Pick up any newspaper or magazine. Odds are you’ll find an article about children who have problems paying attention. Perhaps your own child’s teacher or coach has hinted that your child does not pay attention and suggested that “we watch this closely” or that you have your child evaluated by a professional. What’s going on? There seems to be an epidemic of attention problems in recent years, but the cause is unclear. Parents and teachers are understandably concerned, so children’s behavior is scrutinized to find significance in every squirmy morning, misunderstood direction, or incomplete assignment.

For an estimated 5% of children, attending problems can be attributed to ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), a neurological impairment. However, parents and doctors rightly worry that in many schools far too many children are being labeled and medicated for attention problems. On the other hand, teachers encounter many children who lack basic attention skills expected in a typical classroom such as waiting to take turns, listening when others speak, concentrating on the task at hand, or completing assigned work.

To deal with this apparent crisis, adults in children’s lives need to realize that all children, whether or not they have neurological impairment, need help in learning how to manage their attention. 

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attention. Attention is not a fixed, unchangeable characteristic. It is a skill that develops and is
influenced by a variety of things including how old the child is, what he is asked to do, where he
is asked to do it, and what interesting things are going around him. Attention can also be
strengthened or weakened by factors in the child’s environment and experiences that the family
provides for the child.

Children today grow up surrounded by fast paced mass media. The culture of quick fixes
and instant gratification entices them. Despite our best efforts and intentions as parents, it is a
rare child who is content to be alone with his thoughts with no external stimulation for any
length of time. Rarer still is the child who is able to persevere and sustain concentration on a
difficult or uninteresting task. Yet, to succeed in school, and in life, the ability to focus attention
and thought is crucial. Parents can help their children develop attention management skills in
three concrete ways: establish routines, provide attention-building activities, and model
attending skills. Children of all ages can benefit from this help. It is never too early – or too late
– to start.

ESTABLISH ROUTINES. Often when it seems that a child is not paying attention, he is
confused about exactly what he is supposed to do. Sometimes what he is expected to do changes
in unpredictable ways. Routines help remove uncertainty for the child. Much of daily life is
repetitive. As adults, we get dressed and undressed in much the same way every day, go to work
on a regular basis, and typically follow daily routines to accomplish these goals. We don’t have
to pay much attention to ‘getting it right.’ When we teach children routines to deal with
repetitive parts of their day, we help them ‘free up’ their attention for more interesting and
challenging parts of the day.

For parents of school-aged children, a regular morning routine is a good place to begin
developing predictable routines. Have a specific time for the child to wake up. Then schedule
getting dressed, eating breakfast, brushing teeth, packing the backpack, leaving for the bus, and any other tasks to be done at the same time and in the same order each day. Younger children may need reminders and prompts to keep things moving. A checklist on an erasable grease-board accomplishes the same thing for older children while instilling a sense of responsibility and independence. Keep the same routine on weekends as well and the child knows what he is expected to do each and every morning.

An after-school routine works well, too. It is important to have a place for the child to deposit all his school-related paraphernalia when he comes home. Then when he needs to do homework, or to pack up in the morning, everything is available. A colorful plastic milk crate, easily found at most home improvement stores, is large enough to hold a backpack, library books, homework assignments, and other school “stuff.” In the morning, everything in the crate is put in the backpack easily – no more hunting for the overdue library book or math assignment. Schedule your child’s snack, playtime, after school activities, dinner, homework, and bedtime to suit your family’s schedule, but the more predictable and consistent the routine is day to day, the easier it will be for the child to understand what he is expected to do.

Often, in school, children with diagnosed attending problems, including ADHD, receive classroom accommodations as a part of their treatment or behavioral management program. These accommodations typically include sitting near the teacher, sitting in a quiet place away from distractions, having frequent breaks with an opportunity to stretch or move around a bit, breaking long assignments into smaller pieces, and mixing easier or more interesting assignments in with the harder or more tedious ones to break things up a bit and hold the child’s interest.

As parents, we expect these things to happen at school. However, at home, we may fail to make similar accommodations. Homework is schoolwork done at home. Children with
attending issues face the same problems completing work regardless of what it is called and when it is done. All children face homework more tired and “burned out” than they were at school. So a simple routine helps relieve some of the stress. Homework should be done in a quiet place away from distractions, preferably in the same place every night. Help your child organize his work into time and subject segments. If he’s a whiz at spelling but hates math, let him do half his math, then spelling to build his confidence and break the tedium, then have a snack, and then finish the math. A homework routine goes a long way to keep peace in the evening and help your child develop life-long attending and concentration skills. He will learn ways to cope with tasks he may find uninteresting and to persevere until they are completed.

PROVIDE ATTENTION-BUILDING ACTIVITIES. A second way to develop attending skills is to encourage attention-building activities such as board and card games. In these activities, children have to take turns, attempt to reach a goal, and develop a strategy. They learn to attend in order to follow what is happening and to become more proficient. Parcheesi, Crazy Eights, or Uno are simple examples. More complex board games, such as Checkers, Chess, and Scrabble become appropriate as attention span increases. Additionally, activities that direct the child’s involvement toward a clear goal help to build attention management skills. For example, a jigsaw puzzle does more to develop attending skills than does playing with action figures or dolls, which requires involvement but not always a clear goal. Exposure to these types of activities from an early age will help the child build attending skills and teach the importance of seeing a task through to the finish rather than settling for instant gratification.

Watching television does not require either active involvement or a goal, and it is definitely not an attention strengthening activity. As adults, we are skilled at what is called “divided attention.” Divided attention is paying attention to several tasks at once. Children are not skilled at doing this. Their attention is easily captured by television, and it is then impossible
for them to complete other tasks. During the morning routine, it is important to turn the television off. Once it is on, the child will be unable to focus on less interesting activities such as eating breakfast. Likewise, television should be off during the homework routine.

MODEL ATTENTION SKILLS. A third way to develop attending skills is to model attending. Parents are their children’s first teachers and role models. If parents do not manage their own attention well, children won’t either. The hurried lifestyle most families live today is not conducive to giving children undivided attention, but unless they receive it they are unlikely to learn this important skill. A relaxed, conversation-rich family dinner is a good place to start. When each person tells about his day and listens to what others have to say in an unhurried way, turn taking is modeled. A benefit is that, when your turn comes, everyone will listen to you! Likewise, when you give your child undivided attention he learns the importance of doing one thing at a time. Similarly, finishing what you start teaches the child the importance of following through on tasks. You model divided attention when you listen to the child while doing something else.

Children’s skills in attending and attention management are developed over time. Parents have a great deal of influence on how well their children learn these skills by the way they structure the home environment, the games and other activities they provide for their children, and the way they themselves handle the demands of daily life. Parents who provide a predictably structured environment, choose appropriate activities, and model attentive behavior in their own lives can do a great deal to help their children develop these skills. All children need this sort of help, and parents who provide it are less likely to see their children referred to specialists for attending difficulties or labeled ADHD.