

childPSYCH News

A newsletter for professionals and parents

Volume 7, Issue 3
Term 3 2012

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APS Psychologists



Australian Tutoring Association



Special points of interest:

- We have a NEW learning centre! Call us now for more information
- At *childpsych* only psychologists who are registered teachers and/or Educational Psychologists will write the report on learning difficulties
- To unsubscribe from this newsletter at any time, either email or call *childpsych*

The development of attention in children by Philip Gosschalk, Clinical & Educational Psychologist

Attention is important for learning skills and knowledge. There is no one area of the brain where attention is located, rather various parts of the brain are needed to ensure we can concentrate. It is no surprise then that with different parts of the brain involved in attention, there are different types of attention.

Selective attention refers to the ability to block out distractions, whereas *sustained* attention refers to the ability to keep focussed on something. *Capacity* for attention refers to the ability to cope with multiple sources of information such as “reading and understanding what you have read” or ‘writing and thinking about what you want to write’. The ability to *shift* attention or move from one activity to another is also important .

The parts of the brain involved in attention depend on the type of attention. As you may know, various parts of the brain develop at different rates (e.g. infants learn to crawl before they talk). The ability to sustain attention and manage distractions develop rapidly around age 6 and seem almost fully developed by age 10. So don't expect prep aged children to be too good at managing distractions and sustaining attention! Whereas the ability to shift



“...a child's attention skills develop rapidly up till the age of 9 then slow in growth between the ages of 9 and 12”

attention seems to develop later around age 12.

In general, a child's general attention skills develop rapidly up till the age of 9 then slow in growth between the ages of 9 and 12. Researchers believe that young children's poor attention may be also to do with myelination of axons. Think of myelination as the fatty coating around nerve endings. A good coating means messages are sent around the brain speedily and efficiently. Often Omega 3 supplements (e.g. Fish Oil) are considered to help with myelination. Children born low birth weight often have problems with myelination and in turn can have a variety of attention problems.

So how do you tell if a child has a genuine attention problem or are just acting their age?

Psychologists have a range of tests and procedures for assisting with working this out. Neuropsychological tests have been developed that

allow various aspects of attention to be examined and compared to other children their age. In our practice we prefer to use a cognitive test called the Woodcock Johnson Test of Cognitive Abilities. This test measures various facets of attention. Using these cognitive tests assists psychologists to see if Little Johnny is typical of other children his age for attention or not. In addition, psychologists also have standardised rating scales to get an idea of how these attention problems are seen in a school and home environment. For example, Little Johnny's problem with managing distractions may be a mild problem in the home but a severe problem in the school setting.

So what can be done about attention problems? In some cases fish oil supplements may help young children. Medication has been recommended for those with significant attention disorders. Recently, brain based training such as the Cogmed program can also improve a certain type of attention problem. (see over for more information). Finally, understanding the specific type of attention problem can help psychologists design behavioural interventions. For example, a child with difficulty with managing distractions may benefit from learning to take more notice of whether they are on task at school using a self monitoring task.

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The Student-Teacher Relationship

A good student-teacher relationship has been linked to improved student academic attainment and other positive school outcomes such as motivation to learn.

Given that grades 5 to 9 have been identified as a period of high risk for disengaging from school, working towards building strong student-teacher relationships are important.

A recent Australian study examined **adolescent's boys and their teacher's relationship to look at what actually constituted a good relationship.** This study examined the student-teacher relationship from the perspective of the student and teacher. Interestingly, only half the **student's and teachers agreed** on whether they had a good relationship. **Teacher's tended to think** they had a better relationship with their students than they really did! It seems that in this group, teachers valued a close relationship with their students. But the boys felt the teacher was not as caring or con-

cerned about their feelings and less likely to help them.

In contrast, students who had good relationships with their peers tended to ask for more help and received more positive feedback and praise from their teachers. Boys who had poorer relationships with their teachers felt less cared for.

These results provide some food for thought. First some students are hard to form a relationship with — particularly when they are challenging to manage and have behavioural difficulties. However, it is important for teachers to try and build some rapport with the student.

A simple way for teachers to build rapport with a challenging student is to perform some task with them. For example, with primary school aged students giving the student the job of marking the class roll with the teacher can help. For adolescents, simply talking to them about their interests and expressing a belief the student can better themselves can help.

Home Schooling Children with Autism

Withdrawing students from mainstream education is on the increase among parents with children with autism. Many of these parents feel that management and treatment of **their child's autism is best done without a fulltime mainstream classroom placement.**

There are three advantages to homeschooling. The first is that children can have a safe place to learn at their own pace. The second is that it is possible to individualise a curriculum. Finally, home schooling provides one on one teaching.

The decision by parents to pull their child out of mainstream schooling often comes after years of failure. Often the child is disruptive and suspended frequently despite the best efforts of all involved.

For parents considering home schooling it is important to think about the practicalities. Parents should talk to other parents who have taken this path. In general if your child is defiant with you and difficult to control then may be this is not the best solution.



It is advisable to have an educational consultant if you decide to home school your child. The distance education branch of Education Queensland does provide a lot of support however. We find in our practice that the ability to provide an educational consultant but also a psychologist is helpful for coordination of services.

The educational consultant is generally best used for advising on teaching approaches, developing an educational plan. In addition, the educational consultant can provide some teaching as well as **monitoring the student's progress** through their home schooling curriculum.

If a student is homeschooled, this does not mean this has to be **the option for the rest of a child's schooling.** Think outside the square!



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childpsych provides a specialist autism clinic focused on assessment and diagnosis and intervention services. Our autism interventions are delivered by psychologists accredited to work with children with autism spectrum disorders.

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- ✓ Management of children with autism to age 18 years
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