

Building Memory Skills: The Basic Concepts

Since the ability to direct and sustain attention is a critical component of memory, weaknesses in memory are common in children with ADHD. If we want to improve memory skill we must pay attention to attention. Remembering a person's name is easier when we pay attention to how they look and use their name in conversation. Recalling where we placed something is easier when we are more mindful of what is in our hand and where we put it down. In many instances, test scores that reflect memory weaknesses are actually attention vulnerabilities and it is not uncommon to see memory skills and test scores improve as we address the vulnerabilities in attention.

Memory is a complicated process with many components. The most basic level involves sensory or short term processing, but there are also intermediate, long term and working memory components. As we strive to understand a person's memory skills, it is important consider these different components. A key consideration is the difference between storage and retrieval of information. How we store information impacts how well we can retain the information and how well we can retrieve it when we need to. As we shall see, many memory "tips and tricks" incorporate storage and retrieval strategies.

Be wary when people say a child has a "poor memory." Very few people have universally poor recall. Some of us have strong visual memory and weaker auditory memory. Children may have good rote memory skills but have trouble recalling more meaningful information that involves language skill. A student may have trouble decoding and retrieving words but have a fantastic ability to recall chess positions or how to tie knots. Focusing on a child's weaknesses and neglecting a youngster's memory strengths is discouraging and undermines motivation and effort to improve.

Psychologists and educators have more confidence in test scores than they should. Attention, anxiety, fatigue, attitude, strategy, etc. all affect test scores. A child can do poorly on a memory task one day and do much better when reassessed. Children can score poorly on a digit span test but do quite well when they are asked to recall a sentence or a story. Clinicians unfortunately will rely on only a few subtests to evaluate memory when a more comprehensive battery is needed. Please be carefully about forming conclusions based on too little information.

While it is true that children and adults with ADHD are more likely to have working memory weaknesses, it is perhaps equally true that most of us don't really understand what working memory actually is or how to actually improve it. Working memory is far more than our ability to repeat back numbers in different fashions or recall the names of our presidents. Working memory involves an ability to hold information as we are performing a task. It involves both attention and short-term memory. It is highly dependent upon task complexity and personal skill. There is also a long-term storage component since accessing what we already know is often part of the task we are performing. As you might already anticipate, building a child's working memory is very difficult and is usually dependent upon the specific task or activity a youngster is expected to perform.

So-called memory weakness are commonly a matter of habit failure. When we “forget” to bring homework to school or flush the toilet it usually reflects a lack of routine or habit. When we don’t “remember” to put away our bicycle or where we put our wallet and keys it more commonly reflects habit failure. This is a very important concept since this type of forgetting can be addressed by developing better routines that flow and habits that make it unnecessary for us to remember. Positive practice is one of the most powerful strategies to help with these memory failures that we will discuss when we talk about building memory skills.

There is a difference between memory and memorization. Most memory “tips and tricks” are about memorization; the intentional process of trying to remember something. Memorization skill is extremely helpful when we are studying for tests or learn something that we will need to know at work. As we shall discover, memorization strategies involve techniques that are fairly easy and fun to learn. Children have more confidence about their memory when they learn these techniques.