

## Ways to Increase Attention Span

### BOARD GAMES

Games such as Candy Land, Chutes & Ladders, and even card games like UNO require your child to pay attention to a task for a period of time until the game is finished. Kids with poor attention spans may struggle to complete an entire board game, and this might be one of the reasons you've noticed that your child's attention span is lacking!

The initial reaction from parents may be to avoid playing these games since the child struggles to sustain attention long enough to finish the game. This, however, is not helpful to your child because your child will frequently be faced with tasks at school that require his attention, whether he wants to pay attention to them or not.

Schedule regular game play into your routine with your child to ensure that focused-attention activities are part of his regular day, so that he can practice keeping his attention on this task. If he struggles, remind him that he can stop playing the game once it is finished and talk about ways to keep himself focused on the task if he's having difficulties.

Need a list of great games to play with your preschooler or early elementary schooler? Try these games that work great for improving attention:

[Candy Land](#)

[Uno](#)

[Connect 4](#)

[Chutes and Ladders](#)

[Trouble](#)

[Hi Ho Cherry-O](#)

[Sorry](#)

[Go Fish](#)

## **IMPULSE-CONTROL GAMES**

Attention-span issues may be impulse-control issues in disguise! A child who is asked to clean his room who can be found 5 minutes later playing with his trains may have a harder time with controlling his impulsive desire to play with the trains than controlling his attention span.

Help your child to manage those impulses by playing games that require impulse-control as a way to win the game. These activities require the child to pay attention, follow the directions of the game, and control their bodies and desires to complete the task of the game.

Since the game is a fun experience, your child may not realize that he's developing skills in impulse-control, yet you will see a change in your child's ability to control those impulses with more frequent exposure to these types of games.

There is a LONG list of games that might help with impulse control and I won't be able to cover them all here, but below are a few examples:

### ***BOARD GAMES***

Any board game or card game that requires taking turns also requires impulse-control. Your child has to wait for you to take a turn, move your player and for it to be his turn again. Depending on the game, there may be times that your child has to wait his turn for longer than normal (such as that you receive a "spin again" direction, or your child is instructed to "lose a turn.")

While playing games together, refrain from controlling the spinner or the cards that direct the players' turns; this is part of the impulse-control process. You may be tempted to do so because your child's impulse-control makes it challenging for him to wait his turn, but taking this temptation away from him only makes his struggle more difficult.

If your child struggles and spins out of turn or tries to draw cards in advance for everyone playing the game, simply ask the child to return the card to the pile and start from there (or ask the child to wait his turn). This draws attention to the impulse-control concern and reminds your child that while the game is fun, there are still rules to be followed.

(If you lose your cool on this, as I've done before, don't beat yourself up about it. Just move on and try again another time!)

### *RED LIGHT, GREEN LIGHT*

In this *game*, children are required to hear the direction that is given to them (i.e. red light means to stop and green light means to go) and then direct their body to respond to the command. While the child may not want to stop, hearing a red light direction requires the impulse-control to jump into effect.

This activity is great for helping kids to think first and act second (and for making sure that their thoughts and actions match up!).

#### WHAT TIME IS IT, MR. SHARK?

Again, in this *game*, children are required to hear the direction that is given to them and then direct their body to respond only to the direction (despite their desires to hang back or move forward, depending upon their goal in the game). Impulse-control can be a challenge in this game because their desire may be to stay back so as not to get caught by Mr. Shark (or to take huge steps in hopes of getting caught and becoming Mr. Shark as some kids do!)

As you play the game, be prepared to talk with your child if you see him struggling to control his initial impulses. For example, if you see your child starting to run backwards each time Mr. Shark answers, his initial impulse to run from Mr. Shark (albeit evolutionary and appropriate) is overriding his cognitive brain that knows he is only to run backward if Mr. Shark says "Lunch

time!” Remind him to play by the rules by saying something like, “Jack, I saw you start to run backwards when Mr. Shark said 3 o’clock. Remember, you can only run backwards when he says ‘Lunch time!’ so let’s come back here and try that again.

(The directions to this game suggest playing it in a pool, but this game is easily played out of the water as well.)

### *MUSICAL CHAIRS*

In this **game**, there are no formal “directions” given to your child, but your child is asked to use his brain to respond to the stopping of the sound/music and to then direct his body to find an open seat. Kids with impulse-control struggles may sit down during the game even though the music is still playing, or even keep walking after the music has stopped because the body hasn’t responded to the “direction” quite yet.

This is a great activity for younger kids because they can make the association to the starting and stopping of the music even if they aren’t great talkers; just make sure to show the younger ones how to play the game first by demonstrating and they’ll pick it up quite quickly.

Just like with the other impulse-control games, your role is very important. If you notice impulse-control is lacking in the game, gently and kindly point it out and start over again so that it’s fair for everyone and he learns that impulse-control is necessary, even when he doesn’t like the outcome.

### HAND-EYE COORDINATION GAMES

I have saved the best activities for last!

Activities in this category help train your child’s brain to stop focusing on anything else but the task at hand. They help to improve your child’s mental timing (i.e. speed up your child’s ability to process and respond to a command) and over time, you’ll see a difference in your child’s attention-span.

These activities are a must for any child who seems a little behind with their ability to focus attention as well as for those who have a clinical diagnosis of ADHD. Whether it's a small concern with attention (child gets distracted when asked to put something away) or a larger concern (child cannot eat at a restaurant because the distraction around him captures all of his attention), these activities should help.

I will identify a few activities to use here, but please note that any activities that require hand-eye (or foot-eye) coordination can be helpful for a child with a poor attention span.

In addition, I encourage you to use an activity from this category prior to an important event in which you need your child to pay attention, as these activities tend to help the brain sustain attention for longer than the activity lasts (i.e. if he's going to sing in the church choir in 20 minutes, warm up with some hand-eye coordination activities right before he takes the stage and his attention will be glued on his teacher!)

### *METRONOME MATCHER*

In this activity, all you need is a tennis ball and a [metronome](#). For those of you who don't know what a metronome is (don't worry, I didn't really know what it was either until I learned about this activity), this is the tool that is used to keep time in music to ensure that the beat stays in time.

While most of you won't have a metronome at home, you can all easily find one for free in the App store.

For this activity, simply set the metronome to a reasonable pace and ask your child to try to match the bouncing of the ball to the click of the metronome. I encourage you to try it yourself too! Making it a competition may make it more fun and help it to last longer!

## *PLAYING CATCH*

Did you ever imagine that something as simple as playing catch could help your child to sustain his attention in other aspects of life, such as listening to a story or following instructions at school?

Playing catch regularly with your child can not only improve his gross and fine motor development and his hand-eye coordination, but you will also see improvements in his attention span.

## *BAT & BALL*

I have to admit that when I first started researching the impact of these hand-eye coordination activities on attention span, I was skeptical. However, as soon as I started using an activity that required hand-eye coordination with a preschooler in my office, I no longer needed any convincing!

Bat & Ball was that activity!

This activity isn't anything fancy. We simply found something in my office that worked as a bat (in our case, a table-top punching bag, but you can find something else that works without buying anything new) and tried to hit a ball with the bat as many times as we could.

The child really struggled with coordination, so the activity was almost painful as the adult in the beginning. But over time, the child started developing the skill to hit the ball with the bat. At that point, I upped the challenge to see if the child could hit the ball and hit it towards me so that I could catch it. We kept increasing the challenge, including attempts at hitting and catching the ball to focus on that hand-eye coordination.

After two sessions of this, the child's coordination was much improved. I was impressed to see the change from just one session to the next. But the most important thing was the change in attention span! Attention span was much improved, not just in my office, but at home and daycare too.

If your child is struggling with a short attention span, I strongly encourage you to start with this activity and use it as frequently as you can!