

Supporting a Child with Working Memory Difficulties:

A Guide for Parents



Supporting a Child with Working Memory Difficulties

If you find that your child needs support with seemingly simple tasks such as following instructions, retaining information and staying focused, they may be experiencing working memory difficulties. Our guide is here to help you learn more about what working memory is and how to support your child to improve their working memory skills.

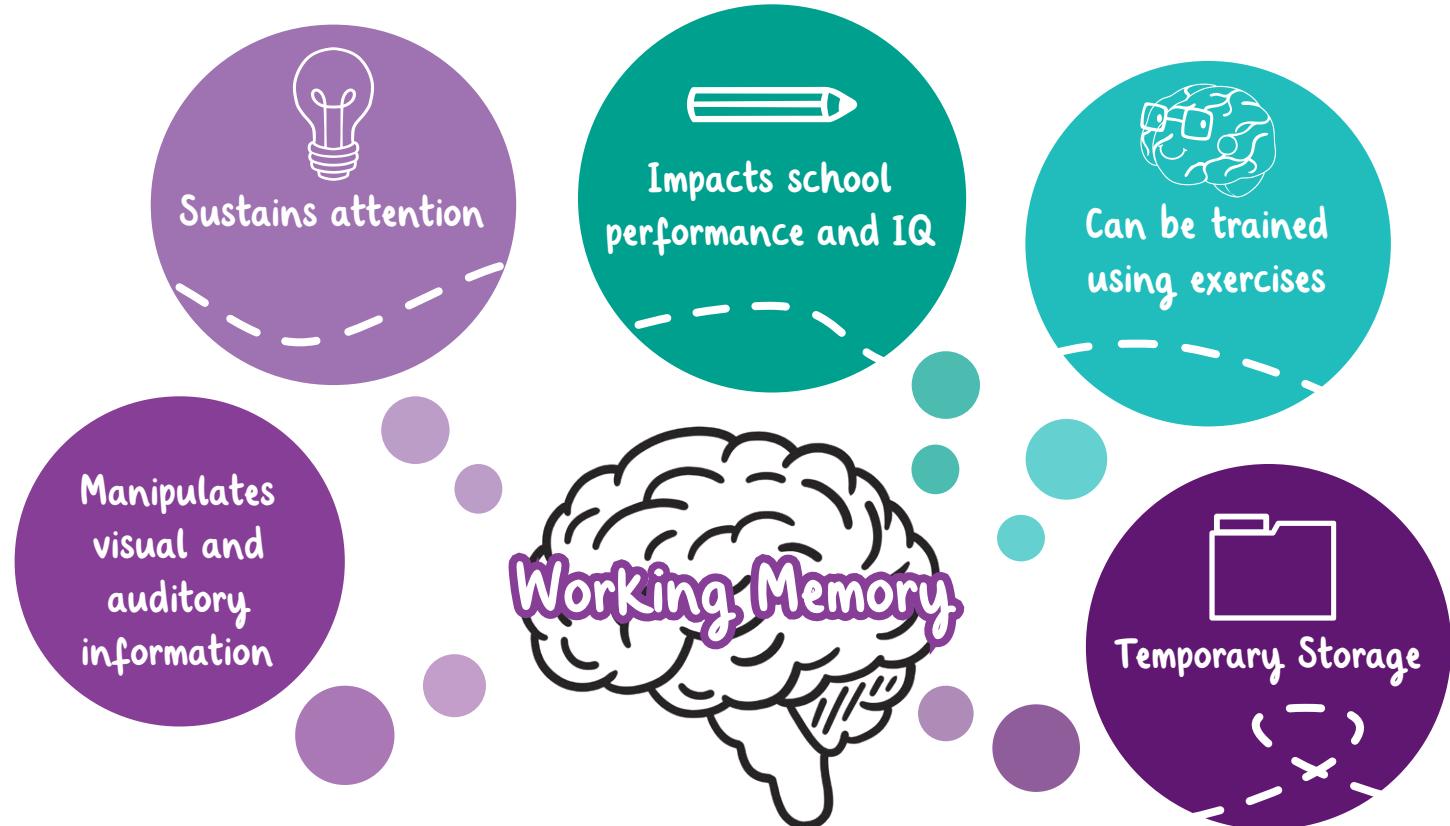
What Is Working Memory?



Working memory is one of the brain's **executive functions**. Executive functions are the core mental skills that allow us to focus, plan and switch between tasks. Working memory can be compared to a sort of mental notepad. It is the skill of holding onto new information while working on another task. For example, when learning a new fact in class, working memory allows the child to 'hold on' to that new fact while they process how to connect it to what they are currently working on. Even if they forget this new fact later on, the working memory notepad has successfully helped them to use that fact at the time. A strong working memory is also necessary for correctly storing information in the long term memory.

There are a few components of working memory:

- Verbal (remembering information they have heard or read)
- Visual-Spatial (remembering where things are, e.g. where they put their pencil)
- Central Executive (the ability to stay on task)



What Are the Signs of Working Memory Difficulties?

You may have noticed signs of working memory difficulties at home or your child's class teacher may have identified some barriers to learning. Your child may need extra support with:



Retaining information (for example, when reading a book they are unable to tell you what just happened).

Following instructions, especially without missing steps.

Starting tasks.

Maintaining focus on a task.



Tackling multi-step problems.

Applying past learning to current situations.

Multitasking.

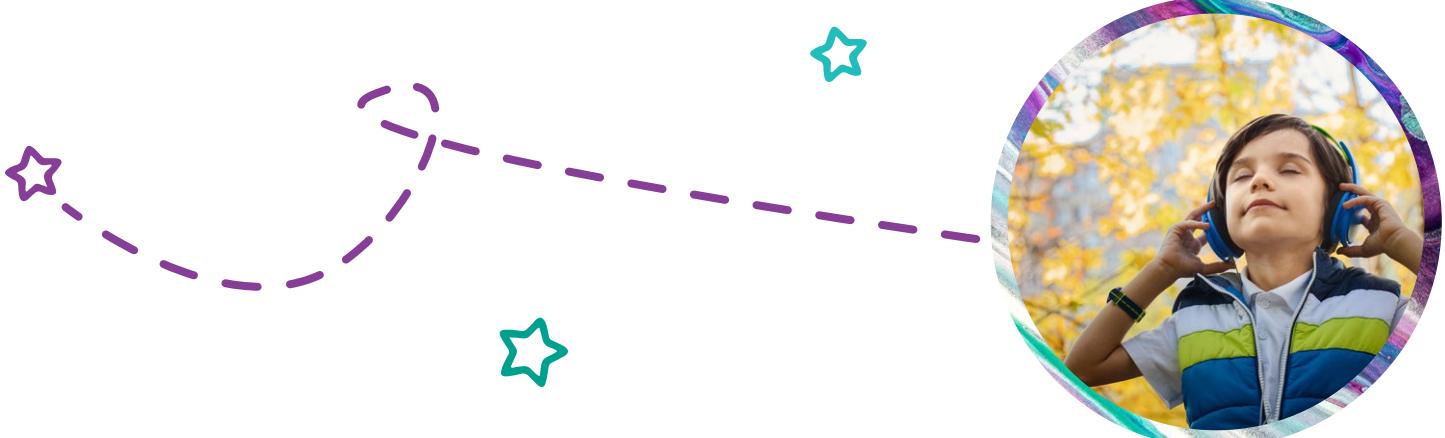
Following routines.



Planning and organising.

Time management.

Children who need support with these processes may find that their self-esteem is affected or may appear to be lacking in attention or easily distracted.



What Can Affect Working Memory?

Everyday issues such as tiredness, mood and distractions all affect working memory.

However, neurodivergent children and those with specific learning needs (such as those listed below) often find it more difficult to utilise their working memory effectively.



Dyslexia

Dyscalculia

ADHD

Autism

Auditory processing difficulties

Speech and language difficulties

Genetic disorders

Childhood trauma



Fortunately, there are lots of ways that you can support your child to build on their working memory skills.



What Can I Do to Support My Child?

Lighten the Load

Both at home and in the classroom, your child could benefit from extra support with things that they would normally be expected to remember, such as the daily timetable or routines. Here are a few ideas of things you or your child's class teacher could do to lighten the load on your child's working memory and decrease the amount of information your child is having to keep in mind.

Display a **visual timetable** or a **now/next** board.

Have all materials set up ready and easily accessible, e.g. pencil, ruler, etc.

Key vocabulary set up at eye level.

Instructions displayed on the board.

Don't be afraid to adapt exactly how much you lighten the load. Some days, your child may be able to recall their routines without looking at the visual timetable at all, whilst other days they may completely forget that they always get ready for break time at 10.30am!

Break It Down

Most people find tasks more manageable and less daunting when they are broken down into smaller chunks. Children who need support developing their working memory may find it easier to tackle a task if it is stripped down for them. A task here could be something as simple as, "Go and clean your teeth". That seemingly simple request can actually be broken into lots of smaller steps. Think about how many times you have walked into a room and forgotten why you are in there! A child with working memory difficulties may do step one and head up the stairs and then completely forget the rest of the task. Start with a single step such as, "Go to the bathroom." When that is completed, move on to the next step, "Grab toothbrush and toothpaste."

Break a task into separate chunks.

Allow the child to complete one step at a time.

Do not overwhelm your child with information about what the next step is.

Again, the amount that you may need to break down tasks depends on your child's needs and these can fluctuate day-to-day depending on lots of different factors, such as energy levels and mood.



What Can I Do to Support My Child?

Repeat, Repeat, Repeat

Children are more likely to be able to recall a routine if it is repeated consistently. Having a solid routine in place so that the child knows that's one less thing to worry about remembering will help them be able to concentrate that energy on the task at hand. You could try:

Repeating routines at the same time each day.

Asking your child to repeat instructions or information back to you.

Repeating key instructions or information.

Asking your child to visualise what they are going to do first.

This works at home too. You can tell your child that you are going out for dinner this evening and continue to give them reminders throughout the day. You could even try prompting them to tell you what you are doing this evening, although this may be tricky for a child with low self-esteem as they may fear getting it wrong or forgetting.

Help Them to Help Themselves

Alongside lightening the load with visual aids, breaking down tasks into smaller chunks and repeating routines, one of the most powerful tools you can give your child is the ability to help themselves. You can encourage and support your child to trial and error a variety of ways to manage their working memory difficulties until they find something that works for them. You could:

Go shopping for a nice notepad and pen that they can use to jot down information that they need to remember.

Make funny mnemonic devices or acronyms to remember information.

Demonstrate the correct use of the visual aids you are already using.

Model strategies for dealing with anxiety around forgetfulness.

Work with your child to find a way of organising their belongings in a way that makes sense to them.



Exercises to Improve Working Memory

It is possible to boost your memory skills with practice. You can help your child to give their brain a workout with some simple exercises, which can then be incorporated as a small part of your daily routine.

Games to Improve Working Memory

You can make memory building a little more engaging by adding a competitive element. [Twinkl Parents Hub](#) has lots of fun memory games and a variety of activities that your child will love. There are lots of interactive games you can find online too, such as games where you need to follow the flashing light patterns.

Remember, everyone is different and everyone, no matter what their age or ability level, has difficulties with their memory at some time. These strategies could benefit anyone who wants to improve their working memory skills and, although working memory difficulties can affect a child's self-esteem and performance in school, it is important to remember that it is not linked to their ability.



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