



Concentration Tricks for a Young Pup

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Monday, March 19, 2001; Page C04

Tyler concentrates like a poodle pup. Not that his daily routine helps. At school, chairs screech, desks rattle and kids yell from first bell to last. At home, TV channels spin by in fevered flashes and his favorite shows switch scenes every seven seconds. If he didn't have an attention deficit disorder this morning, he'll have one by dinner.

Teacher Says: Get that puppy in shape. Use biofeedback. Or borrow from dog training and use newspapers, a fence and a leash to prolong his concentration in a wound up world. Tyler's not the only one who needs help.

"All of us are experiencing attention deficit disorders today more than ever because of all the information we get. It's a high stimuli world," says Peter Freer, former technologist for the Asheville City Schools in Asheville, N.C. Even teachers are affected. "We think in 30-second increments," says Pat Faulkner, principal of Old Fort Elementary School in Old Fort, N.C.

Freer, a former science teacher, created a biofeedback system called Play Attention, for helping kids, aged 7 and up, learn what it feels like to pay attention. Adapted from biofeedback techniques used by NASA and Air Force pilots, Play Attention helps Tyler "see his attention span in real time," says Freer. A bicycle-style helmet equipped with sensors measures the brain waves associated with focus and cognitive processing and presents feedback in a video-game format.

But they aren't video games. Simple in color and strategy, these games adjust the attention level, pace and stamina that kids need for classroom work, such as listening to a teacher or writing with paper and pencil. "It's a bridge between the monitor and the classroom," says Freer. At the first level, students use only their minds to make a bird fly, a fish swim or build a tower with blocks on the computer screen. "Kids think it's cool to build a tower using only their mind," says psychologist Donna Moore, of Rockville, who uses it with her patients whose concentration pup needs training.

Does it work? "It's not a magic bullet, but it has helped. We have seen the transfer to the classroom," says Faulkner who uses Play Attention with her second to sixth graders. "We start to see a change in a month to six weeks," she says. Not all students using the system have ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), "though they have attending problems," Faulkner says.

Same Horn of Reston doesn't use biofeedback systems; she thinks the mind can be trained with commands and visual cues." Concentration is directed mental energy. Our objective is to train the brain to do what we're supposed to do, the way we are supposed to do it," says Horn, author of "ConZentrate" (St. Martin's Griffin, \$13.95).

Use the following exercises to train Tyler's brain to concentrate, at school or at home. Heed the advice of experienced terrier trainers and work with him when he is well rested, 5-10 minutes, twice a day:

Spread Newspaper. Show Tyler that concentrating has a place. "Our attention is where our eyes are. If our eyes are shifting, our attention will probably be scattered," says Horn. Cut out a newspaper picture of a group of basketball players going for a basket. Ask Tyler where their eyes are focused. Could they make a basket if they weren't looking at it? Ask why not. Get him to analyze how their hands, arms and bodies are positioned for better focus. Then, have him demonstrate how he would "concentrate" while reading, writing or kicking a soccer ball.

Fence it in. Train his concentration with his hands. Horn calls it "Focus Pocus." Place a math paper in front of him. Have him cup his hands like blinders beside his eyes until he sees only paper. Ask him to focus his eyes for 30 to 60 seconds on the paper and silently question himself about the work. Are there just fractions or whole numbers, too? How many problems do I have to do? How will I work the page -- across the rows or down? As he begins each new assignment, have him repeat, "Focus Pocus" to cue his brain to contain his concentration.

Put a leash on it. Set a time limit for him, until he can do it himself. "If we want our mind to mind, we have to give it an order and a time limit to complete the order," says Horn. Place a small clock or a wristwatch near his math assignment. Set a reasonable time limit. On Play Attention, kids work 30 to 40 minutes with "breaks to rest the mind," says Freer. For kids with ADHD, whose attention span is typically 60 to 90 seconds; Freer sets a goal of five minutes of undivided attention.

Repeat it a few dozen times. Help Tyler develop a mental tune to drill his brain into believing it can concentrate. Have him repeat a simple phrase like "I can concentrate like a champ" when he doubts his ability. Horn believes that such affirmations reduce negative thought patterns and produce constructive beliefs and behaviors. Dog trainers call this a conditioned reinforcer.

Associate the behavior with the command. Design a ritual to signal Tyler's concentration to sit up and wag its tail. Before class work or homework, teach him a ceremony like the following: While chanting his pep song, he positions his pencil box squarely on the top of his desk, then he sets out a "blotter" made of calming-colored construction paper like pale green or pink. Next, he centers his work page across the top of the page. Finally he wriggles his fingers, clasps his hands together and raises them slowly over his head. Taking one deep breath, he begins concentrating.

Don't let Tyler's wound up world jerk his mind up and down the street. Send his concentration skills to obedience school. Try a bicycle helmet that makes his mind cruise like a bird up in the sky or use tunes

and routines to show his mind who's boss. As his concentration grows up in the months to come, he will learn for himself that a mind well trained and well behaved is always top dog.