

Section 7 : Strategies for improving attention and activity levels:

First it is useful to think about sitting in a boring meeting that seems to drag. What do you tend to do to help you to concentrate? Some people tend to shuffle around, fidget, twirl hair, bite the back of pen or pencil, doodle or yawn. Sound familiar? These are all strategies that we automatically use to assist our flagging alertness levels. Some of the children we see also have difficulty with keeping focused.

Please refer to the reference “The Alert Programme” in the booklist. This is a very useful programme that can be a valuable resource for a school setting. There are also ideas that will supplement this in “Multi-sensory Strategies” (section 16).

Good things to ask yourself:

- What strategy does this child use to keep concentrating?
- How long does this child concentrate for?
- Is his concentration different in different activities? When is it better?
- Has this child had breakfast?

For the child who becomes hyperactive or doesn't know when to stop moving:

These children sometimes have the need to move around to maintain their alertness levels or are unable to calm themselves down. Even as adults we tend to need movement to help us concentrate. Have you noticed how we tend to shuffle around or fidget in a boring meeting?

The following ideas are worth trying and noting what seems to suit each child.

- Allow time for legitimate movement. Send a child on an errand or ask them to do something in the classroom to assist which gives them a short break.
- Try using an air-filled cushion that allows movement. Details of the “move ‘n Sit” cushion are supplied in “Suppliers of equipment” (appendix 1).
- Introduce activities that allow for the child to receive deep pressure. This is known to have a calming soothing effect – very like cuddling a distressed baby. Activities that could be used would include a short time in a chill out corners seated in a beanbag to read a book. A game such as hiding under a beanbag or cushion could also be used. Have the child do some activity that has some resistance or weight to it. For example a quick game of tug and war with the ESA or another child (who also requires movement); doing some wall pushes or some time in the sand pit.
- Reduce the amount of sensory input i.e. noise, general hustle and bustle (that is why a limited amount of time in a chill out corner may be

useful). Try and do a calming activity with the class after there has been lots of excitement.

- Introduce “statues” or “hands on heads” whilst giving instructions or trying to calm the class. This way, individual children are not picked on, there is no fidgeting, the child has others’ example to copy and each child is giving themselves a quick dose of deep pressure!

For the child who is passive, sleepy or disorganised:

- Give the child a reason to move around. Again send them on an errand or get the whole class to do some “wake-up” exercises,
- Try giving the child something to chew, bite on or an extreme taste. This may sound strange but you may have noticed children and even yourself performing lots of extra oral movements when doing something that requires intense concentration. Think about how you thread a needle or when you are typing up a document, driving through a really busy part of town or even parallel parking! By allowing children some oral motor activity this can help to focus their attention. Some schools have given children water bottles to keep on their desk or even disposable straws handy so that they can be chewed during writing and then immediately discarded. When introducing extreme tastes or textures try and use natural ingredients as far as possible (e.g. slices of lemon, ice blocks to crunch on etc! First ask parents about any allergies!). Some teachers are initially reluctant to introduce these ideas but have later found that, whilst it is initially a novelty and the entire class is initially involved, after a couple of weeks only the children who seem to benefit from this continue to use them.
- Again try the “Move’n’Sit” cushion.
- Allow fiddle toys that are appropriate to the setting and that are used with rules, e.g. a stress ball. Sometimes just using an elastic band around- a pencil can be useful.
- Very often these children would benefit from the exercises that are provided in the “Gross motor group format” (section 17).