

Attention Difficulties

Practical strategies to use at home

- *Create a calm environment*

This is easier said than done, however a stressful environment can only make situations worse or act as triggers for inappropriate behaviour. If the situation cannot be ignored deal with it swiftly and assertively.

Do not attempt to discuss with your child why they are behaving so inappropriately.

Once the situation has been dealt with try to forget about it.

Do not be tempted to keep referring to the problem behaviour.

- *Stick to a routine*

Children with attention difficulties do not respond well to change or to general disorganisation. You will probably find that life will be calmer if you are well organised and there is routine within the household. Your child may not be very good at organising themselves and they often need to be given short, clear instructions.

- *Structure and organise time*

Children with attention difficulties cope much better if they have a clear programme or timetable to follow. They can be particularly difficult in school holidays or at weekends. Try to plan what they are going to do and set the timetable in advance.

Communicate clearly with eye contact

- Do not try to have conversations with your child which involves either lengthy explanations or which ask them to reflect on why they embarked on a particular course of action. Wherever possible keep verbal communication short, pleasant and most importantly make sure you have eye contact. Your child is more likely to pay attention if there is eye contact. (Remember some children with an autistic spectrum disorder may not give eye contact.)

- *Aim to be consistent*

Consistency means managing your child in the same way every time. Having decided a course of action, it is important not to give up too soon. Consistency also means ensuring that all the adults in a child's situation respond in the same way. Most of all it involves managing children in the same way in public and in private situations.

- *Give your child frequent feedback*

Children with attention difficulties are often unaware of whether or not they are doing the right thing. Use reminders to yourself to give your child feedback on how he/she is getting on, e.g. use a kitchen timer, post it notes etc.

- *Give your child immediate feedback and consequences*

Positive feedback rewards a child for doing something well. Your child may then be more likely to behave in that way in the future. Make sure you say specifically what it is that he or she has done right.

If consequences need to be used then stop and think before you speak. Stay calm. Tell the child exactly what has been done wrong. You may need to remove a privilege. Avoid going over the top and making a big fuss. Consequences need to be very short term and are more useful than discussing the problem at length. Aim to be firm but fair.

- *Use rewards rather than punishments*

Punishment leads to resentment and hostility.

A more effective way to change undesirable behaviour is to use incentives and rewards. (Rewards are not bribes and need to be earned.)

Decide on the positive alternative to the behaviour that you want to change then you can praise your child for it when it occurs. If this fails after about a week then you may need to introduce mild consequences. Make sure you criticise the behaviour, not the child.

- *Plan ahead to manage problem situations*

Have a strategy for finding solutions, such as:

1. Identify the problem and set a goal. Define the problem clearly and say what you want the outcome to be.
2. Generate alternative solutions. Think of as many ideas as you can. Borrow ideas from others and build on them.
3. Consider the consequences. Choose an idea which you think will work.
4. Make an action plan. Write down a step by step plan and practice each step
5. Implement the plan. Put each step into action.
6. Evaluate. Ask yourself – did it work? If not – why not?

- *Practice forgiveness*

Try reviewing the day and letting go of any anger and resentment that may have arisen. Forgiving your child at the end of the day does not mean that they avoid all responsibility for their actions, but this is one way of maintaining a positive relationship with your child.

Sometimes we need to forgive other adults for having misunderstood our children. We may need to advocate assertively for our children, but it is not going to help if we feel in turmoil because of what someone else has said. Finally you may need to forgive yourself for the mistakes you have made. No-one is perfect.