



AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

STUDENTS EXPERIENCING INATTENTION AND DISTRACTIBILITY

*This information is designed to help teachers respond to students who may need support. It is **not** intended to be used as a diagnostic tool or to replace the use of formal assessments employed by mental health professionals. Additionally, it is important to consider individual differences, the context of the situation, and cultural and linguistic factors.*

Teachers are an important part of establishing and maintaining healthy classrooms and virtual learning environments (VLE) for children to learn and grow. Teachers may find inattention and distractibility concerning, but teachers can play an effective role in helping students focus and, when necessary, referring students to professionals.

WHAT IS INATTENTION AND DISTRACTIBILITY?

- Whereas attention allows us to focus on one thing and ignore other distractions, inattention refers to an inability to focus on one thing for a sustained period of time.
- Distractibility refers to disruptions in a student's attention, including lack of concentration, difficulty starting a task, or being easily diverted from a task such that the student does not complete it within the assigned time frame.
- Inattention and distractibility in one person may not appear the same as inattention and distractibility in another. Norms for expressing attentive behavior differ across cultures. For example, sustained eye contact has different meanings in different cultures.
- What a teacher might perceive as a minimal attention issue might reflect deeper attention problems.

WHAT DO INATTENTION AND DISTRACTIBILITY LOOK LIKE IN SCHOOL?

- In pre-K and kindergarten students, inattention may manifest as a limited ability to maintain or engage in adult or peer conversation, play activities, or assigned responsibilities for more than a minute or two. Children may have difficulty attending during circle time or may frequently move from activity to activity during free play.
- Among elementary school-aged children, inattention may disrupt their ability to start and/or complete assigned classwork, such that assigned activities are completed inconsistently. Children also may frequently appear to be looking away from their work, instruction, or adult directives. In virtual learning environments, they may seem to engage in something other than on-screen learning activity.
- In middle and high school, adolescents with attention difficulties frequently have problems getting short- and long-term assignments completed accurately within assigned timeframes. They may also have problems tracking their assignments, organizing their materials, taking notes during class instruction, and preparing for exams.

BEHAVIORS THAT ARE SIMILAR IN PERSON AND VLE	BEHAVIORS UNIQUE TO VLE
Students frequently move around in their seats, fidget, or walk around.	Students frequently disappear from view, or their video turns on and off.
Students get distracted by other stimuli in the classroom and do not appear to be engaged in the content/lesson.	Students appear overly distracted by other things at home (for example, pets, cooking, siblings, other household distractions).
Students frequently chat with neighbors, disrupting their own and/or others' work, particularly when the teacher is giving lessons or instructions.	Students frequently send chats through the school video platform, on social media, or via text messaging, with peers, particularly when the teacher is giving lessons or instructions or during in-class work assignment time.
Students have difficulty completing tasks without repeated check-ins or reminders from teachers.	Students have difficulty completing asynchronous assignments and activities that tend to involve less structure than synchronous and in-person activities.

WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO?

DO	DON'T
Follow a structured and predictable classroom and/or VLE routine and schedule. Have schedules and rules easily accessible to help manage students' expectations.	Put students in groups without structured roles and clearly defined tasks.
Provide students with organizational tools and strategies. Check in frequently to make sure that students are continuing to keep materials and assignments organized. In VLE, make the organization as easy as possible, especially for young students. For example, provide checklists of materials to have ready for class and keep all video links in one place so they can be easily found.	Assume that making or posting announcements or assignments just one time is enough for students to remember to complete them, or that all students (and their parents/guardians for VLE) are equally computer savvy.
Help students set manageable goals for long-term assignments. For example, for a paper, set separate due dates for the outline, first draft, peer review, and final draft. Increased attention and reduced distractibility are teachable skills.	Make judgments about how much attention is appropriate. Especially in VLE, attentiveness may look different for different students.
Break work sessions and lectures into short chunks to help with sustained focus. For example, assign a subset of math problems with a break, instead of all the math problems at once. In VLE, incorporate breaks into video lessons to give eyes and bodies a break from the screen.	Assume that all students in your class have the same ability to concentrate and focus. The ability to focus is highly variable across students, ages, gender, and contexts.
Praise on-task or focused behavior. Notice the good that students do. Say, "Wow, look how hard you are working!"	Blame or shame students (or parents/guardians) for attention problems.
Privately address off-task behavior in a gentle way. For instance, privately tell or message/e-mail students, "Try to focus on your work now and in 5 minutes you will have a break."	Reprimand or shame students for fidgeting or off-task behavior.

Provide meaningful rewards for completion of key tasks. When possible, allow students to choose the reward, such as free reading time and Zoom breaks for VLE.	Rely solely on extrinsic rewards such as sticker charts or prizes.
Keep in regular communication with families to keep them informed and identify possible reasons for inattention (e.g., lack of sleep, limited technology, or other issues).	Make assumptions or claims about what is causing students' inattention.
Help students see the connection between on-task behavior and success by making explicit connections between effort and positive outcomes. For example, say, "Look how your hard work on your math homework increased your understanding!"	Criticize, compare to work of peers, measure/contrast to past work, or diminish even small accomplishments, especially from their previous non-VLE experience.

WHEN TO ACT:

- Be sure to follow relevant school and district policies regarding students experiencing inattention and distractibility related to school tasks.
- If the student displays similar patterns of behavior with other subject teachers.
- Consider meeting with the student one-on-one or with the student and their parents/caregivers to learn more and offer support.
- If the student continues to exhibit a behavioral pattern of repeated distracted, disengaged, or inattentive behavior occurring over several weeks, or the frequency or severity increases, seek extra support from administration or school mental health professionals.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- Managing Attention and Distractibility in Online Learning (from APA) (apa.org/topics/covid-19/managing-attention-distractibility-online-learning)
- Understood: For Learning and Attention Issues (understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/distractibility-inattention/understanding-your-childs-trouble-with-focus)
- Misunderstood Minds (pbs.org/wgbh/misunderstoodminds/attentiondiffs.html)
- *Childhood/Teenage Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: An Overview of ADHD in Children and Teenagers* (psychcentral.com/disorders/childhood-adhd)
- Attention Deficit Disorder Association (add.org)
- CHADD: The National Resource on ADHD (chadd.org)
- NASP Position Statement on ADHD (nasponline.org/x26833.xml)
- Institute of Education Sciences Research-Based Strategies for Effective Remote Learning (ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/appalachia/events/event_series_research-based-strategies-for-effective-remote-learning.asp)
- There are numerous established professional learning communities, including those on social media platforms, that share additional information and resources and provide opportunities for collaboration and discussion.

Related mental health primers:

Low Self-Compassion or Low Perceptions of Competence

LOCAL RESOURCES:
