

# Understanding and Managing - Attention and Concentration

The Child Brain Injury Trust is a national charity supporting anyone affected by childhood acquired brain injury. The following information has been developed to help the reader understand more about brain injury and some of the associated issues. Every effort has been taken to ensure the information is accurate and up to date.

If you require more immediate support or assistance please contact our **Helpline 0303 3032248** or email **helpline@cbituk.org** where we will be able to respond to your specific enquiry and or offer support.

## Understanding and Managing – Attention and Concentration

This Factsheet aims to help you understand about the importance of attention and concentration and the difficulties that your child may experience with this specific function of the brain following their brain injury. We will explain what these functions are and how an injury can affect your child's ability to focus and concentrate and provide some strategies to help support them with this area of difficulty.

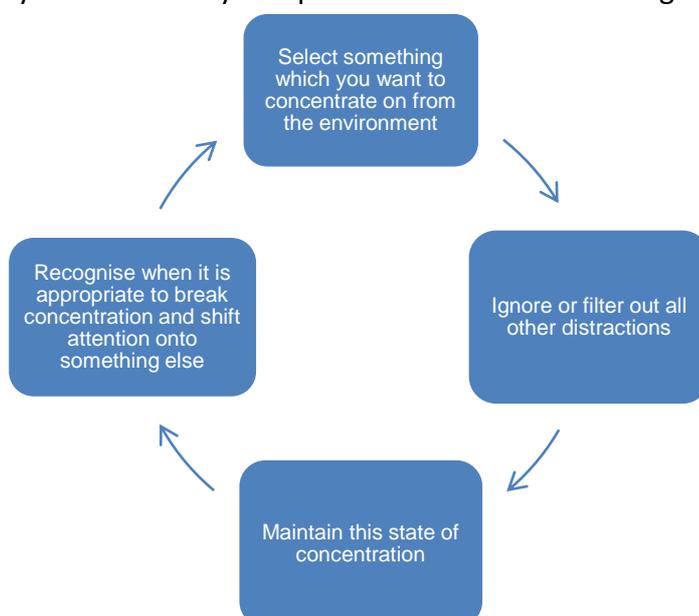
Attention and concentration difficulties can be formally diagnosed by a range of medical professionals such as a neuropsychologist, clinical psychologist, paediatrician or educational psychologist, who can help develop ways to support your child.

### What is **Attention and Concentration**?

**Attention** allows us to select and focus on what is *important*.

**Concentration** allows us to maintain our *attention over time*.

We use these skills every day, often without really noticing them. Although they may sound simple processes, they are in fact very complex. To attend to something it is necessary to:



There are different kinds of attention depending on what we need to do:

- **Focusing attention**
  - when we are able to focus on something specific rather than be in a dream.
- **Selective attention**
  - when we constantly shift our attention from one thing to another and then select and prioritise which task receives our attention.
- **Divided attention**
  - when we need to be concentrate on two different things at once.
- **Sustained attention**
  - when we concentrate at length on one particular task at hand and do not get distracted by other things.

### **Problems with Attention and Concentration**

Problems with attention often occur as a result of an ABI and your child may have greater difficulty in focusing their attention and concentrating. The way in which your child's attention and concentration abilities can be affected may depend on the severity of their injury.

Studies have shown severe traumatic brain injury (TBI) is associated with reduced accuracy and slowed processing of information. Young children with severe TBI may be at risk of severe attention and concentration difficulties. Children with mild and moderate TBI show better outcome, with pre-injury behaviour and age at the time of injury also impacting difficulties 30 months after injury.<sup>2</sup> Pupils who had difficulties with attention and concentration prior to their injury, for example those with ADHD, are likely to experience a higher level of difficulty in attention and concentration after their injury.<sup>1</sup>

Children with TBI, particularly those with more serious injuries, are **most vulnerable to attention deficits** in the acute stages post injury.

These problems become obvious when they need to:

- **Focus their attention**

They can be so distracted by things going on around them generally or by what they are thinking about, that they find it difficult to focus on anything for any length of time.
- **Select what they need to attend to**

Even when they can focus on something in environments with lots of noise and visual distractions they cannot filter out and select what is essential to focus on and what is not.

- **Divide their attention**

They may find it difficult to switch back and forth between activities quickly (e.g. copying work from the board and listening to a teacher explaining).

- **Sustain their attention**

Even if they know what they have to pay attention to and are not too distracted by other things, being able to sustain attention is tiring and difficult and they may give up on whatever they are doing quickly.

## Implications at home and at school

Difficulties with attention and concentration may affect many aspect of your child's day to day activities, and impact across home, school and social interactions. Below are some examples of how issues may arise:

### Typical issues at home

It is possible that your child may have considerable behaviour problems associated with attention and concentration. These problems may relate to daily and social tasks which place stress on their emotional well-being. Difficulties may include:

- an inability to sit still
  - being restless and fidgety e.g. playing with cutlery at meal times
  - flitting from one game/toy to another, no longer able to attend and concentrate on a board game
  - being unable to watch a TV programme for more than 15-20 minutes
- being easily overwhelmed – sensory stimulation
  - disliking loud noisy rooms – at family parties they may take themselves off somewhere quiet
- difficulty completing demands or multiple activities
- failing to pay attention (and remember) what they needed to get when asked to “go upstairs and get something”
- an inability to adapt to change
- becoming easily bored
- failing in daily tasks e.g. dressing themselves without continual prompts
- have a ‘short fuse’ due to their frustration
- poor sleep and frequent waking during the night
- changing part time jobs during the teenage years

## Typical issues at school

The practical effect of difficulties with attention in school can be increased by what is happening in the classroom, **sometimes however, the structure of the classroom imposed on the child can be helpful. Staff may observe your child:**

- Being easily distracted, for example by other children, nearby activities or objects.
- Having difficulty following instructions.
- Talking in class.
- Being easily overwhelmed by information.
- Having difficulty deciding what is important information.
- Changing to different task.
- Staying on task and completing work within time allocated.
- Having an adverse effect their ability to learn and remember information.
- Having an adverse effect on self-esteem e.g. not completing a task prior to the lesson finishing. This may make them feel useless or a failure. In addition, this can be misinterpreted by peers and education professionals as lazy or not trying hard enough etc.
- Also having difficulty due to them suffering from cognitive fatigue (being too tired to think) due to increased energy spent on trying to stay focused.

All these difficulties will affect a child's ability to learn and remember information so they fail to complete task prior to the lesson ending. If staff do not understand their difficulties, they may be seen as lazy and as not trying hard enough, when this is not the case.

## Impact on self esteem

Children are frequently aware of many of these difficulties and this can result in their feeling useless or a failure in many different settings. If their problems are not understood and managed appropriately, they may eventually just give up.

## Impact of friendships and social skills

These difficulties do not just affect academic work at school, but also impact on a child's social skills and friendships, which also affect their self-esteem. If your child

- is unable to focus in a busy environment
- interrupts others
- changes the subject of a conversation
- is slower at processing and making sense of information in general conversations and jokes as well as in class

They may well withdraw from other people, avoid socialising and have difficulty in maintaining and creating new friendships.

## Strategies to support attention and concentration issues

There are many ways in which difficulties with attention and concentration can be reduced or overcome. Below are some ideas of how you can support your child to improve their attention and concentration abilities. Our Regional Child and Family Support Coordinators are also able to support children and their families with these issues. To contact your local coordinator please contact our Helpline, the details are at the start of this Factsheet.

It is critical that schools and families are aware of the limitations and difficulties with attention and concentration and structure expectations accordingly. Below are some strategies that may help your child with attention and concentration issues at home, socially and at school.

### General Strategies

- Firstly ask your child what they want to achieve in respect of their difficulties with attention and concentration? It could be:
  - Read a chapter of their book
  - Finish a piece of craft work
  - Focus long enough to take an exam
  - Concentrate on a particular task for an entire lesson

Then review and implement some of the strategies suggested below to help the child

- When it is important that your child should concentrate on something try to make sure that there are few distractions.
- When giving instructions get your child's attention by calling their name and making eye contact.
- Limit the amount of information given to you child and present one activity or idea at a time.
- Keep instructions brief, break them down and/or provide a written copy.
- Keep activity sessions brief at first, 5/10 minutes or however long they can concentrate for and build this up slowly.
- Always praise success when they have managed to concentrate for this time.
- Meditating, deep breathing and other strategies for physical and mental relaxation such as coffee breaks or talking to friends.
- Use varied styles of presentation to try to focus and sustain attention.

### Strategies for Home

- Turn off any distracting television, music or computers and clear away other books, games etc that are not needed.
- If family/friends are coming round, limit the numbers at first so your child is not overwhelmed by all the competing noise and chatter.

## Strategies for School

**In the initial stages**, there should be a gradual return to school and children should be provided with sufficient rest time. Expectations for tasks such as homework should be reduced.

- Schedule important and demanding activities early in the day or after a longer break.
- Use short prompts and give brief cues or structure them into short achievable blocks, providing a clear beginning and end.
- Allow time for regular breaks and give the child errands that let them move around.
- Alternate activities between mentally demanding and less challenging or physical ones.
- Reinforce instructions with written cues or instructions on the black/whiteboard.
- Minimise potential distractions.
- Have your child sat at the front of the class and keep their desk free of unnecessary material.
- Seat the child near the teacher or with children who will be good role models.
- Provide direct prompts to return to task and positively reinforce on-task behaviour.
- Simplify and reduce material on worksheets and on the black/whiteboard.
- Develop and stick to a daily classroom routine.
- Use picture or cue cards as a reminder to focus attention.
- Encourage pupils to ask for clarification when they have lost the thread of what they are supposed to be doing. A system could be set up to allow this to be discrete.
- For fidgeting behaviour – provide stimulation e.g. shoe lace, or stress ball.
- The use of a task board or step by step guide that your child can tick off when completed.
- The use of now and next boards.

**If children have difficulty in attention and concentration, they can easily fail tasks where parents and staff have not accommodated to their needs. This repeated failure can affect their self-esteem and they can easily give up completely. Simple strategies can make a big difference to their success and sense of well-being.**

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<sup>1</sup>Yeates, K.O., Armstrong, K., Janusz, J., Taylor, H.G., Wade, S., Stancin, T., et al. (2005). Long-term Attention Problems in Children with Traumatic Brain Injury. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 44, 574-584.

<sup>2</sup> [Anderson V](#), [Catroppa C](#), [Morse S](#), [Haritou F](#), [Rosenfeld J](#) (2005) Attentional and processing skills following traumatic brain injury in early childhood.