

ATTENTION TRAINING

We have been teaching low-tech Attention Training exercises for a number of years. There is research behind Exercise One showing that it works when practiced. Again the key word here is practice. The exercises often take a lot of practice to get results. Kids (or adults) do the exercises when they are doing their homework. It might add a minute or two to the homework at first, but when practiced consistently, it takes less time to complete homework because they learn to focus and control their attention and distractibility better. The exercise take a bit of organization and a fair amount of motivation. This is where parent come in. Few kids who are taught these exercises will practice them without reminders and reinforcement from parents. Please see the section of Motivation to learn more on this.

Attention Training Exercise Number 1

Setup:

- Prepare to start some kind of work requiring writing or typing.
 - Homework – worksheets, answering questions at the end of the chapter, math problems
 - Creative writing
 - Balancing the checkbook for adults
 - Doing taxes
- Copy the Attention Training Monitoring Form or simply write the essential elements on a piece of paper. Place the monitoring form within easy reach (right-handers usually place at their upper right.)
- You will need a timer or another way to generate a the *attention signals*. It is best if the attention signal occur randomly from about one to four minutes apart. As one progresses, the signals can be set further apart.
 - It is often best for parents to give the attention signal when students are learning the exercise. Decide on something before beginning. The signal could be as simple as three quick hand claps. Present the signal every one to four minutes – trying to randomly vary the time between signals.
 - Many digital watches can be set to give a signal for a fixed interval.
 - An standard (analog) kitchen timer can be used. The student resets the timer quickly by twisting the knob a little to the right.
 - Make a tape or CD with the signals. We have a tape available at The Attention and Learning Clinic.
 - Someone out there ought to be able to design a simple computer program to do this.
- Start the attention signal generator (tape/timer/watch).
- Start working on the task.

The following steps are done each time the signal sounds.

At Each Signal:

1. Stop and Mark your Place.
 - Stop immediately, don't read the rest of the sentence, write the rest of the sentence, or complete a problem. (When a distraction "strikes", it doesn't wait on us to finish something.)
 - Right-handers usually mark their place with their left-hand index finger.
 - When doing creative writing, say to yourself three times, the sentence you were in the process of writing at the time of the signal.
2. Ask yourself, "Was I WORKING or DISTRACTED" the moment before the signal?"
3. Score yourself on the monitoring form as either *working* or *distracted/ on-task* or *off-task/ paying attention* or *not paying attention*.
 - A check mark or hatch mark works fine.
4. If you scored your self as DISTRACTED, write down what the distraction.
 - Examples of External Distractions – TV, parents or siblings talking, car going by, phone ringing or conversations, air conditioner coming on, smell of cookies baking, a fly or bug moving around, the wallpaper, etc.
 - If the Distraction was Internal (daydreaming), write down a word or two about the content of the daydream.
 - If you marked that you were Working or On-Task, skip to Step 5.
5. Get back to work immediately.

Why This Exercise Works:

- The exercise teaches **self-observation skills**. The first step to change is to be aware of what you are doing now. Many studies of self-monitoring have shown that carefully monitoring (observing and recording) behavior, changes the frequency of the behavior in the desired direction. For instance, when people count and record each cigarette they smoke, they start to smoke less. A major part of growing up – maturing – is learning to regulate our behavior by being more conscious and aware of what we are doing. The exercise gives students the opportunity to practice what adults are continually telling them to do; "Stop and Think".
- When practiced consistently, the exercise helps students **develop a habit pattern**. The *attention signal* functions both as a cue to do the exercise (the five steps), but it is also a distraction from what you were doing before. When practiced consistently, distractions in "real life" will become signals to do these steps. Of course in real life, you wouldn't score yourself on paper or write down the distraction. You would just notice you are being distracted, mark your place, and then get back to focusing on what you are supposed to be working on. Or you may decide just to stay with being distracted for a while. The difference is, after consistently practicing the exercise, you begin to make a clearly *conscious choice* to go with the distraction, instead of getting back to work immediately.

- **Naming** – writing down – the distractions are an important part of the exercise. Most people have had the experience of buying something, perhaps a new car, and then noticing many other people have the same thing. This wasn't noticed before buying it. We notice because it is now ours. When you write down what distracts you, you explicitly own it. When you "own" your distractions you start to notice them anywhere they come up – not just while doing the exercise. In real life, one of the main tricks to sustain attention is to quickly notice when you are distracted (off-task) and then to get back on-task immediately.

Attention Training Exercise Number 2

This exercise is often used first for young children. The parent guides the child through the steps. It could also be used to help students immunize themselves to increasingly more intense distractions.

With Exercise Number 2, the help your child get started on a homework task. It is better if the task involves some type of writing. At random intervals, try to distract your child by noise of movement for about 10 seconds. At first, the intensity of the distraction should be low. As your child becomes more skilled at staying on task, the intensity and perhaps the length of the distraction can be increased. Observe your child to determine if she was working (on-task) or distracted (off-task) while you were making the distraction. You may also want to observe when she gets off-task, even when you are not trying to distract her. After you make the distraction, guide your child through the steps of the exercise. The steps of exercise 1 are used, except skip step 4 and add feedback to your child to help her correctly identify if she was on or off-task.

Summary of Steps for Exercise 2

1. Get child started on a homework task
2. Make a noise and/or movement distract for about 10 seconds. Observe if child is working or distracted
3. Ask child to stop her work and mark her place
4. Ask child if she was working or distracted while you were making the distraction
5. Give your feedback concerning if your child was working or distracted
6. Tell child to score herself as either working or distracted
7. Tell child to get back to work immediately

How to know if child is working or distracted: It's often best to start the distraction just as they are starting to write a word or answer to a math problem. If the child looks toward the distraction, stops writing or slows down considerably, or makes a careless mistake; you can assume she was distracted. When you give feedback, don't make it into an argument. Just give your feedback in a matter-of-fact way.

Attention Training Exercise Number 3

Estimate how long it will take to do some task – homework for kids. Time yourself. Compare the estimate and actual time. You become more realistic about how long it really takes to do things and are better able to plan ahead. This exercise also makes finishing a task a game to see if you can equal or beat your estimated time. Kids need to make sure they are not rushing through and making careless mistakes.

Exercise 4 and 5

You should have become proficient with Exercise 1 before starting the next two exercises because you need to be able to reliably and consciously notice when you are distracted

Attention Training Exercise Number 4

Challenge yourself to stay on-task for a specific number of minutes. Start small and work up. Reward yourself if you stay on-task for the specified time. If you are successful, increase the time period during the next session.

Attention Training Exercise Number 5

For a specified number of minutes or however long it takes to complete a specific task, write down every distraction you have. .