

How can I help my child with focusing and sitting still?

SickKids Centre for Community Mental Health has worked with lots of families whose children struggle with focusing and sitting still. Many families who have worked with staff at SickKids CCMH have found these suggestions helpful. Keep in mind your child's age and abilities when applying these strategies. Give them a try and feel free to add your own!

Follow a routine. One of the most important ways to care for a child with focus and attention difficulties is to follow a consistent routine. This will help your child learn what's coming next and what they're expected to do. Try out some of these tips to set up your routine.

- Post a clearly organized calendar somewhere everyone can see. This will help everyone stay up to date on what's coming up.
- Moving from one activity to the next can be hard for your child. Help them by using "First... then..." statements. Example: "First we need to clean up our toys, then we can play a game."
- Let your child know what's coming up and leave time to transition to a new activity. Giving your child lots of warning can help them ease into the next activity more easily.
- Use a clock or timer to show your child how long they have left on an activity. Try setting the timer for five minutes and let your child know that when it goes off it's time to stop playing and get ready for dinner.
- Keep to schedules and routines as much as possible. It's not realistic to expect every day to follow the same schedule but try to have a similar routine. Example: Breakfast, school, after-school activity, homework, dinner, bath, bed.

Reduce distractions. If your child has trouble focusing and gets distracted easily you can try some of these tips to reduce distractions and keep things simple.

- Make sure that your school-age child has a quiet place to do their homework. This means no TV or phone and as little noise as possible.
- Give your child simplified choices. Instead of saying "What should we do this weekend?" try "Do you want to go to the park or to the mall?"
- Breakdown tasks into smaller steps. If it's hard for your child to complete a math worksheet all at once, try five questions and then a short break to do jumping jacks or dance to get some energy out. Keep going until the worksheet is done.



Communicate clearly. Try to reduce distractions in how you talk to your child too. Try out some of these tips for clear communication.

- Be careful to not overload your child with multi-step instructions. Keep things simple.
- Repeat information! Giving your child multiple reminders will help them remember things.
- When you tell your child something important make sure they are looking you in the eye and aren't distracted. Have them repeat it back to you. This will help them remember more easily.
- Try to give your child immediate feedback. If they do something wrong let them know right away so that they understand what they are not supposed to be doing and so that no other behaviours occur in between the undesired behaviour and the consequence (continued, over).

- When they do something well, tell them! For example, say “I like the way you’re sharing toys with your sister.” Being specific about what they’re doing well will help them remember.
- Make rewards and consequences clear too. If your child knows that they get 10 minutes of screen time when they clean up their toys they’ll be more likely to do it.

Get organized. Your child might sometimes have trouble keeping organized. Try these tips to teach your child organizational skills.

- Label where things belong. Have a bin labelled “toys” and one labelled “dolls” so your child knows where everything belongs. If your child doesn’t read, try pictures.
- Create a system that works for your family and stick to it. For example, try colour coding drawers so your child knows that their things belong in the blue drawers and their brother’s things belong in the red drawers.
- Make sure your child has everything ready for the morning before they go to bed. Have a backpack packed with everything they need for school and their activities. This will help make mornings less stressful.



Offer emotional support. Your child might need more emotional support than other kids. Try these tips to make sure your child feels supported and knows that their feelings are important.

- Acknowledge your child’s feelings. Try saying something like “It’s hard to stop playing the game when you’re having so much fun.” They might still feel upset but letting them know that you get it will help make their reaction less intense.
- Try to use praise as much as possible. Giving your child a reward for cleaning up their room will make them want to do it. Yelling at them when they don’t clean their room might make them more upset and less likely to do it.
- Tell your child when they’re doing something well. It’s hard for them to keep on task and stay organized. Let them know how great it is when they do things that are difficult.
- Take care of yourself and try to keep as calm as possible. Having a child with focus and attention challenges can be frustrating. Remember that it’s okay to lose your cool sometimes, the key is how you handle yourself next. Try taking a quiet moment to yourself when you’re feeling worn down.

Further resources

Check out these links for more tips on helping improve your child’s focus and attention.

1. PBS Parents: Tips for helping your child focus and concentrate <https://to.pbs.org/1nPlfo>
 2. If you have continuing concerns about your child’s focus and attention issues, please consult your health-care provider. Sometimes problems with focus and attention can be the result of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Some children who are diagnosed with ADHD benefit from therapy and medication. Check out this link for more information: <https://bit.ly/2MWH2Mg>
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