

ATTENTION

What is this developmental skill?

Attention is the ability to notice, select, and focus on important information while filtering out distractions. It allows children to listen to instructions, participate in conversations, engage in play, and learn new skills. Attention is more than simply "paying attention"—it is the brain's ability to direct mental resources toward what is most important in the moment.

How does this normally develop?

Attention develops rapidly during early childhood and continues to mature throughout adolescence. Infants naturally attend to faces, voices, and movement. As children grow, they become increasingly able to focus on tasks for longer periods, shift their attention when needed, and ignore irrelevant distractions. These abilities are strengthened through responsive caregiving, play, reading, conversation, and structured learning experiences. As brain networks mature, children become better able to control where and how they direct their attention.

How can neglect interfere with its development?

Neglect can interfere with attention because children's brains may adapt to environments that are unpredictable or unsafe. Rather than focusing on a single activity, they may constantly scan their surroundings for potential threats or unmet needs. This heightened vigilance can make sustained attention difficult. Limited language exposure, fewer opportunities for guided play, and reduced cognitive stimulation may also slow the development of the brain networks responsible for attention. As a result, children may appear inattentive even though their brains are working hard to monitor their environment.

What might this look like?

A child with attention difficulties may:

- Be easily distracted by sounds, movement, or other people.
- Miss parts of conversations or instructions.
- Frequently lose their place during reading or schoolwork.
- Jump quickly from one activity to another.
- Have difficulty completing tasks without reminders.
- Appear to daydream or "tune out."
- Struggle to follow conversations in busy or noisy environments.

Parenting Implications

Children strengthen attention when adults create environments that reduce unnecessary distractions and provide opportunities for focused engagement. Read together, play games that require concentration, and give directions one step at a time when needed. Establish predictable routines and allow children to complete activities without frequent interruptions. When attention drifts, gently redirect rather than criticize. Remember that attention grows through practice and supportive relationships, not through repeated commands to "pay attention."

From Understanding to Attunement

Instead of thinking, "*They're not listening*," consider, "*Their brain may be having difficulty deciding what deserves attention*." This shift helps caregivers recognize that attention is a developmental capacity influenced by a child's experiences. By creating calm, predictable environments and patiently supporting focused engagement, adults help children strengthen one of the most important foundations for learning.