

# Parent Guide

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## What is this resource and how do I use it?

If you're concerned about your child's attention and listening, this guide will help you to identify the possible causes and consequences of these difficulties. You'll also find some ideas of what you can do to support your child at home.

### What is the focus of this resource?

**Attention and Listening Difficulties**

### Further Ideas and Suggestions

We have lots of other support guides for parents in **this category** at the **Parents Hub**. You might like to read about conditions such as **ADHD**, **dyslexia**, **hydrocephalus** or **diabetes**. Visit **this category** to see some of our great new SEND resources.

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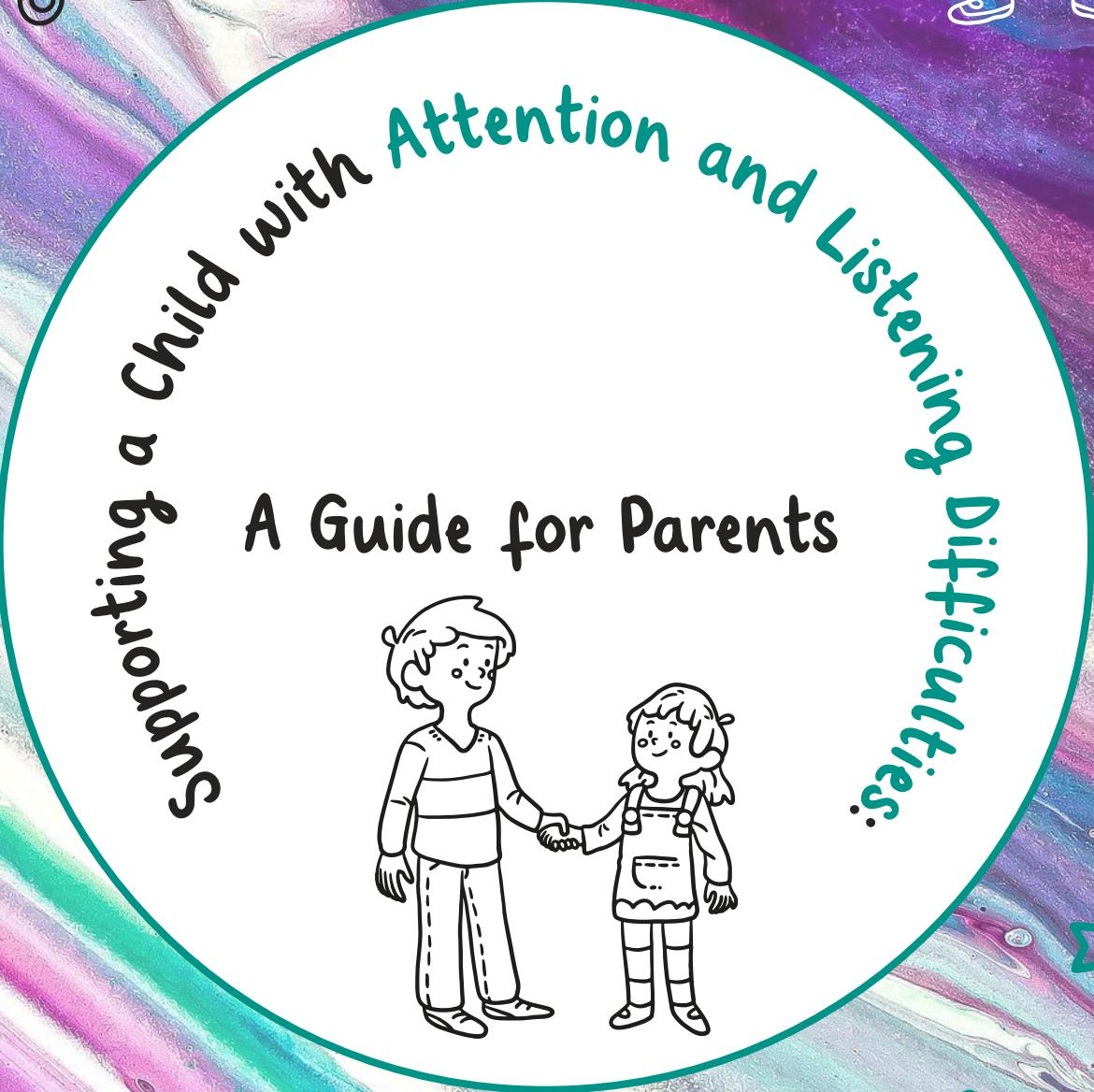
**Parenting Wiki**



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# Supporting a Child with Attention and Listening Difficulties: A Guide for Parents



# Supporting a Child with Attention and Listening Difficulties

If you think your child needs support with their listening, concentration or attention, this guide will help you to understand a bit more about what these difficulties might look like and what might be causing them. Read on for information about how you can support your child and alleviate these difficulties to help them thrive at home and at school.

## What are attention and listening difficulties?

General attention and listening difficulties arise when a child finds it hard to listen or has an attention span shorter than what might be expected for a child of the same age. These difficulties might present in the classroom as not concentrating or constant fidgeting and not being able to sit still. Some children who have these difficulties go on to be diagnosed with ADHD; however, many children with these difficulties do not have ADHD and, instead, the cause of their difficulties is something else.

It is important to remember that lots of children have short attention spans and get easily distracted, but when it becomes more frequent, it might be time to think about ways to support your child.



# Supporting a Child with Attention and Listening Difficulties

## What are the consequences of having poor attention and listening skills?

Many children 'grow out of' their short attention span as they mature. Some do not. Without support, less developed attention and listening skills can lead to a range of problems, including:

- **Low Self-Esteem and Poor Academic Performance**

If a child is not able to complete tasks or follow instructions, they might feel a loss of control and feel unsure about what they should be doing. This leads to a lack of self-esteem as they convince themselves they are 'stupid', which causes them to fall behind at school. Their poor attention and listening skills could be misinterpreted as behaviour problems.

- **Failure to Reach Their Potential**

A child with attention and listening problems that is not supported might not be able to complete tasks. They might find it hard to get to a level of learning which extends their skills and knowledge because they can't concentrate or listen for long enough. They might fail to complete important tasks later on at school, such as assignments and exams, as well as being at risk of not performing to their potential in a job situation. They may misunderstand instructions because they have not listened effectively, leading to them making poor decisions or mistakes and eventually evoking a feeling of distrust from others.

- **Social Difficulties**

A child becoming easily distracted or being unable to stick to a task can be problematic for others, who might find it frustrating. Sometimes, children with attention difficulties also display impulsive behaviours. Friends might find this unpredictability difficult to understand or tolerate and therefore they might not want to nurture a friendship.

- **Difficulty Working with Others**

As they go through school, a child with attention and listening problems may need support to successfully work as part of a group. Children working collaboratively may become frustrated with a child whose attention span is poor and who can't seem to keep on task or pull their weight in the group.

- **Mental Health Difficulties**

In some cases, poor attention and listening can lead to mental health difficulties.



# What causes attention and listening difficulties?

Some children with poor attention and listening skills might be diagnosed with **ADHD**, but the cause of these difficulties in many other children include:

## Anxiety

When a child is feeling stressed or anxious, it can be extremely hard for them to focus on anything but their own feelings. Studies have shown that there is a link between anxiety and working memory, which is required for many activities in the classroom. This may present as a lack of concentration.

Anxieties, such as separation anxiety, can be debilitating: a child will be unable to concentrate properly when they are worried about what might happen to their parent while they are away from them.

Some children are so preoccupied with the feeling of having to give a perfect answer or making a mistake in public that they might seem to be lacking attention.

## Learning Disorder

A child who lacks concentration or doesn't appear to listen might, in fact, have a learning disorder. Their poor attention span might be their attempt to mask what they are struggling with. They might feel ashamed about their ability and welcome any distraction that diverts their attention to something else.

## Sensory Processing Difficulties

A **sensory processing disorder** can lead to a child having a short attention span. Sights, sounds or other sensory information can be extremely distracting, causing a child to lose focus, especially in a busy classroom environment. It could be the vivid colours in the setting, the loud background noise or even the uncomfortable clothes that are distracting to them.

An **auditory processing disorder** could lead a child to miss important information or instructions in a classroom setting or at home. This could look as though they have not been listening.

## Trauma

A child who has experienced or witnessed a traumatic event may present with a poor attention span and be hypervigilant, meaning they are unable to focus on one task.



# What causes attention and listening difficulties?

## Lack of Sleep

Sleep is important for a child's concentration. A child who is too tired may find it hard to focus or become confused with instructions. They may 'drift off' and look like they are daydreaming.

## Lack of Exercise

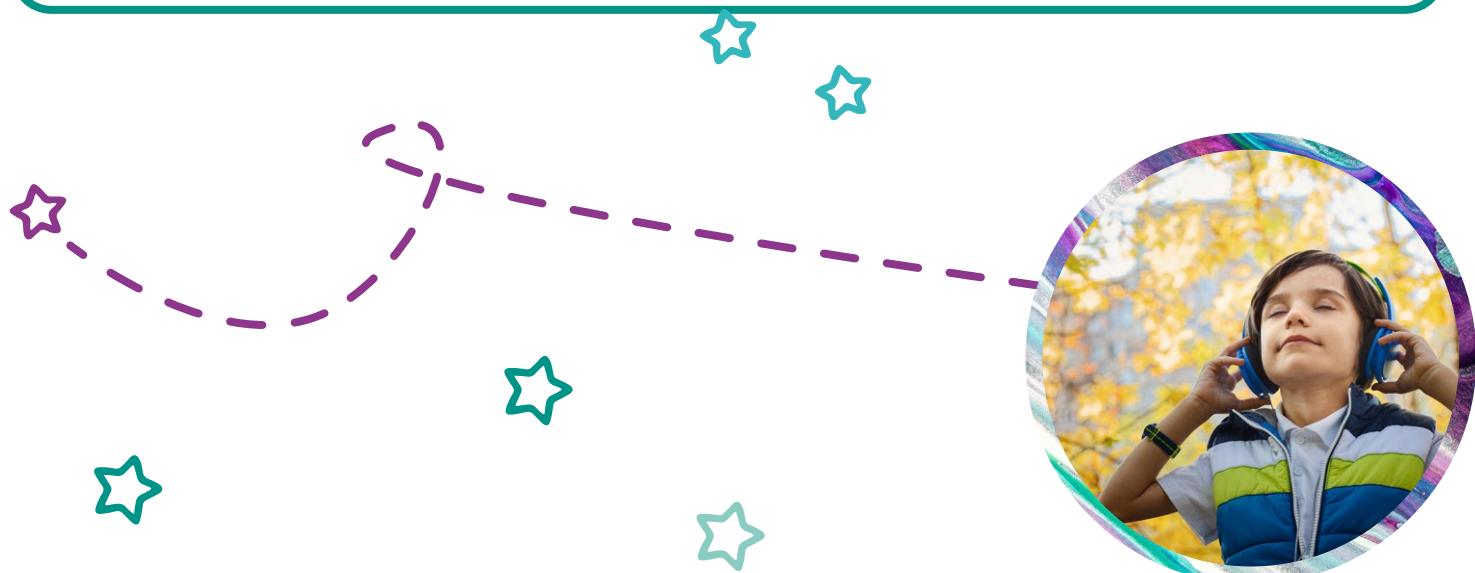
Exercise boosts levels of dopamine, noradrenaline and serotonin. These affect the level of focus and attention we can give to a task. When the body sits still for too long, it begins to initiate movement which is exhibited as fidgeting. Research suggests that regular bouts of physical activity during the day help to maintain concentration.

## Irregular Eating Patterns

Research has found that eating a decent breakfast has a positive effect on a child's performance. Being hungry means that a child might be too preoccupied with this feeling to be able to properly give their attention to learning.

## Lack of Motivation

If a child is able to concentrate well on an activity they enjoy doing, yet finds it hard in other situations, it might not be an attention problem but a lack of motivation. They might have no impetus to complete an activity in which they have no interest.



# What Can I Do to Support My Child?

## Clear Communication with School

Your child's school will no doubt have noticed your child's attention and listening difficulties and they may have approached you to chat about it. Try to encourage a really open conversation and tell them anything you notice at home. If there's something that you've found works well, let them know. If you're all on the same page about supporting your child, the chances are you'll see an improvement quicker. If you incorporate some of the ideas below, you might want to share them with your child's school and tell them about the outcome.

## Think about Instructions

When giving instructions to your child, break them down into smaller, more manageable chunks so that your child can focus on one bit at a time. Look at them when you give the instruction and get them to repeat it back to you. Don't call from another room as you won't have their full attention.

## Keep a Clear Routine

Provide your child with a routine that they can follow easily so that they don't get distracted. **Visual prompts** might work well so that they can see what they need to do. A visual timer for your child to see how much time they have to do something can work too.

## Make Sure They Sleep and Eat Well

Good sleep is a vital element to help them feel on top form the next day. Ensure they get enough sleep so that they feel refreshed and ready for what they need to do. If they've been doing some exercise, let them have some rest before rushing onto another activity. It's a good idea to remove tempting items, such as tablets or other devices, from their room overnight.

Eating a good breakfast can set them up for the day. Try choices such as wholegrain toast with peanut butter and banana, granola with yoghurt and fruit, eggs with soldiers or wholegrain porridge and berries. Studies have shown that wholegrains release energy slowly, keeping your child alert and able to concentrate.

Providing a snack before tasks such as homework will help concentration. Foods such as avocado dip and oatcakes, hummus and vegetable sticks or nuts and seeds will help them stay alert.



# What Can I Do to Support My Child?

## Introduce Movement Breaks and Opportunities for Exercise

Movement breaks, both at home and at school, are important for maintaining concentration. They'll be more refreshed and ready to get down to a task if they've had some exercise and they'll also be more motivated to continue something if they know they're going to get a movement break soon.

## Consider Sensory Support

If you think your child might be affected by sensory issues, you might like to think about items such as noise cancelling headphones, fidget toys and more comfortable clothing. A wobble cushion could be used for times when they are completing homework or need to sit and concentrate for longer periods of time.

## Ask For Their Help

Your child might respond better and maintain concentration if you've asked them for their help. For example, you could get them involved in cooking the tea, which requires concentration.

## Model and Practise Skills

Try to model paying attention by being aware of your surroundings. Saying, "I can hear the birds - can you?" will help them to engage with the present. You could follow this up with, "What else can you hear?" which requires them to concentrate.

Playing games is a great way to develop concentration. Start with games that are quick to be finished and build up to longer, more complex games and activities that require thought and tactics. They'll need to listen carefully to instructions to know how to play.

Puzzles, such as jigsaws, word searches, crosswords and logic puzzles, are great for focus and concentration. Remember, it doesn't have to be a complete puzzle - you can do a little each day and extend the time spent at each sitting. Build up with small steps to increasingly challenging ones.



## Talk and Seek Support

Your child's attention and listening difficulties can be frustrating - as a busy parent, having a child who doesn't seem to listen or won't pay attention can be annoying. But don't worry - try to get to the root cause of their difficulties and then be proactive in trying different methods to develop these skills. Talking to others whose children also display these difficulties can help. You might find lots of parents are supporting their child with these same issues. You're not alone!



**Disclaimer:** We hope you find the information on our website and resources useful. As far as possible, the contents of this resource are reflective of current professional research. However, please be aware that every child is different and information can quickly become out of date. The information given here is intended for general guidance purposes only and may not apply to your specific situation.

