

Beyond Memorization

Forgetting is often a habit failure and not a memory failure. Many of the things a child forgets to do are things that are best done automatically, without conscious thought. Teachers who have strong daily routines for writing down assignments, turning in homework and packing up at the end of the day have students who are far more organized and less forgetful. The same is true at home, where children will do much better if there is a specific routine for getting ready in the morning or packing up to go to soccer.

At both school and home, the best approach for building these habits and reducing forgetfulness is positive practice. When a child forgets to hang up their coat, the remedy is positive practice and not “remembering.” You can help a child remember to hang up their coat by repeatedly walking up to the house, opening the door and immediately putting the coat on a hook. Practice multiple times initially, reducing the amount of practice each day based on how strongly the habit has developed. For the practice to be effective it must include the entire flow; simply taking the coat off and on the hook will not work. Positive practice is extremely powerful and broadly applicable approach that can help children to flush the toilet, turn off a light, feed the dog, turn in homework, etc.

While checklists can be helpful as a memory tool, they are often overused and not as helpful as one would think. Often the checklists include elements of habit or routine that are more effectively learned through positive practice and family modeling. A checklist is more useful when you want to remember things that are not part of a daily routine, such as items you need to bring to a picnic. Checklists can also be helpful in reviewing whether a child has completed the steps of a routine or completed goals for the day. Checklists should be large but not long; a few items on a large poster is far more helpful than multiple items on a sheet of paper.

One of the most challenging memory skills is called proactive memory, where a child is asked to remember to do something in the future. We should be very careful about asking a child to remember to do something later in the day. A simple reminder such as “remember to take out the trash when we get home” may not be sufficient. Some coaching may be necessary to help a child learn how to remember. Using a phone reminder or timer is one of the more helpful tools, but there are imagery strategies that can be used as well. You can also create future reminders the old fashioned way, a note on the front door or refrigerator. The more obvious the visual reminder the better, a book on a chair in the middle of the kitchen helps remind us to return it to the library.

All of us can have trouble remembering where we put things. (I don’t know anyone who has more trouble with this than I do.). Routine and habit are again the most powerful remedies; if you always put your keys and wallet in the basket by the door and your phone on the charging station it will be easier to remember where they are. Eliminating clutter also helps so create

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storage and organize a child's room so things are easier to find. Mindfulness strategies are also very powerful. If you spend time being more mindful of things that are in your hand and the sounds things make when you put them down (perhaps even using imagery to exaggerate the process.) It may take a week or two, but mindfully putting things down ultimately builds an awareness of where you put things. For children who cannot find their homework, an exercise where they must bring the folder when they move around the house can be very powerful.

Although repetition is an important element of the memory/learning process, another key dimension is retrieval. When you use people's names at a party you are more likely to remember them. When students have parents or friends quiz them after study, memory for the information is improved. Repeatedly trying to name the first ten amendments of the constitution is more powerful than reading the list over and over. Flash cards are helpful when we repeatedly go through them, but also because the recall of what is on the back of the card is an act of retrieval. Word definitions are best learned by both repeated review and retrieval.

Repetition and retrieval practice is further enhanced by revisiting the material you are trying to learn. If you are trying to remember or learn something, it is arguably better to study them for 15 minutes in the afternoon, then again, an hour or two later and then a quick review before going to bed. Spacing out the study sessions helps enhance the memory traces. As an aside, shorter study sessions may fit better within our attention span and are easier to schedule in a busy day.

There is a surprisingly helpful strategy that utilizes our sense of smell. Most of us have a specific scent brings back memories. For me it is the gum from Topps baseball cards. If you study with the scent a lemon, that same scent may help you recall the information during the test.

Working memory is often a vulnerability for children and adults with attention weaknesses. Unfortunately, clinicians are better at identifying working memory problems than they are at improving them. Improving attention will certainly help with working memory. Medication therapy can be a very powerful tool. There are some programs/apps that claim to improve working memory (e.g., N-back) but the literature on their effectiveness is far from clear. If you are going to use a memory app or program pick an inexpensive one and see how helpful it is.