

Supporting Focus, Attention and Motivation

Practical ways to reduce unnecessary barriers, help your child get engaged and build strategies for learning and everyday responsibilities.

Attention in ADHD is not simply a matter of whether a child is trying hard enough. A child may focus intensely on something interesting and then struggle to stay with a routine task that matters just as much. Attention is influenced by interest, novelty, urgency, reward, emotional state, tiredness, sensory load, task difficulty and how much executive-function effort is required.

Motivation can be misunderstood in the same way. A child may genuinely want to complete homework, tidy a room or get ready on time while still finding it extremely difficult to begin, persist or return after interruption. Support works best when adults look at the task demands and the environment rather than repeatedly asking the child to 'try harder'.

What may be getting in the way?

What you may see	What may be happening	What may help
Starts but drifts away quickly	The task may be long, repetitive, unclear or competing with more stimulating input.	Shorten the work period, clarify the target and remove avoidable distractions.
Cannot begin despite repeated reminders	Task initiation may be the main difficulty rather than understanding or willingness.	Make the first action tiny and concrete; begin alongside the child if needed.
Only works when the deadline is urgent	Urgency may temporarily increase activation and focus.	Create earlier mini-deadlines, visible progress points and immediate feedback.
Rushes and makes avoidable mistakes	Holding attention to detail may become harder once the main goal feels complete.	Use a short finishing checklist rather than 'check your work properly'.
Refuses a task they expect to fail	Anxiety, repeated criticism or low confidence may now be part of the barrier.	Reduce shame, adjust the level of challenge and build experiences of achievable success.

Attention is easier when the goal is visible

'Do your homework' is a large instruction. 'Complete questions 1-4, then check in with me' gives the brain a visible finishing point. Where possible, show the amount of work, the first step and what happens afterwards. This does not make every task enjoyable, but it reduces the amount of planning the child must generate before they can begin.

Interest can be used without making everything a game

Interest is a useful source of activation. Choice of order, a preferred pen, working beside someone, standing rather than sitting, linking examples to an interest or using a visible challenge can make engagement easier. The aim is not to entertain the child continuously; it is to understand what helps their attention switch on.

Practical strategies for focus and motivation

Start by changing one repeated difficulty. If homework regularly takes two hours, do not introduce ten new systems at once. Identify whether the biggest barrier is starting, sustaining attention, understanding the task, tolerating frustration, managing distractions or remembering what to do.

Make the first step obvious

Replace 'get started' with one visible action: open the book, write the date, put the clothes in one pile or read the first question.

Use shorter work periods

Some children sustain better attention when work is divided into manageable blocks with purposeful breaks rather than one long session.

Create useful feedback

Tick boxes, progress markers and brief adult feedback make progress visible. Avoid waiting until the entire task is finished before acknowledging effort.

Build movement in

Movement may help alertness and concentration for some children. Standing, stretching or a short active break can be part of the strategy rather than a reward.

Breaks need a purpose

A break can restore attention, but a break that moves the child into an activity that is extremely difficult to leave may make restarting harder. Experiment with short movement, water, stretching, a snack, a sensory activity or a clearly timed preferred activity. The useful question is whether the child can return with more capacity afterwards.

Praise the strategy, not a fixed identity

Specific feedback teaches more than general praise. 'You used the checklist and noticed the missing question' or 'You came back after your break without me reminding you' helps the child see which actions supported success. Avoid suggesting that successful concentration proves they could focus like that all the time if they wanted to.

Homework and learning

If homework repeatedly creates distress, look at whether the child understands the work, how long school expects it to take and how much effort has already been used during the day. A child who has held themselves together through school may have far less capacity available at home. Where problems are persistent, communicate with school rather than allowing homework to become a nightly measure of family endurance.

Motivation and rewards

Immediate, proportionate rewards can sometimes help make a distant outcome feel more concrete, but they are not a substitute for understanding the task barrier. Keep any reward system simple, achievable and free from humiliation. If a child repeatedly fails to earn the reward, the system is providing information: the expectation, timing or support may need to change.

Create a Focus and Motivation Plan

Choose one task that matters and look closely at what happens before attention is lost or motivation disappears. Build support around the barrier rather than around the assumption that the child does not care.

The task or situation	_____
What makes this task difficult to begin?	_____
What tends to distract or interrupt?	_____
What is the smallest useful first step?	_____
How long can my child realistically work before a break?	_____
What kind of break actually helps?	_____
Can choice, interest or movement be built in?	_____
How will progress be made visible?	_____
What support can gradually be reduced?	_____
What did we learn after trying the plan?	_____

Build independence by teaching the tools

The long-term aim is not for a parent to become the child's permanent attention system. As the child develops, help them notice which conditions improve their own focus: quiet or background sound, movement, a timer, working beside someone, a checklist, a short deadline or breaking work into pieces. Independence grows when the child can increasingly choose and use those tools themselves.

A message for parents

When a child can focus beautifully on a favourite activity but struggles with homework, chores or getting ready, it can look deeply inconsistent. Try to treat that inconsistency as information rather than evidence of bad intent. Ask what the successful situation is giving their brain - interest, immediate feedback, novelty, movement, clear goals or a visible reward - and whether some of those conditions can be borrowed for harder tasks.

Further reading and guidance

Useful starting points include NHS information about ADHD, NICE guideline NG87 and ADHD Foundation resources for parents and carers. *Smart but Scattered* by Peg Dawson and Richard Guare also provides practical approaches to executive-function support. This resource is educational and does not replace individual medical, psychological, educational or safeguarding advice.

Space to Breathe Therapy

ADHD Parent Support Series - Part 10