

INCREASING YOUR CHILD'S ATTENTION SPAN

Any teacher in today's classroom would gladly give his eyeteeth for an occasional spit-wad in lieu of the steady stream of disruptions that plague most classrooms. Nowadays, schools design specialized classes for those with various learning or attention disorders. Elementary teachers regularly recommend that children, especially boys, be tested for attention disorders. More children than we care to admit take prescribed drugs to slow them down. Attention disorders – we hear it everywhere. What is happening with today's children?

We live in a fast-paced world. Electronic chips rule our lives. The press of a button cooks the food, entertains us, and cleans us. A whirlwind of sensory stimuli attacks us from every quarter. Our houses are buzzing with TVs, iPods, computers, and electronic gaming devices. Did you ever long for some peace and quiet within the confines of your own home? When was the last time your family read a book together, put a puzzle together, played a lazy game of croquet, roamed the countryside on a spring day enjoying the wild flowers, toured the museum, played charades, or sat around the living room and talked without the TV on? The length of your child's attention span depends upon the character of your home life.

From birth until ages seven to ten, the brain continues to develop, and the type of programming the child's brain receives determines his attention span. Television commercials, fast-paced TV programs (especially children's programming), and video games are designed for the short attention span. For example, one commercial makes 80 drastic movement changes. A child's brain cannot keep up with these changes. If he spends too much time in front of the TV in these early years, his brain will not develop properly. According to Vincent Ruggiero in *The Nonsensing of America*, **the cells in the part of the brain that determine the child's attention span literally do not connect when bombarded with a heavy exposure to television.** High peer group surroundings on a continuing basis (such as those in day care centers) hinder the development of the attention span, also. Day care centers cannot provide the one-on-one attention that train children to focus on one skill, but instead are plagued with noise and constant group activities which work against the necessary development of a good attention span. What kind of ramifications does this have? Children raised by the TV or day care centers often cannot sit still or concentrate on anything for long, are easily distracted, overly active, and generally disruptive. What is the solution?

Your children have only **one** chance to develop their brains; why gamble with their lives? A stay-at-home mom can monitor the type of input the children receive. If extenuating circumstances demand a working mother, be wise in your choice for childcare. Do not hire someone because she is cheap or lives close; hire one who shares your same values and who you trust completely. Then give your sitter guidelines for how your children should spend their time. When at home, carefully plan your family time so that the children feel loved and secure. Furthermore, arrange appropriate activities that build their attention span. Any sacrifice will reap great benefits.

Our family read aloud in the evenings up through the teen-age years; it was one of our favorite pastimes. We introduced books to our children as babies. Early books contained brightly colored pictures with short captions. At a year old, our oldest son poured over the Richard Scarry picture books, filled with colorful pictures of everyday places and household items with which he was familiar. The picture book section of the library contains hundreds of delightful stories that will serve you well for the first few years. Daily reading aloud to your children will not only build their attention spans, but will also develop their imaginations and birth a love for reading. Moreover, it will create a family tradition overflowing with treasured memories.

Any activity that requires your child to focus on only **one** thing will build the attention span. Putting blocks of various shapes into the appropriate shaped hole, Legos, puzzles, stacking blocks, sewing cards, and models are some ideas for activities. When our son turned three, we purchased a set of large-sized Legos, and he played with those every day. You will discover other ideas for attention span building activities. Make the necessary materials available for your child's free time, but also arrange special times in which you work with him. You will not only be directing your child's mind and energies in a positive way, but the time spent together will build your relationship, too.

Diet plays an integral part in a child's ability to concentrate and keep his attention focused. The number one killer is refined, white sugar. During the refining process, sugar is stripped of its nutritive value, leaving us with a nonfood. Functioning as a poison in our bodies, a heavy intake of refined sugar creates an addiction. In the eye-opening book, *Sugar Blues*, William Dufty presents a powerful history of the sugar industry, the physical and mental problems caused by a refined-sugar-laced-diet, and some inspirational testimonies. Balancing whole foods with plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables provides the necessary brain food for your family. An occasional sweet treat is certainly appropriate, but avoid the **habit** of sugary foods. If you read the labels on packaged and canned food, you will probably be shocked at how many contain sugar and other chemical additives. For healthy alternatives, most communities offer local produce markets, health food stores, and food co-ops. Even regular supermarkets stock organic choices. It is not necessary to be weird in your eating habits, just sensible.

Some children labeled with attention disorders are simply undisciplined. If this is the case, the parents need to make some serious changes and work in unity to properly and consistently discipline the child for his own well-being.

Perhaps after reading this, you realize that you have done all the wrong things with your child. Don't despair! Change is possible. You can implement these recommendations at any age. It's never too late. Although it **will** be more difficult, the brain cells can connect at a later age. Still, while making these adjustments, your child may loathe putting a puzzle together. He may even hate listening to you read aloud. He may dislike eating fruit instead of a sugary treat. He may resist your new disciplinary measures. But don't give up! Determination is absolutely essential to prevent you from retreating when you become weary of tackling the challenge. However, if you are consistent, the cells in his brain **will** begin to connect, thus enabling him to keep his attention on task for longer periods of time. Further, your child will eventually cultivate a taste for wholesome foods. Patience and persistence will produce these changes.

As parents, we carry an awesome responsibility to properly train our children. Who they become as adults depends largely (not solely) on their upbringing. The ability to keep one's attention on task is essential to living a fruitful life. Persons plagued with short attention spans inevitably leave a string of unfinished projects behind them, causing difficulties within families, on the job, and among friends. The commitment and sacrifices we make as parents to secure the best for our children will ensure a healthy, happy, and productive legacy.