

SUSTAINED ATTENTION

What is this developmental skill?

Sustained attention is the ability to remain focused on a task, activity, or conversation over time despite distractions. It allows children to complete schoolwork, follow stories, participate in play, and persist through activities that require mental effort. Sustained attention is not simply the ability to pay attention—it is the ability to continue paying attention long enough to accomplish a goal.

How does this normally develop?

Sustained attention develops gradually throughout childhood. Infants attend to interesting sights and sounds for only brief periods, while toddlers can focus longer on preferred activities. During the preschool and elementary years, children become increasingly able to maintain attention during play, learning, and structured activities. This development is supported by brain maturation, meaningful experiences, and adults who help children return their attention when they become distracted. Even in adolescence, sustained attention continues to improve as executive functioning matures.

How can neglect interfere with its development?

Neglect can interfere with sustained attention because the brain may become organized around monitoring the environment for potential threats or unmet needs. Instead of focusing on a single task, children may remain highly alert to changes around them, making concentration difficult. Limited opportunities for guided play, shared reading, and structured learning may also reduce the experiences that strengthen attention over time. As a result, attention difficulties in neglected children may reflect developmental adaptation rather than an inability to learn.

What might this look like?

A child with difficulties in sustained attention may:

- Lose focus before completing tasks.
- Be easily distracted by sounds, movement, or other people.
- Frequently switch from one activity to another.
- Miss important details because their attention drifts.
- Require repeated reminders to stay on task.
- Appear to daydream or "zone out."
- Have difficulty completing homework or chores without frequent supervision.
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Parenting Implications

Children develop sustained attention through practice in supportive environments. Reduce unnecessary distractions when possible, establish predictable routines, and provide opportunities to complete tasks in manageable periods. Gradually increase the amount of time a child is expected to stay focused rather than expecting long periods of concentration immediately. Build in short breaks, acknowledge effort, and redirect attention calmly when it wanders. Interactive play, reading together, puzzles, and hands-on activities can all strengthen sustained attention.

From Understanding to Attunement

Instead of thinking, "*They just won't pay attention,*" consider, "*Their brain may have learned that scanning the environment is more important than focusing on one task.*" This perspective recognizes that attention is shaped by development and experience. By creating environments that feel safe, predictable, and engaging, caregivers help children gradually strengthen their ability to sustain attention and become more successful learners.