 S P E E C H I N C

Pay Attention

By Katie Pengilly MA,CCC,SLP

We tend to think of attention as something simple. We are paying attention, or we are not. Actually, attention is a complex cognitive function which, like other multifaceted cognitive functions, matures throughout childhood. Inattention is undesirable, as is too much attention (for example, in the case of hyperfocus). Is distractibility a feature of attention, or a glitch? The goal is: efficient, flexible and voluntary control of our attentional resources. Nuanced attention is the basis for planning, organization, self-control and perseverance.

Neuroscientists have identified the part of the brain that is important in being able to attend to one stimulus and ignore others (known as selective attention) as the prefrontal cortex. Maturation of the nervous system allows for changing from global to selective attention.

Infants as young as 4 months of age attend to differences in their environment. By around 10 months of age infants can show signs of resistance to distractions. By 18 months children can display focused attention. By age 3, around the time many children enter preschool, their attention to task is increasing.

Studies show that attention is somewhat malleable. For example, children in preschool and elementary school show decreased attention to distractors when give frequent instructions to do so. Parents and teachers can scaffold their instructions accordingly to increase the student’s attention and decrease attention to a distracting event. Children show decreased attention when experiencing distress or negative emotionality. Parents and teachers can focus on praise and warm, positive emotional environments which may correlate with improved attention.

Why is selective attention critical for classroom success? Estimates are as much as 80% of classroom education is teacher talking/student attending, so selective attention is key. The classroom requires selective and sustained attention to a specific target (the teacher, or written materials) with the simultaneous ability to ignore distractions. One of the most common teacher/parent concerns is that their student is having trouble paying attention. The student may be “tuning out”, easily distracted, impulsive and looking around to see what everyone else is doing because he/she cannot sustain attention to the teacher. On the other hand, school activities such as art, P.E and team sports requires less selective attention. In these classes more global attention is required, to pay attention to many details, sights and sounds at one time. When kids enter the formal school system, they are moving from the global attention of multi-sensory experiences such as play, sports and media to the selective attention of sitting still and selectively listening to a teacher.

In the case of school aged kids who are struggling with attention in the classroom, physiological issues to consider may be poor sleep, blood sugar imbalances, vision or hearing issues. Psychological issues to consider may be anxiety, decreased confidence or perfectionism. Learning issues to consider may be sensory or auditory processing difficulties. Depending on the etiology of the observed attentional difficulties, treatment can include medication, parent training in behavior management, classroom interventions as well as therapy.

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