

Question: When I ask my son to pick up his shoes or start his homework, it is like he doesn't even hear me. How can I get him to focus on what he needs to do instead of being completely focused on his toys and games?

The good news is that your child has shown you that he is able to focus on tasks when he plays with his toys and games. Now, the challenge is to find ways that encourage that kind of focused attention when it comes to less exciting activities. There are many things you can do to help promote the life skill of Focus and Self Control in your child.

Focus and Self Control: involves paying attention, remembering the rules, thinking flexibly, and exercising self control (not going on automatic, but doing what you have to do in order to pursue a goal). Children need this skill in order to achieve their goals, especially in a world that is filled with distractions and information overload.

1

Set your child up for success.

Being able to pay attention to tasks and stick with them until they are complete are important life skills for children to develop—skills that influence their success now and later in life. Megan McClelland of Oregon State University and her colleagues found that young children who could pay attention—even when there were distractions—were far more likely to graduate from college when they were 25 years old.

Create an atmosphere at home that promotes Focus and Self Control.

- **Share the ways that you manage to get things done even when you would prefer to do something else.** For example, you can say: "I want to read this magazine, but I'm going to cook dinner and pay bills first. Then I'll be able to read."
- **Limit background noise as much as you can, especially when trying to get your child to pay attention.** The research of Daniel Anderson of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst has shown that background noise (like having the TV on) makes it harder for children to focus.

2

Make your expectations for your child clear and share why they matter.

Children are more likely to follow expectations when they know why these are important to you.

- **Do your best to explain the reasons behind your expectations:** "When you get home

from school, I need you to get your homework done before you play any games. That way I can help you look at it before we have dinner."

3

Use a problem-solving process.

The life skill of Focus and Self Control calls on Executive Functions of the brain, such as paying attention, remembering information that applies to the situation, thinking flexibly and using self control. Phil Zelazo of the University of Minnesota describes Executive Function as goal-directed problem solving.

When you use this kind of process, your child must focus to identify the issue, think flexibly to come up with new strategies, as well as exercise self control to follow through with those strategies.

- **Talk to your child about the issue:** "When you're playing your video games, it seems like you're paying such close attention that you don't hear me. Then, I sometimes end up yelling, and we both get upset. What ideas do you have to help you get your chores and homework done so that you can enjoy some free time, too, and we can make this happen without a fight?" Also, let your child know what you are going to do to stop yourself from getting upset.
- **Come up with solutions together.** Asking your child to think of as many options as he can for dealing with this situation requires him to think flexibly and be creative.

Write down this list of solutions to try. For example, your child might create a to-do list in order of importance or set a timer that reminds him that playtime is over and it is time to move on to other tasks.

- **Make sure you and your child make plans to deal with the obstacles that might arise.** What might get in your child's way of achieving his goal? What will he do if he wants to play a game but he hasn't yet done his homework? Use the process developed and tested by Gabriele Oettingen and Peter Gollwitzer of New York University to address these obstacles by thinking of IF/THEN solutions: IF that happens, THEN I will do.

Help him consider his solutions from both his and your point of view.

- **Select a plan to try out.** This should be a plan that works best for him and for you.
- **Plan a check-up time to talk about whether this plan is working and improve it,** if necessary. Ask your child to report back to you about his progress. What is working? What isn't? Try out new strategies until you find what works for both of you.

4

Support your child's solution.

- Visual reminders help your child keep the solution you have agreed to in his mind. You might suggest to your child to try using a calendar or planner with deadlines for certain tasks.

- Express your appreciation when your child follows through with his chores: "Thank you so much for putting all of your dirty clothes in the wash. It made things easier for me." These positive words help your child behave in more positive ways.

5

Use your child's interests as opportunities to promote Focus and Self Control.

Michael Posner and his colleagues at the University of Oregon gave four year olds and six year olds five days of training in attention skills on the computer and compared them to groups of children with no training.

Posner found that it was easier for the children who had even that brief training to control their behavior and pay attention. Additionally, the researchers found that when children's ability to pay attention improved, their reasoning and thinking skills also improved.

Rather than fight against your child's focus on toys or games, use these interests as a way to build life skills. With your guidance, television and computer games can actually support your child's Focus and Self Control.

- **Take a strong role in selecting video games that help strengthen your child's growing ability to focus.** When you select games for your child, review them carefully. Are they helping your child improve his thinking skills in constructive ways? Look for games that ask your child to follow changing rules, instead of responding automatically. For more information on the kind of games that have been informed by Michael Posner's work, you can visit <http://www.teach-the-brain.org/learn/attention/index.htm>.
- **Select television shows that help your child pay attention.** Daniel Anderson of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, one of the earliest researchers on children's television, has found that if television content is age-appropriate, meaningful and educational, not only do children learn from it, they also learn to pay attention.

6

Play games that promote Focus and Self Control.

Jeanne Brooks-Gunn of Columbia University reviewed several studies that evaluated what kinds of skills or knowledge gained early in life matter most to children's later success. One of the most important abilities was found to be attention skills. According to Brooks-Gunn:

Attention [skills] allow children to focus on something in a way that maximizes the information they get out of it.

While these life skills continue to develop as your child grows and matures, promoting them can be naturally included in everyday activities in fun ways. Children are more likely to learn

when they are engaged in direct, meaningful and enjoyable experiences. And it is never too early—or too late—to start

- **Red Light/Green Light.** Have your child stop when you say: "Red light!" and go when you say: "Green light!" Then, change the rules and ask your child to move when you say: "Red light!" and stop when you say: "Green light!" Try other colors, too!
- **Simon Says.** Your child must follow only what "Simon says." If you say: "Simon says: 'Touch your toes,'" your child should do it. If you just say: "Touch your toes," your child should stay still. Make the game more complicated by asking your child to do two or more actions at once, like: "Touch your nose and your belly."
- **Do the Opposite.** Challenge your child to do the opposite of what you say. If you say, "Touch the ground," your child should reach up high.
- **Colors and Words.** Give your child a color word like red written in green pen, marker or crayon and the word green in red. Ask your child to control his immediate response and say the color of the word, not the word. Take a turn and try it. It's tricky!

These games all encourage your child to pay attention, remember the rules, think flexibly and control his behavior in order to reach a goal. Remember to let your child have a chance to lead these games, too!