

Attention

About attention

Attention describes being able to concentrate for a long time, being able to stay focussed on one task without being distracted, being able to divide your attention between multiple tasks (e.g. listening while completing an activity), and being able to switch your attention between different ideas (e.g. shifting your thinking to a new task or activity easily).

Many students with disabilities or developmental disorders have challenges with attention. This includes those with intellectual disability, specific learning disabilities, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and autism.

Each student is unique, and so they may have different levels of attention. For example, some teens may be able to concentrate on a single activity for a long time, but have difficulty dividing their attention between two tasks. Another may have difficulty concentrating for a long time and need frequent breaks or change of activities to keep them interested.



Evidence-based strategies

Consider how you communicate

- **Get their attention before speaking.** Eye contact, gestures, touch or verbal prompts can be used to get students' attention before giving instructions or speaking to them.
- **Speak clearly.** Clear and direct instructions about the task, the behaviour expected, and how much time students have to work in may be helpful. These instructions may need to be repeated at the start of each new task.
- **Simplify instructions and learning.** Consider breaking down big tasks into smaller ones. For example, give step-by-step instructions or visual instructions (i.e. pictures). It may be helpful to check their understanding before moving on to the next step or activity. For example, ask them to repeat instructions or answer questions.
- **Vary teaching formats.** Consider using pictures, videos, PowerPoint presentation, objects, or demonstrations to explain concepts and tasks. Hands-on lessons can be very engaging!
- **Use computer software.** Multimedia educational software on the computer or tablet may help some students focus on complex lessons, such as mathematics or reading. Interactive software where students can answer questions and receive immediate feedback are good for practising these skills. Some software can help improve memory and attention.

Modify the environment

- **Minimise potential distractions.** It may be helpful to sit students with their backs facing windows, doors, corridors or other busy areas of the classroom. Distractions could be removed when not in use. Let students who are easily disrupted by sounds wear ear plugs or headphones while they work on individual tasks.
- **Select seating.** Consider sitting students near friends who can model positive behaviours, or close to you so you can interact with them. Short seat breaks (e.g. run an errand, touch their toes), stability balls, cushions or study carrels may improve focus and restlessness. Similarly, holding blu-tack or a stress ball may help.

Make classes structured

- **Create a consistent daily routine.** Rules and routines help a student know what is planned for the day. Consider using a timer/clock to help teens learn to manage their time and routines. This can be useful if teens are learning to self-monitor their behaviours too.



Tailor activities to be as inclusive as possible

- **Match teaching to interests and abilities.** Consider what students like and can do to keep things interesting or relevant and manageable for them. As they become more capable, the workload or difficulty can be slowly increased.
- **Help them.** Some students may need help (e.g. prompts, demonstrations, encouragement) from teachers or other students when learning new skills. This help can be gradually reduced as they become more capable. They may need to be taught how to ask for help (e.g. raising hands, waiting for their turn to speak).
- **Work collaboratively in groups or with buddies.** This will reduce distractions, making it easier for them to focus. Students can practise new skills, make friends, and learn by watching others. Buddies are also great for redirecting a distracted student.

Provide feedback

- **Give encouragement and correction immediately.** Students may respond well when their own and others' efforts and achievements are encouraged frequently. Brief and direct correction may be more successful than repeating instructions lots of times or paying attention to disruptive behaviour.
- **Redirect rather than reprimand.** Consider asking a student to check displayed rules or redirecting a student who is distracted without causing embarrassment.

Support students to self-manage

- **Teach students how to self-monitor.** Consider giving students a checklist of behaviours that they would like to work on (e.g. raise hand to ask question). Prompt them to check off the list throughout the day. Access AllPlay Learn's Self-monitoring form under relevant resources.
- **Teach self-instruction skills.** Consider guiding students to problem solve so they can persist with school work instead of getting frustrated. For example, they can follow these steps mentally or think out loud: "What is the problem?", "What are my options?", "I think this is the best option", "Am I following my plan?" and "How did I do it?"
- **Guide students to self-evaluate.** Students can be taught to rate their choices and outcomes, and write down what has helped or stopped them from achieving their goals. Teachers can help students be more accurate in their evaluations by recording their own observations.



Teach academic skills

- **Teach organisation strategies.** Tools such as colour-coded folders, planners or checklists can be used to help students keep track of notes, books, homework, assignments and key dates.
- **Teach note-taking skills.** Students can be taught note-taking and summarising skills during a lesson through simple and direct instructions. Prompts and redirection may help students to take accurate notes. This support can be reduced when they can record information and write notes clearly and concisely without help.

Best practice tips

Alternate activities

- Consider giving tasks that require higher concentration earlier in the day. Mixing high- and low-interest activities throughout the day may help keep them interested. Breaks after finishing each small task may help with their attention.

Provide choices

- Giving students choices in their work can increase engagement. Consider letting them write, draw, demonstrate or talk to demonstrate their learning.

Tailor the assessment approach

- Some students may need extra time for reading or writing, or a scribe or reader. They may need to enter and re-enter the examination room (with supervision) to take breaks.

Use audiotaping

- Some students may find it very challenging to follow large amounts of verbal information. With permission, audiotaping may allow them to review verbal information at their own pace.

Get student feedback

- Check in with students. Some students may need adjustments to the teaching pace, their goals or the level of support given.



Consider the use of word processors

- Students can type instead of write notes and answers.

Other considerations

Homework

- When setting homework consider what types of tasks students could complete within a set time or to a set standard.
- It may be helpful to teach students how to use a homework planner and give them prompts when they need to write things down. Some students may need to be shown how to break down projects and study into smaller tasks, and to plan their time. Teachers can check and sign planners.
- Consider asking parents to use a consistent homework routine at home. This may be doing homework in a distraction-free area at a fixed time. They can also check that tasks in the planner are finished and provide lots of encouragement.
- Teaching tips that may be relevant to homework include: Adapt activities, teach students self-management and academic skills.

Transitions

- For more information about supporting students with disabilities when transitioning across education settings, access AllPlay Learn's [transition page](#).
- Post-school transition to adult life should begin as early as possible in school.
- Aim to increase independence by working on organisational, social and problem-solving skills, and time- and self- management skills. Provide plenty of opportunities to practise them across a range of contexts.
- It may be helpful to identify skill gaps and develop a support plan to help them be successful (e.g. social skills, academic and/or employment skills).

Other co-occurring conditions

- Students with attention challenges may also experience [ADHD](#), [specific learning disability](#), [autism](#), [intellectual disability](#), or [anxiety](#).
- Refer to information about these areas to help support the student.



Relevant resources

Visit our [resources page](#) for a range of resources that can help to create inclusive education environments for students with disabilities and developmental challenges. Some particularly relevant resources for supporting students with attention issues include:

- Strengths and abilities communication checklist
- Student self-monitoring form
- Locker checklist
- Problem solving guide
- AllPlay Learn Story - How to be organised