

Dealing with Distraction



It can be hard to keep the attention of young children. If you find that children aren't paying attention, here are three areas you can check.

Activities

Do you offer only activities that are highly structured and teacher directed? Does an adult always think up the activities? Do you ask children to do the activities at the same time and in the same way?

If so, children may lose interest and become distracted. Build in activities that grow from the children's interests. Be sure activities are appropriate for the children's ages and abilities. Allow more choices. Limit the amount of time you expect all children to do activities in a large group.

Learning Environment

All parts of the learning environment play an important role in reducing distractions.

Materials. Children may lose focus if they can't find many interesting materials to use. Brainstorm with them about the different kinds of materials they might use to explore art, literacy, building, and pretend and active play. Have enough materials on hand so that children don't have to wait a long time for their turn.

Rotate the most interesting items. You may want to keep some toys and books out of sight for a week or two and then bring them out again. Changing the items available for free play keeps children interested.

Room arrangement. Create learning centers for writing, art, science, math, and dramatic play. Try to avoid creating distractions—for example, by reading stories next to where snack is being prepared, or doing an activity that requires concentration in an area that encourages conversation, such as dramatic play.

Help children stay on task. Children will not always be able to do activities that are their first choice. A gentle reminder can help keep a child focused on the story you're reading, on waiting his turn, or on the game you're playing: "I know this book was not your first choice. I hope the next one will be. You need to listen now." Or "It's Mahesh's turn to talk right now. Your turn will be next."

Schedule

Does your program schedule break the day into many small blocks of time? Do you often ask children to shift gears and make abrupt transitions?

Frequent and abrupt transitions are a distraction for all of us! Children can better focus on a story or on other activities when they have big blocks of time and don't feel rushed. Let children know what to expect ahead of time. Give them jobs to do or songs to sing during transitions. These activities give them a focus and can help make transitions smoother.

 For related Web resources, see "Dealing with Distraction" at <http://illinoisearlylearning.org/tips.htm>.



29 Children's Research Center
51 Gerty Dr. • Champaign, IL 61820-7469
Telephone: 217-333-1386 • Fax: 217-244-7732
Toll-free: 877-275-3227 (Voice/TTY)
Email: iel@uiuc.edu
Internet: <http://illinoisearlylearning.org>

Illinois State Board of Education