

There's No Hocus Pocus in How Children Focus

by Dr. Mel Levine

Attention is the brain's general manager. It takes responsibility for bringing together all the resources of a mind to control behavior and enhance learning. When attention is working well a child is able to focus and deploy his brain's assets efficiently. When a child is unable to concentrate, her strengths may not shine through while her deficiencies become accentuated.

Attention enables a child to filter out distractions, to focus on the most important things long enough and with sufficient intensity to use and understand them well. Attention supports learning in numerous ways. For example, concentrating well enhances a student's memory for facts and strengthens his understanding of complicated language. A part of attention fosters high quality productivity, as it mobilizes a child's ability to plan, to pace herself, and to monitor the progress of her output, so she can make changes as needed. The same is true for her behavior and social life; planning, pacing, and monitoring are crucial and under the guidance of attention.

Nowadays many children are diagnosed with attention deficits, so-called "ADD". The label is a mixed blessing. While it conveys the fact that a child is struggling through no fault of his own, it dangerously oversimplifies him. There are many different forms and manifestations of attentional weakness and knowing what particular aspects of attention work well and which need support is critical to developing the strategies necessary to enhance learning and life. And just about every kid harboring such deficits also has other forms of dysfunction, such as trouble with attention plus language, attention plus memory, or attention plus motor and spatial problems. Moreover, each of them possesses his or her own prized packet of strengths!

These children come in "all different sizes and shapes." So the care of those with attention deficits demands tailor-made strategies that address the specific manifestations of their reduced attention control, enhance or bypass their other weak areas, and mobilize their assets and interests. Medication may be helpful in some cases, but it is a mistake to think that it is ever the entire answer.

The goal is to cultivate a child whose general manager manages to succeed. The product is a happy and productive kid who performs in his or her own way as a unique individual.



Attention Controls:

Function	Definition
Mental Energy Control System	the set of attention controls that initiate and maintain the energy level needed for optimal learning and behavior
Alertness	an effective level of focused listening, watching, and concentrating
Mental Exertion	the flow of energy needed for cognitive work output (e.g., homework)
Sleep/Arousal Balance	sleeping well at night and being sufficiently awake and alert during the day
Performance Consistency	a steady, reliable, and predictable flow of the mental energy needed for dependable functioning (moment to moment, day to day, week to week)
Processing Control System	the set of attention controls for regulating the use of incoming information
Saliency Determination	discriminating between important and unimportant information, avoiding distractions (also known as selective attention)
Processing Depth	focusing with sufficient intensity to capture details (e.g., instructions)
Cognitive Activation	excessive processing, or forming connections that are not particularly relevant to the topic at hand
Focal Maintenance	sustaining concentration for the appropriate period of time (also known as attention span or sustained attention)
Satisfaction Control	focusing sufficiently on activities or topics of moderate or low levels of interest; weak satisfaction control can lead to insatiability, or a constant desire for excitement and intense stimulation



Production Control System	the set of attention controls for regulating academic and behavioral output
Previewing	anticipating/predicting likely outcomes of actions, events, and problems; planning how to solve a problem before starting to work
Facilitation/Inhibition	selecting the best option before acting or starting a task; weak facilitation and inhibition leads to impulsivity
Pacing	doing tasks at the most appropriate speed, without rushing
Self-Monitoring	watching one's own output and making necessary modifications; finding and correcting mistakes
Reinforceability	using previous experience and feedback to guide current behavior and output