



6 Ways to Raise a Focused Child

by Maggie Jackson

Eating on the run. IM and TV, plus homework. Kids today are growing up in a land of distraction—a noisy, info-cluttered, hyper-mediated world where mental juggling is the norm. But, despite this trend, there are things that you can do to encourage focus in your child’s daily routine. Maggie Jackson, author of [*Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age*](#), gives some tips for parenting in an increasingly distractible society:



Speak a Language of Attention

Attention isn’t just one thing. It’s a set of three skills: focus, awareness and executive attention, i.e., planning and decision-making. And it’s teachable, scientists are discovering, by simply talking with your kids about attention and encouraging them to practice. How do you practice attention? Listen for the trumpet in a song. Play “Spot the Letter” on a car trip. Walk through the garden—using all your senses.

Focus on One Another

A first social skill for toddlers is joint attention—a meeting of minds that comes from focusing on something together. But today we’re so used to splitting our focus that it’s hard to truly attend to any one thing or person. Continuous partial attention undermines our relationships. When we give each other half-focus at dinner or in conversation, we are effectively saying, “You aren’t worth my time.”

MAM: Moms Against Multitasking

Multitasking is a national pastime, and kids are no exception. Sixty percent of kids age 8 to 18 multitask at least some of the time they’re doing homework. But it’s not as easy as it looks! Toggling between tasks slows us down because the brain needs time to switch between new and old tasks, and ramp up for the new job. Warning: Multitasking may also inhibit deeper, flexible learning. That means kids might do well on homework, yet learn the material less well. Teach kids to single-task to get the job done right.

White Space

Quelling distractions is both a matter of harnessing our attentional skills and creating a climate for focus. And today, kids are exposed to nearly six hours a day of non-print media. Two-thirds under 6 live in homes that keep the TV on half or more of the time—an environment linked to attention difficulties. Take a page from pioneering companies who are creating “white space,” places or times for uninterrupted, unwired thought.

Eat Mindfully

We snack, we gulp, we eat energy bars on the run. Forty percent of our food budgets are spent eating out, up from 25 percent in 1990. But this mobile eating undermines our ability to taste, sense and share our food. We’ve fallen into a national habit of mindless eating, says Cornell psychology professor Brian Wansink. Take the time to stop and eat with your kids, whenever possible, noticing the smell, taste and feel of your food and encouraging them to do the same. Your whole family will be dialing down on stress and boosting focus!

Be a Role Model for Focus

If we want to nurture “Planet Focus” for our children, we have to cultivate our own attentional skills, and pass them on. Be an attentional role model. Give the gift of your attention. Carve out time for focused thinking and relating—and speak up against multitasking, interruptions and hyper-hurrying. Rediscover what it’s like to have a long conversation, to sit still, to go beyond what’s first-up on Google. The word “attention” comes from the Latin verb meaning to “stretch toward.” It’s not always easy to nurture your attentional skills—but it’s worthwhile.

Maggie Jackson is an award-winning author and journalist who writes the popular “Balancing Ads” column in the Boston Globe. Her work also has appeared on National Public Radio and in the New York Times, among other national publications.

© Copyright 2006-2012 Education.com All Rights Reserved.

http://www.education.com/magazine/article/6_ways_to_raise_focused_child/