

SEND &amp; INCLUSION · GRADES 1–6

# Attention and Focus

Strategies that actually work

## Attention isn't willpower

When a child 'isn't paying attention,' the temptation is to assume it's effort — they're not trying. This is almost never true. Attention is a complex cognitive process involving: • ALERTING — being awake and ready • ORIENTING — selecting what to attend to • EXECUTIVE — holding focus over time, switching when needed Difficulties in any of these can look like 'not paying attention.' Children with ADHD, autism, anxiety, working memory difficulties, hunger, tiredness, trauma, or just having had a bad morning will all show as 'not focused.' The strategy is the same: make focus EASIER, not 'tell them to try harder.'

## Make focus easier — environment

Strategy	Cognitive reason
Reduce visual clutter	Less to filter from
Reduce ambient noise	Less to suppress
Predictable routines	Less working memory used on what's next
Decluttered desks	Less to compete for attention
Single colour for emphasis (not rainbow)	Brain can't prioritise everything

## Make focus easier — task design

Strategy	Cognitive reason
Chunked tasks (3 questions, then check)	Sustaining attention has a limit
Clear endpoints ('do these 5 then stop')	Working memory holds an end-state



Strategy	Cognitive reason
Worked examples on the desk	Reduces extraneous cognitive load
Visual checklists for multi-step tasks	Externalises working memory
Same lesson structure most days	Frees attention for content

## Make focus easier — body

Strategy	Cognitive reason
Movement breaks every 15-20 min	Attention naturally cycles
Standing options at desk	Some bodies focus better upright
Hydration breaks built in	Dehydration hits cognition fast
Snacks for low-blood-sugar children	Glucose powers cognition
Short transitions, not long downtime	Attention wanes during empty time

## Make focus easier — emotion

Strategy	Cognitive reason
Address anxiety before content	Anxiety hijacks attention
Predictability before novelty	Novelty for the curious; predictability for the anxious
Trust before challenge	Children focus better with a teacher they trust
Repair after upset, before continuing	Unprocessed emotion blocks focus
Avoid public humiliation	Shame is a cognitive interrupt

## What doesn't actually help

- 'Pay attention!' — the child can't, by definition. Telling them adds shame, not focus.
- Long lectures on the importance of attention.
- Punishment for inattention — works only if attention was a choice. It usually isn't.
- 'Look at me when I'm talking to you' — for autistic children especially, eye contact and listening are different processes. Forcing eye contact blocks listening.
- Removing recess as a focus punishment — exercise IMPROVES focus. Removing it backfires. What works is making focus easier — environment, task, body, emotion — not telling children to focus harder.



## When focus difficulties may need referral

Most focus difficulties are normal variation. Some patterns are worth flagging to the SENDCo:

- Persistent inattention across multiple settings (school AND home)
- Inattention significantly impacting learning despite good adjustments
- Co-occurring with other concerns (motor coordination, sleep, mood)
- Family history of ADHD or related conditions
- Inattention since age 5-6, not just emerged in upper KS2

A referral doesn't always lead to a diagnosis — but if the child has ADHD, early identification means earlier support.

