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Attention and concentration

Points to note

- Children with autism can be easily distracted. They may find it hard to concentrate when they are disturbed by background noise, flickering lights or movement of other children. Classrooms that are very bright and colorful can overload a child with visual information. Children with autism find it particularly hard to 'filter out' background noise and visual information.
- A child with autism can have trouble understanding what he needs to focus on; he may be unaware of the 'big picture', concentrating instead on small, irrelevant details.
- A child with autism is likely to have obsessive interests that intrude on his thoughts. He may pay little attention to an activity that does not fall into his particular area of interest.
- A child with autism may not pay attention to group instructions because he does not consider himself to be part of the group.
- Attention may be poor if there is a problem with receptive language and the child has not understood what is being said.
- The child may have difficulty understanding the concept of time. If the child is uncertain how long an activity is likely to last; this uncertainty may affect his concentration.

What you can do

- In some classrooms it may be acceptable to play background music to mask out unwanted noise.
- When demonstrating an activity you may need to repeatedly remind the child what he needs to focus on.
- Try to incorporate the child's particular topic of interest into activities to increase his attention and motivation.
- Use the child's name frequently when addressing the class as a group. This helps the child with autism recognise that he is part of the group. If the child has an aide, ask the aide to repeat group instructions to him individually.
- Keep your language clear and precise, giving one instruction at a time. Give the child sufficient time to process the instruction, then check that he has understood.
- Try to keep tasks as relevant and functional as possible. Children with autism will lack motivation when given tasks that have little relevance or meaning to them personally.
- Make sure the child understands the activity and knows how to start and when to finish. Use a kitchen timer or analogue clock to show the child how long the activity will last. This will help him develop a concept of time. You might say, "We'll do this work until the big hand is on the 12."

- If all else fails and the child just won't pay attention, he may need some time out. Remember we all have our bad days!