

Addressing Attention Interference

There are a variety of elements that I think about when I work with kids to help them with their ability to direct and sustain attention. Not everything is a function of attention, and if I don't think about these additional factors, the things that might interfere with a child's ability to pay attention, I'm sometimes missing an important ingredient.

First of all, let me say that not everything is a function of attention. Maybe the child's not doing their schoolwork effectively because they have a learning disability. Maybe it's a function of a mismatch between a child's strengths and what they're being asked to do in school. Maybe it's an issue of interest or motivation. Maybe the classroom dynamic is interfering with attention. Not everything is a function of the child's ability to pay attention.

One of the things that commonly undermines a child's attentional capacities is stress. People who are anxious have negative emotions that interfere with the ability to concentrate and learn. If there are stressors that we can identify and address, we will almost always see improvements in attention.

One of the most common and important factors that affect attention is anxiety, so much so that I think there are children that are misunderstood as having primary attention issues, when in fact anxiety is the underlying element. Anxiety affects attention because it biases what you focus on. Anxieties get you looking for threats and when you look for negative information, threats, things that are not right, it interferes with your ability to focus on a task. The other reason anxiety gets in the way of attention is that anxiety has a looping. That if you're anxious, your mind keeps wandering to those anxious thoughts, and the more your mind wanders, the more it interferes with task attention. The third reason that anxiety can interfere with attention is that it impacts sleep. If you're not sleeping well, as we've talked about before, you're not going to pay attention well. It's really important that you consider whether there are coexisting anxiety issues that might be impacting your child's ability to direct and sustain their efforts.

We also see children who have recurrent preoccupations, mind wandering, looping thoughts that get in their way, that make it harder for them to stay present and to think about the task. The most common one is video games. I have boys or girls that are nonstop talking about Minecraft, for example. If you loop on something over, and over, and over again, it will intrude on your task thinking and we have to learn how to address those looping thoughts and not just work on how to improve your attention.

Along those lines, we really have to be careful about excessive screen time. I am convinced that screen time preoccupations interfere with many aspects of our children's success and we have already talked about screen time guidelines and other variables and addressed what I think is an epidemic in our society regarding the overuse of screens.

We have some children who are overscheduled. They go from school to daycare to soccer practice to dinner to homework. They don't have any down time, or any independent play. That downtime, or independent play, is different from playing a sport. It allows the children to be creative, to let their minds wander, to have control over the play, to develop their own rules in the play. It's really important to have some down time and not overschedule your child or your family.

We often have unrealistic expectations. I've made reference to this before. I see five-year-olds that are expected to sit still for an inordinate period of time, I have children that are doing three hours of homework as fifth and sixth graders, I have children that are in some kind of sport for three, four hours at a time. We just have to be more reasonable about what we expect from our children, because they won't have the attention capacities unless we do. I also have schools now, because there is such a high curricular demand, that they've actually cut back on recess. To expect kids to focus in the classroom hour after hour, without more recess, without more physical activity, without rebooting attention outdoors is just unrealistic.

We also have unfinished business that undermines our attention. If there's something important in our life or our day that needs to be addressed, and it is unaddressed, it will interfere. Our minds will wander to that unfinished business. I often ask is there anything we need to get done, anything we need to talk about or address before we begin this next activity.

In our society we are accepting way too many interruptions. There are many work places where we're not giving people time for undivided attention. We think that these interruptions are part of the normal work day. We have children who cannot tolerate those interruptions. It's really difficult for them. They're working on an activity and next thing you know they have to stop and do something else. I wish there was more opportunity for a child to persist with the task and march towards their goal.

As I've mentioned, we have children with skill deficits. We don't know that they have skill deficits, necessarily, but weaknesses in memory, reading skill, math fact knowledge, will interfere with their ability to do the work and it will look like it's an attention problem, when it's an issue with learning. We have kids that are not paying attention in sports because they're not suited to that sport. I could tell you a story about me and gymnastics but it's probably too embarrassing to share. But I will tell you that I did not pay attention in my gymnastics class.

We also overemphasize finishing tasks. I think finishing is a four-letter word. It's way overacted. I want children to set goals and march towards those goals. If finishing is something they can accomplish, great. If you emphasize finish, finish, finish, go home and finish, we are I think sometimes sending the wrong message. Not everything has to be finished.

Bodily discomfort can also interfere with attention. Headaches, stomachaches, allergies that are not fully appreciated by parents or physicians or teachers. I know children who have bowel issues or bladder issues that get in the way. There are somatic issues that can affect attention that need to be addressed.

I've cautioned all parents about over cueing, over prompting, getting over involved. If we do that, that will interfere with a child's williness or ability to develop their own individual attention strategies. A task that's completed with mom or dad or the teacher saying, "Come on, get to work," or "You need to get to work, leave that alone, pay attention to your work." I'm not sure that's a task well done.

We talked also about fatigue. Lots of children are simply having trouble to pay attention because they are tired. You always want to think about getting enough sleep and making sure that they have enough energy to participate.

Lastly, I see many, many children who are dehydrated. They are not drinking enough. I think most kids are eating enough, although I question for all of us what we're eating and whether it's the right foods. But

more importantly I see kids that are not drinking enough and we really want to emphasize hydration as part of our attention program.