strategies to improve daily routines, educational accommodations, executive functioning, or to simply better understand your child's unique learning profile, South County Child and Family Consultants is an invaluable resource for empowering individuals and families.