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AUTUMN 2023

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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

I'm a parent homeschooling my two children and have always struggled to concentrate and focus myself. Is this something that was never addressed or treated when I was younger? What exercises or tips could help me, as an adult? – Marina, Kempton Park

Hi Marina,

If a cognitive skill like attention isn't explicitly trained and strengthened, a child will continue to have attention struggles into adulthood. The article "7 Questions Answered About Your Child's ADHD" in [SAHS issue 9](#) contains lots of useful strategies. Here are two more:

1. Focus on one task at a time

Trying to do multiple things at the same time puts undue strain on the brain. Instead, start with a single task and finish it. Only then move on to the next.

2. Break down tasks and take regular breaks

Break tasks down into smaller, manageable (realistic) chunks to help you remain focused on the task at hand. *Tip:* Set a



timer for 25 minutes and start working. When time's up, take a five-minute break, then continue. Repeat until you're done.



My husband is German and I'm a South African whose mother tongue is English. It's important to both of us that our daughter learns and becomes fluent in both English and German. However, she's experienced some learning issues and we've been advised stick to English only when it comes to her studies. Do you agree and do you have any additional advice? – Nicole, Bryanston

Hi Nicole,

Since my area of expertise is cognitive development rather

than academics, I can only advise on the information the latest research into this topic offers.

There's overwhelming evidence that children learn best in and through the language they know best (known as *mother tongue*). During the early and primary school years, there's a big focus on communication and language skills development.

If that focus is centred around the language with which a child's most familiar, learning and development happen at a much faster pace.

You don't mention how old your child is. However, given the evidence supporting single-language education, I recommend taking the school's advice.

While your daughter may study and be schooled in English, you can still speak German at home, watch German movies, listen to German songs, etc.

My child has auditory processing issues. What's the best way of explaining work to him, or how else can I make learning easier for him? – Tracy, Pretoria

Hi Tracy,

Auditory processing involves the way the brain identifies incoming sounds, and is able to analyse those sounds and give them meaning (processing vs hearing).



It's one of the major underlying cognitive skills needed for reading and spelling, and in my experience working with auditory processing disorder (APD), it also affects the ability to pay attention and remain focused while listening or reading.

Here's what you can do:

1. Your son will have trouble understanding and remembering information when he hears it. **Keep explanations and instructions short and regularly ensure that he's keeping up.** Have him repeat the work/instruction back to you in his own words.
2. **Allow more time.** People with APD often experience a delay in their response to questions, so allow more time to process a question and formulate an answer.
3. People with APD get tired faster because listening is a cognitively taxing activity for them. **Keep learning sessions short, allow regular short**

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.

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breaks and schedule learning activities at the right time of day, as it may be harder for your son to listen and process that information in the late afternoon or evening when he's already tired.

4. **Consider cognitive training.** Modern brain research shows that cognitive skill weaknesses (such as auditory processing) can be identified and overcome. Cognitive skills training can restructure brain pathways to improve auditory processing.