

Questions and Answers to Behavioural Problems in Preschoolers

Improving Children's Attention in their Everyday Lives

Clinical Psychology Unit

Central Psychological Support Service

(Pre-school Service)

Many parents think that their child is weak in attention, are these your concerns as well?

“He cannot sit still, and is always fidgeting and running about!”

“Every time he has to do homework, he just daydreams and wastes time!”

“He is not looking at his homework even when he is holding a pencil, and he is easily distracted by the slightest noise!”

“He is so unwilling to do training and keeps on procrastinating and messing around!”

“His homework is always incomplete and careless!”

Parents have to understand that complaining, pushing, scolding and nagging would not help with negative situations. Other than finding treatment and training programs run by professionals, parents can also try implementing training in the child's everyday life. After all, parents have the greatest opportunities to change your child.

Accepting children's weaknesses and finding solutions to help them.

Eat wisely

Exercise wisely

Rest wisely

Act wisely

"You can't absorb any nutrients with poor digestion; You can't learn anything with a poorly functioning brain."

陳瑞燕 (2009), 《提升兒童大腦功能四部曲》, 中華書局

Let's see how we can improve children's attention from these four aspects of children's everyday lives.

Eat wisely

Have a balanced diet by intaking the appropriate servings for each food category

The healthy eating food pyramid

Have a balanced diet by eating according to the Healthy Eating Food Pyramid

For 2-5 years old

Fat/Oil, Salt, Sugar

Eat the least

Milk and Alternatives

2 glasses every day (1 glass = 240ml)

Meat, Fish, Egg and Alternatives

1.5-3 tael every day (1 tael = meat in the size of a table tennis ball)

Vegetables

At least 1.5 servings every day (1 serving = ½ bowl of cooked vegetables)

Fruits

At least 1 serving every day (1 serving = 1 medium-sized fruit, like an orange / apple)

Grains

1.5-3 bowls every day (1 bowl = 250-300m)

Drink 4-5 glasses of fluid every day

Including water, milk and soup

The CHEU “Health Zone” website www.cheu.gov.hk

Tips on healthy eating

- Food that contains Omega-3 fatty acids:

Salmon, Cod, Mackerel, Tuna, Flounder, Broccoli, Walnut

- Food that are high in natural antioxidants:

Prune, Raisin, Blueberry, Strawberry, Spinach, Orange, Cherry

In a research published on November 2016 by the Faculty of Education, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, it stated that:

Students who ate breakfast every morning were found to have better academic results.

Breakfast foods that help improve academic results include baked goods, grains & food high in protein

For example,

- Whole wheat bread
- Milk/ Soy milk
- Classic corn flakes
- Egg

Foods that do not help improve academic results:

- Congee, Noodles
- Vegetables, Fruits
- Fruit juice

Foods that lower academic results:

- Soft drinks
- Instant noodles
- Biscuit
- Processed meat, e.g. ham, sausages...

EXERCISE *wisely*

to let children run, jump, sweat and breathe more

Exercise increases our energy levels. Many parents agree that children's attention is better after exercising.

Exercise can improve our cardiovascular function and brain cell activity, reduce anxiety and depression, and improve cognitive abilities.

Let children do more aerobic exercises, like running, swimming, hiking, riding bicycles and climbing.

Ball games can train attentional control and body coordination. Even simple activities like dribbling a ball or throwing & catching paper folded balls can also be helpful.

Get off the bus 1-2 stops early and walk back home, or take the stairs more often to let children breathe deeper and sweat more.

Parents might give children electronic devices (e.g. phones and tablets) when they want children to be quiet and sit still.

What possible bad consequences would this lead to?

Playing with electronic devices reduces children's chances of exercising, and hence their fitness and the stimulation received through exercising, which all affects their overall development.

Children can easily be addicted to the digital world and would have less social interaction with others. They would gradually become more self-centred and less skilful in verbal communication.

The instant stimulation received from electronic devices often causes an information overload in the brain and makes it more difficult to concentrate after using the devices. Once children return to the real world where stimulation is less intense, children would be bored and lose patience easily.

Parents should avoid using electronic devices to get children to be quiet. Instead, they should accept that children will make noise and run around.

Rest wisely

to introduce peace and quiet into daily lives

The most important quiet time is the time when we sleep.

Parents should help children develop healthy sleep habits, so that children have enough sleep and sleep well.

Sleep hygiene tips for preschoolers

Set a time period for bedtime stories or chats with children. After turning off the lights, adults have to demonstrate that it is time to sleep by stopping all movement, being silent, & giving no verbal response.

You can just say:

“Go to sleep... it’s time to sleep now... slowly fall asleep... let’s sleep.”

Silently patting children’s backs or chests is the best response to children who won’t stop talking.

- Avoid being too full or too hungry before bedtime. Avoid eating candies, drinking soft drinks, tea and coffee.
- Make sure bedroom is dark, quiet with a comfortable temperature.
- Get enough sleep. **Go to bed and get up regularly** every day.
- Develop a **fixed routine** before going to bed, for example, having story time and brushing their teeth.
- **Don’t tell children the plan for tomorrow in bed**, or they may keep thinking about it while trying to sleep.
- Reduce activities and stimulation before bedtime. **You must not let children watch TV, play with toys or use other electronic devices in bed!**
- **Don’t let children sleep in places other than their beds.** A good way is to bring them to bed when they are drowsy but still awake.
- **Insist that children lie in their beds to sleep.** if they still could not fall asleep after some time, let them get up for a while, but avoid giving them any stimulating toys or activities. An unattractive book or a stuffed animal would be a good choice. After a while, ask children to go back to bed.

Other than sleep, parents and children have to remember to add “pauses” to their hectic lives, to help them be energized again.

Parents should provide children with guidance and help them learn to take “pauses” in their lives. In the following suggestions, parents should act as a role model for children, and should not simply instruct the child without guidance.

What can be a “pause” in our everyday lives?

Paying attention to our breathing can be a good method. If you have never tried it before, why not go through the following steps and try it out:

- 1. Put away your work and find a distraction-free corner to sit down.**
- 2. Set an alarm for 3 – 5 minutes, to create a special time for yourself only**
- 3. Adjust your posture to a comfortable position. Focus your attention on your hip. Feel how the weight of your body is supported on the chair.**
- 4. Let your arms drop gently to your sides, and sit in an upright position, allowing yourself to breathe in and out smoothly.**

5. **Reflect** upon yourself "Which body part do you feel the movement of your breath the most?"
6. If you are having difficulties, you can try paying attention to these three body parts:
 - Nostril – Notice the gentle movement of the air between your upper lip and the tip of your nose, or the coolness of the air filling up your nostrils during inhalation.
 - Chest - Notice the expansion and contraction of your chest when you inhale and exhale, or the coolness of the air traveling down your lungs.
 - Abdomen/Belly – notice the expansion and contraction of your abdomen when you inhale and exhale, or the changes in the tightness around your waistline.
7. Decide on a focus point for your breathing, and continue to feel each breath you take. Allow yourself to notice how you inhale and exhale each time.
8. There is no need to change the pace of your breathing, just allow yourself to **breathe naturally**. Remember, this is not a breathing exercise, but an attention exercise, so there is no need to adjust your breathing. Simply maintain your attention and build a sense of awareness towards yourself.

If your mind has wandered off, gently remind yourself to "bring your attention back" to the focus point of your breathing. It is natural to be distracted at times, and it is not a mistake or a failure. Just remember to bring your attention back to your breathing.

9. Patiently continue to be aware of your breathing and to feel your breathing. Maintain your attention until the alarm goes off, and continue your daily tasks with more energy.

Why should we pay attention to our breathing?

When you are doing this exercise, you will realise that it is nearly impossible to pay attention to your breathing every single second, and you will get distracted. Being distracted is not just a problem in children. Everyone is affected by it, it is just a matter of degree.

When we are distracted, our minds usually wander in two directions, either to past memories or to future worries. However, we can only take actions and change the present moment instead of the past or future. Every time we are aware of our breath, we return to the present moment, because breathing is always a present action. We cannot breathe yesterday's air, or take in tomorrow's breath. When we attend to the feeling of the breaths we take, we are living in the present moment and paying attention to the things and people in front of us.

***The simple act of breathing is a valuable experience to us,
because it reminds us to "live in the present moment".***

Breathing is like anchoring a ship in a stormy ocean, when we are aware of our breath, even if other things are happening around us, we can still remind ourselves to stay in the present moment through being aware of our breathing, and not let our minds wander away.

Guide children to be aware of breathing & STAY FOCUSED

After parents are comfortable with focusing on breathing, it is time to teach the children as well. **Let children know that if they try to focus their attention, they can feel their breath, and at the same time, when they pay attention to each breath they take, they are able to focus their attention.** Parents can give children these two concrete instructions:

1. Ask the child to put his finger under the tip of his nose. Pay attention to the air flowing with every breath, the air feels cool during inhalation, and feels warm during exhalation; or
2. Ask the child to put his hand on his belly. Pay attention to the gentle rise and fall of the belly. The belly rises during inhalation and it falls during exhalation.

Parents can make use of the time before children go to bed or before they start to play at the park, to guide them to do this exercise. Parents can ask children to focus on their breathing, and feel 3 – 5 breaths before sleeping or start playing.

With these exercises, parents can rest wisely with children:

Develop a habit of paying Attention to Breathing

Constantly remind yourself to feel 3-5 breaths with your child in your daily lives. This can happen anywhere, for example, when you're using public transport, taking an elevator, taking a shower, doing chores, walking with children and waiting to fall asleep.

Create quiet time periods at home with your child. Attend to your breathing for 10-20 seconds before and after activities, to practice taking "pauses" during the day and calming down before starting activities again.

Even if your child were not willing to practice with you at first, don't give up and keep demonstrating it to the child! You will be more at peace after practicing it more frequently as well.

When parents are more at peace, they could use their experience to help the children find peace and calmness as well. This helps to improve their temper and impulse control.

Act wisely

Practice Makes Perfect

Children will be more interested to practice attention exercises if the tasks are fun, for example:

Test the child's memory: Ask him to bring you a piece of tissue paper after he finishes taking the shower

Poke the child's back and ask him to count how many times he has been poked

While walking in the park, ask the child to tell you whenever he hears a bird chirping

During a ride on the bus, ask the child to find 5 cars with the letter "B" in their car plates, or find 5 yellow cars

Hide snacks in a corner and ask the child to search for it

Ask the child to remember 2 – 3 grocery items to remind you getting them at the supermarket

Ask the child to close his eyes, then touch or smell the objects that you give him

Ask the child to look around and find anything that looks like the letter "C"

Reorganise the home furnishings and ask the child to point out the differences

Develop a habit of checking in children

For example, children can develop a habit of checking if they have left anything behind when they are getting off public transport, or they can look in the mirror before leaving the house to check if they look neat. Parents should ask children to check every single time but not just when they have forgotten something or look messy, so as to develop children's self-awareness instead of relying on adults' reminders. Remember, every time children check on their work/themselves, parents should praise them, "Good job!" If everything was fine after checking, children can continue on with their activities, but if they did spot something missing or not alright, they could fix it right away.

Guide children to find their own mistakes

Parents can occasionally play dumb, make mistakes intentionally and let children point them out. For example, giving them a pencil when they need scissors. Besides, when children have finished their homework, parents should not point out their mistakes straight away. Instead, they can hint the children to look at certain parts of their homework to check for their own mistakes. If this is too difficult, parents can gradually give more hints about where the mistakes are, until they are able to spot them out. This would give children a strong sense of accomplishment when they can do it with their own effort.

Analyzing children's attention difficulties.

1. *Is the child's ability sufficient to cope with his academic demands?*
YES - Consider increasing the child's interest and motivation
NO - Adjust the learning goals and demands
2. *Are the learning materials interesting?*
YES – Interesting content can increase attention span. Think more about incorporating the child's interests into his learning
NO – If the content is not easy to adjust, consider enhancing the child's motivation, e.g., having rewards after he finished the tasks
3. *Are there distractions in the learning environment?*
YES - Minimize noises and remove objects that would easily pull away the child's attention
NO - Increase their self-awareness by setting reasonable goals with them, and using a timer as an external reminder
4. *Is the duration too long? / Is the workload too much to handle?*
YES – Shorten the duration or reduce the workload. Another way is to split the task into several shorter parts.
NO – Enhance the child's motivation or increase his self-awareness with the use of a timer

The parents' acceptance and patience is important when guiding and training children with attention difficulties. Parents have to accept the children's limitations, adjust but keep reasonable expectations at the same time. Besides, by applying the principles and skills mentioned in previous chapters ("Eat wisely, Exercise wisely, Rest wisely, Act wisely") to improve children's daily functioning, parents will certainly find a way to help the children to cope with their difficulties, no matter how challenging the problems may seem!

Hope you find the advice in this booklet helpful for you in improving your child's behavioural problems, and put these advice into action.

Nevertheless, children's behaviours are affected by developmental challenges and other factors. You are welcome to contact a clinical psychologist through Integrated Programme teachers at your child's school, so as to provide you with appropriate advice and support.