Your Attention, Please!

With Kate Sussman
March 5, 2013
Kate Sussman, M.Ed, a special education consultant in New York City and the newest addition to the Hidden Sparks team, acts as an External Coach and mentor to new Internal Coaches from outside the tri-state area. She worked for seven years with the Opportunity Charter School in Harlem. Previously, she coordinated after school and summer programs for at risk students and worked with Manhattan public high school teachers to create inclusive classrooms. Kate has been a facilitator for Schools Attuned, is a certified trainer for the University of Kansas Strategic Instruction Model and a former adjunct instructor at Bank Street College of Education. Kate has worked with teachers from public, private, and Jewish day schools, grades K—12.
Have you ever wondered (or been told by your child’s teacher) that attention issues might be getting in the way of your child’s success in school? In this one-hour session parents will have an opportunity to examine the three major attention controls (mental energy, processing and production) and how they manifest in behaviors. With the understanding that attention is a dynamic construct with many variables, we will develop a deeper understanding of our own children’s attention profiles. We will also look at the ways strengths and weaknesses in attention can affect a child’s academic success, how to talk to our children about attention, and develop strategies that can be used at home or at school to increase success.
Session Goals:

• Participants will understand the concept of an “attention profile”

• Participants will be better able to describe their child’s attention profile

• We will share strategies for supporting and strengthening attention, matched to a profile

• We will discuss attention in terms of description vs. “disorder”
Who is here tonight?

Are we talking about children who are …

- early elementary?
- later elementary?
- middle school?
- high school?
- adult?
- (yourself?)
Why are we here tonight?

- How many of you are joining this call tonight because you have a child who sometimes confounds you with his/her behavior?

- How many are joining because a teacher has said to you that there are some concerns in school about your child’s attention?

- How many are here because you have a child who has received a diagnosis of ADD/ADHD?

- How many are considering seeking out an evaluation?
Pay Attention!

What else are your concerns?

- talking to teacher about my child’s attention
- helping my child at home to manage homework/demands
- teaching some basic, general strategies that will help my child strengthen some areas
Pay Attention!

When we say “Pay attention!” – what do we expect? What does it look like?
What words do we use when we are describing someone who is struggling with attention?

• Lazy
• Procrastinator
• “She only works when she wants to”
• Disruptive
• “He shows no effort”
• Work is unpredictable
• Spacey
Attention & Labels

• How are these students often described or labeled?

• How do these labels help? Hurt?
Attention:
The cognitive process of selectively concentrating on one thing while ignoring others.

“The mind’s conductor”
Telling a child who is struggling with attention to “try harder” is like telling a person with poor eyesight to “squint harder.”
Three Functions of Attention

Mental Energy
We have to find the right balance of alertness (can’t be too sleepy or too awake) …

Processing
We have to figure out what to pay attention to, and for how long, and we have to monitor how well we are paying attention to that thing …

Production
We have to inhibit ourselves from doing other things!
Part 1: Mental Energy

- Sleeps well at night/is sufficiently alert during the day
- Attains an effective level of alertness for listening and watching
- Easily starts and completes projects
- Turns in projects that are consistent in terms of quality and amount
- Demonstrates a consistent and steady pattern of behavior throughout the day
- Doesn’t fidget with hands or feel the need to move around a lot
MENTAL ENERGY is the “fuel” that keeps our brains running

Sometimes there is TOO MUCH mental energy, and sometimes there is TOO LITTLE!

“Problems regulating sleep and staying alert during the day are a common occurrence in kids with insufficient attention control,” (A Mind at a Time, p.56)
Mental Energy at School and at Home

How does inconsistent mental energy manifest at school? At home?

- Head down on desk during the day
- Can’t fall asleep/stay asleep at night (thoughts are still “spinning”)
- Needs to take a lot of breaks while doing homework
- Has a hard time starting/completing homework
- Feels tired when has to sit and listen
- Fidgets, needs to move hands and feet a lot
- “Bouncing off the walls”
Strategies to Support Students Struggling with Mental Energy at Home & in School

- Physical Activity
- Breaks
- Postural Strengthening
- Structure/Preview Day
- Signals
- Bedtime Routine
Physical Activity

- Get up and stretch – at your desk, in the corner
- Toss a ball – see how quietly, how lightly
- Give child a “job” – sharpen the pencils, take notes to office
- Fidget toy, squeeze ball
- Rubber band/nylon attached to chair legs
- Snacks
- Non-disruptive
Breaks

- Intersperse between intense tasks
- Reenergizing
- Planned/unplanned
- Timed
- Monitored
Postural Strengthening

- Sitting up straight actually helps us to fight fatigue
- Strengthen upper back muscles
- SLANT
Structure/Previewing

• Plan activities around child’s “best” times of day
• Make a homework plan
• Break down assignments into parts
  – eg. Brainstorm ideas, then first draft, then next draft – with breaks in between each step
  – You read a page, I’ll read a page
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>How long needed?</th>
<th>When will I do it?</th>
<th>Completed!</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Math worksheet</td>
<td>15 minutes</td>
<td>5:00 – 5:15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hebrew – study vocabulary for quiz</td>
<td>20 minutes</td>
<td>5:20 – 5:40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Science – answer questions</td>
<td>15 minutes</td>
<td>5:45 – 6:00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Practice guitar</td>
<td>15 minutes</td>
<td>6:15 – 6:30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independent reading</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
<td>6:30 – 7:00</td>
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<td>Dinner</td>
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<td>7:00 – 7:30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shower</td>
<td>15 minutes</td>
<td>8:30 – 8:45</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lights out!</td>
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<td>9:00</td>
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Signals

- Touch, eye contact
- Proximity
- Hand signals
- “Five minute warning”
- “SLANT”
- Cue words
- Humiliation protection
Bedtime Routine

• Set consistent bedtime/wake-up time
• Log bedtime and how alert felt the next day
• Pre-bedtime activities: start to settle down
For example, since this webinar started …

• How many of you have been snacking? (And/or – how many of you are wishing you had brought something to snack on?)

• How many of you were just wishing you had taken a nap earlier?

• How many of you are trying to find a position that’s comfortable, but not so comfortable that you fall asleep?

>> What other strategies have you been using to support your own mental energy during this webinar?
Processing Controls

- Determines what information is needed to solve a word problem or study for a test
- Isn’t distracted by irrelevant background noises/sounds or visual stimuli that is unrelated
- Can relate new information to things already known
- Easily engages with school subject matter
- Doesn’t daydream frequently
- Focuses on a task for the appropriate amount of time
- Works consistently on topics regardless of interest in the content
- Can delay gratification
Processing Controls

How does this manifest at home or at school?

- Doesn’t focus long enough to accomplish a task
- Distractions (sounds, smells, feels, memories of the past, thoughts about the future)
- Passive processors (don’t see relevance/fit with other info)
- Forever over-connecting (too many bells are ringing!)
- Only concentrates when experiences or information is exciting
Strategies for Children with Weak PROCESSING CONTROLS

• Memory Strategies
• Monitor “free flights”
• Gentle reminders
• Probing questions
Memory Strategies
- Rehearsal/repetition
- Subvocalization
- Checklists

Monitor “free flights”
- Note “mind trips”
- Have students record periods in which they are least alert
- Note when these are more frequent
- Set goals for diminishing number
# Keeping Track of Losing Focus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Class/Period/Time</th>
<th># of times I lose focus</th>
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Gentle Reminders and Probing Questions

• *Ask:* What were the **most important** ideas in what you just read?
• *Ask:* What does that information **fit in** with, in terms of what you already know? How does this new information **change** my thinking?
• *Reminders:* Looks like you are getting distracted, let’s get back on task …
• Help your child to **prioritize** important information
Production Controls

- Considers possible outcomes or consequences before doing or saying something
- Controls impulses
- Allocates appropriate amount of time for homework
- Transitions easily from one task to another
- Can estimate time needed to do things
- Meets deadlines
- Works at a good pace
- Checks work for mistakes
- Responds to consequences and positive reinforcement
How does this manifest at home or at school?

- Weak previewing
- Seems to have a poor sense of time
- Doesn’t weigh options
- Does things too quickly/too slowly
- Makes careless errors
- Doesn’t always use past experiences to govern behaviors
Impulse Control
- Stop and count to ten
- Clear, explicit consequences
- Behavior charts

Practice Previewing
- Checklists
- Think alouds:
  - “What would happen if …”
  - “How will it look when it’s done?”
# Using a Checklist to Preview and Self-Monitor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AM – to do</th>
<th>PM – to do</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eat breakfast</td>
<td>Pack bookbag</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brush teeth</td>
<td>Brush teeth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pack snacks</td>
<td>Read</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leave house by 8AM!!</td>
<td>Lights out by 9PM!!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assignment</td>
<td>How long will it take?</td>
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**Homework – Nightly Planning**
Strategies for Children with Weak PRODUCTION CONTROL at Home and School

Pacing

- Keep schedules
- Announce transition times, how much time is left
- Use a timer

Self-monitoring

- “go back and find three mistakes”
- Editing checklists
What else impacts attention?

- A language or memory issue
- Sensory issues
- Emotional issues
- Environmental issues
What About ADD/ADHD?

• Approximately 5-7% of children in our country are diagnosed with ADD/ADHD.

• Attention issues are considered a “disorder” when the particular traits we have been talking about become unmanageable and are impairing your child’s everyday functioning (school, relationships).

• Symptoms typically emerge prior to age 7.

• There is no single “test” for ADHD, but professionals will use a variety of tools to develop a “description” of your child’s attention.
What About ADD/ADHD?

• Medication is not an answer in itself, but would be part of a broader management plan that might include diet changes, lifestyle changes, behavior therapy, counseling, and strategies and interventions like we have been discussing here.

• “All children are impulsive, distractible, and inattentive some of the time. Children with ADD are impulsive, distractible, and inattentive most of the time.”

   - Dr. Sears
Talking to Your Child About Attention

- Think about: When & Where (humiliation protection)
- Think about: How (tone, speak slowly, be brief)
- Be optimistic
- Talk about the great things about “your kind of mind”
- Choose one thing to work on
- Model behaviors/share strategies that you use
Talking to Your Child About Attention

“It is important for parents to recognize and value the differences and for the child to conclude that it’s okay to be different.”

- from *The A.D.D. Book: New Understandings, New Approaches to Parenting Your Child*, p. 6

“Love your child for who he or she is, and try hard to keep that in mind when the times get rough. You, sometimes, are all they have. Their behavior is not usually willful, and they are not able to see themselves as their world does. How frustrating it must be to not truly understand why everyone is mad at you and to feel like you haven’t been let in on the secret.”

- Sally, mother of a son with ADD (from *Super-parenting for ADD*), p.12
Talking to Your Child About Attention

Resources for talking with children about attention issues:

- If You Give a Mouse a Cookie by Laura Joffe Numeroff
- Joey Pigza series by Jack Gantos
- I’m Gonna Like Me by Jamie Lee Curtis & Laura Cornell
- All Kinds of Minds by Dr. Mel Levine
- Keeping Ahead in School by Dr. Mel Levine
Talking to Your Child’s Teacher

- Develop a trusting relationship with the teacher

- “Time spent building a positive relationship with your child’s school – mostly with the teacher or teachers – is a precious gift to your child” (Superparenting for ADHD, Hallowell)

- Ask the teacher what s/he is seeing

- Try to be as DESCRIPTIVE as possible in talking about what you see in terms of your child’s attention, and give (or get from the teacher) specific examples of how this impacts his/her academics/behavior.
“A lack of attention control may mask as laziness, a negative attitude, or just plain bad behavior. Yet these are struggling and confused students who want very much to succeed, to please themselves and win the respect of the adults in their lives. They need our sympathy and support at the same time that they need us to hold them accountable for working on their attention controls.”

- from A Mind at a Time, p. 89
More Resources

Superparenting for ADD (2008) Edward Hallowell, MD & Peter Jensen, MD

The Myth of Laziness (2003) Mel Levine, MD

A Mind at a Time (2002) Mel Levine, MD


http://daviskm2psy3010.wordpress.com/slant-strategy-three/
http://www.helpguide.org/mental/adhd_add_parenting_strategies.htm

If you are still concerned that your child might be struggling with some of these traits in a more intense way, take a look at
http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/adhd/DS00275/DSECTION=tests-and-diagnosis
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Date</th>
<th>Session</th>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday 4/9/13 8:30-9:30pm</td>
<td>Understanding Your Child’s Psychoeducational Assessment Report</td>
<td>Dr. Orit Goldhamer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday 5/21/13 8:30-9:30pm</td>
<td>Memory</td>
<td>Karen Kruger</td>
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For more information visit: www.hiddensparks.org
Contacting Hidden Sparks

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