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SUMMER 2022

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Ask Dalena



Dalena van der Westhuizen will answer any questions or concerns you may have about learning, concentration, memory and cognitive development – and, of course, the frustrations arising from these

My child has an incredible memory when it comes to places he visited years ago, as well as things he did when he was younger. However, when it comes to studying, it seems as if his excellent memory goes out the window and he's unable to absorb his schoolwork for exams. Do you have any study tips to help him with this?
– **Jana, Centurion**

Hi Jana,

It's truly astonishing that a child can remember the ice cream you bought him when he was two years old, but struggles to remember the information he studied the day before!

As it turns out, different types of memories are stored in distinct regions of our brains. Recollections of experiences are called *episodic memory*. These types of memory are our interpretations of events such as places visited or experiences your



son had when he was younger. The more enjoyable, funny, scary or awkward an experience was, the longer we tend to remember it.

Factual knowledge, like schoolwork, on the other hand, is part of our *semantic memory*. We need to do a lot more processing to understand the meaning and context of this type of information to enable us to store, recall and apply it.

This explains why your son remembers experiences more easily than abstract or subjective academic information that requires a lot more processing. (Do keep in mind that these

processing skills can be tested and strengthened.)

My children get distracted by everything. How can I motivate them to study?
– **Jackie, Pretoria**

Hi Jackie,

Studying becomes frustrating and time-consuming when children are continually distracted.

Unfortunately, for many children, it's not easy – and sometimes even impossible – to start tasks and stay focused on them until they're done, especially if they struggle with executive function challenges or ADHD. For them, remaining focused on a task that's not highly interesting can be tough or near-impossible without huge effort and many incentives.

Here are some simple and practical strategies you could try:

- Objectively evaluate their workspace and environment, and remove anything that might distract them. Then make sure all the materials they'll need are readily

available, but limit the number of items, especially stationery (they don't need four different pens or three different pencils, etc).

- Take note of the time of day they're usually at their best and try to schedule tasks that require longer focus during that time. Mornings, especially early mornings, are usually best.
- Break down tasks/ assignments/lessons into manageable chunks. Then set a timer for 25 minutes for work to be done, allowing five-minute brain breaks in between tasks. Repeat two to three times, then allow a 30-minute break. (This is called the Pomodoro technique.)
- Some children find transitioning from one activity to another challenging and then struggle to focus on the new task. Giving advance notice about a transition can help a child prepare for what's next, so put a simple schedule together for study time (or the day) and go over it before you start. Then give a reminder ahead of time about the next activity so that the children expect it.

If your children continue to be easily distracted, it might be time to dig deeper to find the cause of their attention struggles. Weak attention skills can be strengthened.

How can I best help my 15-year-old daughter with her subject choices for next year? – Nicola, Bryanston

Hi Nicola,

Helping your child choose the right subjects is an important, but potentially nerve-wracking experience. While it's always worthwhile talking to an expert in the field of subject choices, here's a general guideline:

- Take note of any compulsory subjects from your curriculum provider/home education centre/Department of Education.
- Then take into consideration the career your child is interested in pursuing. Make sure that you research and take note of any subjects required for admission to studying in that specific field.
- However, keep the playing field open in terms of a possible change in your child's planned career/field of study. Have a "plan B" in case of a shift in your child's interest from one field of study to



About Dalena

Dalena van der Westhuizen is the co-founder and MD of BrainAbility, a cognitive development specialist, a master brain coach and an internationally certified cognitive coach. She translates the latest international cognitive research and best practice into strategies that can be applied by parents and educators alike.

A mom and a self-confessed chocoholic, Dalena enjoys working with both kids and adults to improve the way their brains process information for better learning, reading and focusing.



Send your questions for Dalena to: adri@isikhova.co.za.

another a few years from now. Don't narrow down too many subjects for a single field of study so that you're left with no alternatives.

- If your daughter still has no idea what she'd like to study or pursue or as a career, don't just choose "easy" subjects or only those she enjoys. Ensure that her subject choices gain her admission to various fields of study in tertiary institutions.