

WORKING MEMORY

What is this developmental skill?

Working memory is the ability to hold information in mind while using it to complete a task. It allows children to remember directions, solve problems, follow conversations, complete multi-step activities, and connect new information with what they already know. Rather than simply storing information, working memory temporarily keeps information "active" so the brain can use it.

How does this normally develop?

Working memory begins developing in infancy as children learn to remember people, objects, and routines. During the preschool years, children gradually become able to follow two- and three-step directions and remember simple rules while playing. Throughout childhood and adolescence, working memory continues to improve as the brain develops, allowing children to manage increasingly complex schoolwork, plan ahead, and solve more difficult problems. Consistent routines, language-rich interactions, and supportive adults all strengthen this skill.

How can neglect interfere with its development?

Neglect can disrupt working memory by limiting the experiences that help build and strengthen the brain's executive functioning networks. Children who grow up in unpredictable or chaotic environments often devote more mental energy to monitoring their surroundings for safety than to learning and remembering information. Chronic stress can also interfere with the brain systems responsible for temporarily holding and manipulating information. As a result, working memory may develop more slowly, making everyday learning much more difficult.

What might this look like?

A child with working memory difficulties may:

- Forget instructions before completing them.
- Lose track of what they were doing.
- Need directions repeated frequently.
- Struggle to complete multi-step tasks.
- Forget classroom routines or household expectations.
- Have difficulty solving problems because they cannot keep multiple pieces of information in mind.
- Appear inattentive or unmotivated when they are actually overwhelmed by the amount of information they are trying to manage.

Parenting Implications

Children with weak working memory benefit from reducing the amount they must remember on their own. Give one or two directions at a time, use visual reminders, establish predictable routines, and break larger tasks into smaller steps. Encourage the child to repeat directions aloud before beginning a task and provide gentle reminders instead of assuming they were not listening. Success comes from supporting the child's developing abilities rather than expecting them to remember more than they currently can.

From Understanding to Attunement

Instead of thinking, "*They never listen,*" consider, "*They may not be able to hold all of that information in mind yet.*" This shift changes the caregiver's role from correcting mistakes to supporting development. By providing structure, repetition, and patient guidance, adults help strengthen working memory over time, allowing children to become more confident, independent learners.

