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## Dealing With Attention Issues

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# **ATTENTION**

## **MENTAL ENERGY CONTROLS**

*Alertness*  
*Mental Effort*  
*Sleep/Arousal Balance*  
*Performance Consistency*

## **PROCESSING CONTROLS**

*Saliency Determination*  
*Depth/Detail of Processing*  
*Cognitive Activation*  
*Focal Maintenance*  
*Satisfaction Level*

## **PRODUCTION CONTROLS**

*Previewing*  
*Facilitation/Inhibition*  
*Pacing*  
*Self-Monitoring*  
*Reinforceability*

**Attention Video Viewing Guide:  
Introduction to Attention & Mental Energy Controls System**

VIDEO OUTLINE	NOTES/MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES
Introduction to Attention	
<b>Mental Energy Controls System</b>	
Alertness	
Sleep-Arousal Balance	
Mental Effort	
Performance Consistency	

**Carmen & Mental Energy Worksheet**

<b>MENTAL ENERGY CONTROLS COMPONENTS</b>	<b>EVIDENCE OF WEAKNESS</b>
Alertness	
Sleep-Arousal Balance	
Mental Effort	
Performance Consistency	

## Attention Video Viewing Guide: Processing Controls System

VIDEO OUTLINE	NOTES/MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES
<b>Processing Controls System</b>	
Saliency Determination	
Depth and Detail Of Processing	
Cognitive Activation	
Focal Maintenance	
Satisfaction Level	

## Carmen & Processing Controls Worksheet

<b>PROCESSING CONTROLS COMPONENTS</b>	<b>EVIDENCE OF WEAKNESS</b>
Saliency Determination	
Depth and Detail Of Processing	
Cognitive Activation	
Focal Maintenance	
Satisfaction Level	

## Attention Video Viewing Guide: Production Controls System

VIDEO OUTLINE	NOTES/MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES
<b>Production Controls System</b>	
Previewing	
Facilitation and Inhibition	
Pacing	
Self-Monitoring	
Reinforceability	

## Carmen & Production Controls Worksheet

PRODUCTION CONTROLS COMPONENTS	EVIDENCE OF WEAKNESS
Previewing	
Facilitation and Inhibition	
Pacing	
Self-Monitoring	
Reinforceability	

## Attention Management Plan Worksheet for Carmen

<b>STRENGTHS</b>	<b>STRATEGIES TO STRENGTHEN STRENGTHS</b>
<b>ATTENTION WEAKNESSES</b>	<b>MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES</b>
<b>1.</b>	
<b>2.</b>	
<b>3.</b>	

## **Carmen Narrative**

### **Background Information**

Carmen is a tenth grade student. She lives with her parents and one older sister. She is a hard worker and strives to please her teachers and parents. Her parents report that they have problems getting her up in the morning. The morning routine becomes a battle. Though her parents are not aware of this, Carmen often does not fall asleep until 1 or 2 am.

Carmen's lack of organization adds to the problem of getting out in the morning. She constantly loses things, most often her homework papers. Her parents also say that Carmen has trouble organizing her homework time. One day, she spent all afternoon watching a video on the Civil War, and didn't start her homework until nine o'clock at night. "She never plans anything," her father says, and Carmen agrees, although she adds that she doesn't see why that's a problem. Carmen's mother says she feels like she spends a lot of time either laughing at the creative and funny stories Carmen tells, or arguing with her about getting homework done or cleaning her room.

Carmen is an excellent athlete, and loves swimming and soccer. She plays in the town's year-round competitive soccer league, and is often the top scorer in the game. She hopes to join the varsity swim squad this year.

Carmen is well liked by her classmates, and is quick to notice if something is bothering one of her peers. She always has a kind word and caring gesture for anyone having trouble or feeling sad. Her teachers and fellow students describe her as a very compassionate person with a wonderful sense of humor. However, Carmen has begun to experience significant problems in school.

### **What You See in the Classroom**

Carmen spends a lot of classroom time moving around—sharpening her pencil, borrowing the teacher's protractor, asking to go to the bathroom—or playing with her keys at her desk. Her Algebra teacher often reprimands her for this behavior when he is trying to give directions for completing a project or assignment. "If you'd look at me when I give directions," he says often, "You'd do better following them." She is easily distracted by noises and movements around her.

Carmen is often unsure how to begin a task, and either looks to her peers for clues about what to do first, or simply jumps in and tries

something. She often turns in work that doesn't follow the directions given. When a teacher intervenes to help her refocus, Carmen becomes upset. When asked why, Carmen replies, "I thought I was doing the right thing." Sometimes she will get up and wander around in the middle of a task. When the teacher says, "What are you doing, Carmen?" she responds, "I got too bored." Decoding new words is a tough task for Carmen. Although she knows the sounds of individual letters, she often can't manipulate those sounds to pronounce words. Sometimes, when she comes to a word she can't sound out, she just skips it or substitutes a different word in its place. Most of the time, her substitutions are semantically correct.

Carmen scores well on tests which involve reading comprehension, especially when the test is multiple-choice. She has greater success when illustrations or diagrams are used to help elaborate and clarify the text. However, she has trouble paraphrasing and summarizing information that she hears. She says that she tends to get "caught up" in thinking about one part of what the teacher says, "and then I miss the rest." "I do better when I'm really interested in what she's talking about," she told her mother, "Most of the time, she is so boring!" When her History class was learning about the Civil War, Carmen did an excellent oral presentation, full of rich detail. She also enjoyed making an extremely creative scale model of Fort Jefferson, which she integrated into her presentation.

Carmen enjoys sharing her creative ideas through writing, although she isn't very good at it. While she has an extensive oral vocabulary and great ideas for stories, her written work is often disconnected and her ideas poorly elaborated. The classmate who was the peer editor of her last essay said, "I couldn't figure out what was going on until Carmen explained it to me out loud."

When Carmen's class was studying animal habitats, each student was asked to write about the implications for preserving natural habitats. Carmen became excited about writing a story where she discovered a gecko while on a trip to Hawaii. Her essay was full of run-on sentences, and she asked her peer editor to help her figure out which ones were run-on—"since I can never tell." It took her several tries to correct all the run-on sentences and misspelled words in her rough draft. When it was finished at last, however, the teacher gave it an A.

Carmen struggles with spelling both in the context of writing, and also with spelling in isolation. While many of Carmen's spelling errors are

phonetically correct, she continues to make the same errors again and again. This is true despite repeated practice.

When Carmen began math problem solving in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, her teacher taught the problem-solving process using visual diagrams and flowcharts to explain the steps. Carmen caught on very quickly, and excelled in this area of math, especially when she was allowed to use a calculator. "I love math problems," she says, "but I hate math facts. I never can remember them." In Algebra, Carmen can read word problems and determine the correct answer but rarely shows how she solved it. When she has to document her steps, she loses track of the question she is trying to answer, often resulting in incomplete responses. Her Algebra teacher can't figure out why such a good problem-solver is having difficulty with her work. "The other students in the class understand. She just needs to listen in class, and to make fewer careless mistakes."

## Strategies to Try

### Strategy Tips

• Decide which strategies to try by observing the child and identifying the ways in which he or she learns best.

• It may take several attempts to see positive results from one strategy. Don't give up too soon.

• When these strategies you try do not improve the child's skills, try others.

• Most of these strategies can be adapted for use with different age groups.

You may use the strategies on the following pages to help children who are experiencing difficulties with attention. Many of these strategies are accommodations—they work around a child's differences by offering alternative approaches. Slowing the speed of a presentation for someone who is not alert is one example. Other strategies are designed to specifically strengthen a weakness. For example, a child with attention problems might benefit from a system of cues that help her ability to stay focused. From the strategies suggested below, select those that you and the child think might work best.

### General

**Allow longer breaks.** Extending the amount of time given for breaks (such as recess) can be beneficial, especially for elementary-school children.

**Use different methods of instruction.** Use verbal, visual, and experiential methods to enhance attention. Make frequent shifts between discussion, reading, and hands-on group activities.

**Accentuate important information.** Let children know when important information is about to be presented. Slow the speed of oral delivery, include pauses, and accentuate by intonation and gesture what is most important. Preview, repeat, and summarize important points.

**Have children discuss the lesson.** Take time during a lesson for children to talk to each other about the facts or skills they are learning, such as what strategies they are using to complete an activity.

**Be a coach or a mentor.** Make statements about how you schedule your daily activities and the positive benefits of such planning and scheduling. Be a check-in person with whom the child can share what he's accomplished.

### Mental Energy

**Provide preferential seating.** Seat children with attention difficulties close to the teacher. Make eye or physical contact to sustain attention. Tables grouped in clusters or staggered desks allow for an unobstructed view of signals and easy access for physical contact.

**Provide frequent short breaks.** Breaks can be especially helpful during and between tasks that require intense concentration—and sometimes not just for one student, but for the whole class. Throughout activities, intersperse brief breaks that allow children to move around. Encourage constructive movement tasks, such as collecting papers or erasing the chalkboard. At home, allow children to take a five- to ten-minute break to stretch or play with a pet after every 30 minutes of homework.

**Encourage physical activity.** Some type of physical activity helps children sustain their attention during classroom instruction. Doodling, squeezing a ball, rolling clay, tapping a pencil on one's thigh, or moving to a rocking chair can be helpful activities. Of course, these activities can't be disruptive to other children in the class.

**Find ways to make material less complex.** Use outlines, color, or organizers to help make complex activities or ideas more easily understood. Warn children in advance about what will be presented, e.g., tell the class that you will present five ideas, then present the ideas in stages and check for understanding before moving on to the next stage. Provide summary charts, partially completed outlines, or other aids to reduce the amount of mental energy required when working with complex concepts, ideas, or activities.

**Prepare children before asking them to respond in class.** Let children know in advance that they will be called on in class. Before the start of class say quietly to a child, "I'm going to call on you to answer the first question on the blackboard."

**Keep a diary or log.** Have children monitor their periods of effort and concentration with a diary or log. Children can create charts to track their improvement.

**Provide opportunities for high interest activities.** Set up a space in the classroom where children can go to build on their strengths. Use their affinity areas, such as computers or art, to enhance their alertness while letting them gain more expertise in that area.

**Use energy buddies.** Pair children so they can work together by providing jump-starts for one another. Children can take turns starting math problems or reading the passages of a text.

**Recommend a bedtime routine.** Talk with children about the importance of having a consistent bedtime schedule to help them get a good night's sleep. The use of "white noise" or background noise (e.g., soft music) to help filter sounds that might interfere with relaxing can sometimes be helpful to children who have difficulty getting to sleep.

**Monitor performance inconsistencies.** Keep track of the factors that seem to affect a child's mental energy. Help children understand the time of day and circumstances when they are most focused. Provide guidance on how to use, as well as compensate for, these highs and lows throughout the day.

## Processing

**Provide ongoing reference to information about an activity.** Write important points or directions on the board so that children can refer to them whenever necessary.

**Draw focus to important information.** Have children practice underlining or highlighting key words. Use color-coding to organize key information (e.g., green for main idea, red for details in reading, blue for essential information).

**Use technology.** Devices such as calculators, tape recorders, books on tape, word processors, and software programs may be helpful to children. These devices allow children to control how much information is being presented at one time and how rapidly it is presented.

**Provide outlines, maps, and graphs.** Give children outlines to help them preview the most important information in a lesson or reading assignment. Have them complete a map or web of the main ideas presented in a lesson. Use graphs or graphics to draw attention to the relevancy of information and help children understand why one piece of information may be more important than another.

*"A lot of the attention controls take place unconsciously. . . . The question is, if we make kids more conscious of these things, if we make them even more explicit than they now are, can they do a better job? Can they be more in control? I believe they can, and that we should be teaching kids about the attention controls, so they can be more in the driver's seat themselves."*

—Dr. Mel Levine

**Practice paraphrasing and summarizing.** Ask children to write a summary of a lesson in their own words, then review that statement prior to beginning the next class session.

**Promote listening strategies and build listening skills.** Give a strategy to use for listening actively, such as FACT (Focus attention, Ask yourself questions, Connect ideas, Try to picture important ideas).

**Focus on cues for important information.** Identify cues embedded in text or class lessons that children should look and listen for, e.g., "In summary. . .", "The five reasons are. . ." etc.

**Promote both bottom-up and top-down thinking.** Encourage children to start thinking about the details and work up to the big picture, as well as to start with the big picture and work down to the details.

**Promote collaboration between children.** Pair children who work well with details with children who prefer to think about the big picture. Encourage the children to talk to each other about the thought processes they employ when accomplishing a task or assignment.

**Use subvocalization.** After determining a key piece of information in a lesson, have children repeat it to themselves several times under their breath. Model the strategy for them.

**Connect new information to prior knowledge.** Pause during the presentation of new information and ask children how the new information relates to previously learned material or a personal experience.

**Break tasks into smaller steps.** Help children focus on important information by "chunking" assignments into smaller, more manageable segments. For example, have children highlight the symbol (+, -) in a math problem before calculating the answer.

**Encourage eye contact and repetition.** Have children practice making eye contact with speakers. Remind children by pointing to your eye or quietly stating, "Look at me." Ask children to repeat information, explanations, and instructions. For example, have a child repeat the directions that have been given for an assignment to check for understanding and retention.

**Use memory strategies.** Teach children to use strategies like imagery and elaboration to strengthen the depth of information processing. Attaching a mental image to an important piece of information, stating the reasons for its importance, and connecting the information to some prior knowledge or area of interest are all examples of memory strategies.

**Review notes after instruction.** Going back over newly learned information as soon as possible will enhance processing. Have children review their notes immediately after a lesson to make sure they got all the important points. Older children could tape record a class lecture, then listen to the tape after leaving class.

**Teach self-testing strategies.** Have children ask themselves questions they think might be on a quiz or test. When reading, have children frequently stop and ask themselves questions about information they have just read.

**Structure time limits to monitor children's processing.** Have children take notes on a reading passage for at least five minutes but no more than 10 minutes. Impose time limits for children who are overactive processors; require them to stop or redirect them, even if they are in the middle of a task.

**Use visual prompts.** Attach brief notes or visual images on notebooks or desks to help children be aware of their own processing. For example, a note might say: "Am I being too passive or too active in my thinking right now?"

**Teach children to prioritize.** Have children complete the most difficult parts of a task when they are able to focus, take a break, and then begin again.

**Teach and model internal standards.** Teach children how to use internal dialogue, or self-talk, to delay gratification when they are working on tasks that are not particularly interesting or gratifying to them. Ask them to brainstorm about rewards that will motivate them to work during periods of low interest and excitement.

**Cue children to upcoming transitions.** Let children know when a task is about to change and their focus will need to be adjusted. For example, "In five minutes it will be time to put your social studies work away and get out your math books." Keep a schedule of activities on the board the children can refer to.

**Use computer software and games.** Allow children to play subject-related computer games to extend attention, then ask them to spend the same amount of time focused on academic tasks.

## Production

**Provide models of assignments and criteria for success.** Give children a clear sense of how a final product might look by showing examples and sharing exemplary products (e.g., essays or drawings). For instance, make work from last year available and draw the children's attention to specific qualities of the work (e.g., "Notice that a good paper has a clear topic sentence."). Do not, however, compare children's work with that of peers or siblings.

**Build in planning time.** Give children five minutes of planning time before beginning an assignment. Provide guidance in effective planning when necessary.

**Use stepwise approaches.** Require children to break down tasks into parts and write down the steps or stages. Compile steps of frequent tasks into a notebook for easy reference during work assignments.

**Provide guidelines for self-monitoring.** Give children explicit guidelines for checking their progress along the way. For example, tell children that every five minutes they should stop and check to see if their plan is still working. Use a timer to signal when to start checking. Also encourage children to self-monitor following the completion of a task (i.e., ask themselves a series of questions such as, "What have I left out?").

**Provide pathways to success.** Let children who may not be able to articulate a plan, draw a road map to their final product. Possibly include a fork in the road showing the path to success and the path to failure. ...

**Teach proven strategies.** Provide children with specific age-appropriate strategies to use in checking work. For example, use COPS (Capitalization-Organization-Punctuation-Spelling) for proofing written work. Children can create a reminder card to keep on their desk or in their assignment book for quick reference to the strategy.

**Stress the importance of organization.** Have children preview an assignment and collect the materials they will need before starting it. Guide children in keeping their materials and notebooks organized and easily accessible. Emphasize the positive impact that organization and preplanning will have on the completed project or assignment.

**Let children wait to turn in work.** Instruct children to allow a day or two to elapse between writing a report and re-reading the report for quality. This will give children enough perspective to catch errors or add more details and produce better results in the end.

**Encourage self-grading.** Set a standard of work quality or criteria for success for children to follow, and allow them to self-assess the quality of their work before turning it in. If the grade matches the child's appraisal, give extra points for good self-assessment.

**Set goals and record progress.** Have children set a short-term goal, such as completing all homework for the week. Record the daily progress toward the goal so the children can observe their progress. Graphic recording, such as plotting their own line graphs, may be particularly reinforcing for some children.

**Eliminate incentives for frenetic pacing.** Remove any positive reinforcement for finishing first. State the amount of time a task should take. This will slow down children who work too quickly and will speed up children who work too slowly.

**Use assignment books.** Teach children to use assignment books and "To Do" lists to keep track of their short- and long-term assignments, tests, and quizzes. Use peers to help monitor other children's assignment books.

**Use a diary or tape recorder.** Have children note what went well and where or when they went astray during the day. Encourage them to identify some techniques that can be used to improve their production and include them in the diary.

**Provide consistent feedback.** Create a feedback system so children understand which behaviors, actions, or work products are acceptable and which are not. Use specifics to praise good work and recognize when children use strategies effectively. For example, "I like the way you elaborated in this description," or "Asking to take a break really seemed to help you come back and focus."

**Try a mentor.** Some children may benefit from a mentor who will work with them to dissect the day, brainstorm alternative strategies, and provide recognition of progress. The mentor must be seen as credible and may be an individual from within the school or from outside the school.

*"There's a timer set, and that timer will give me—give everyone—a chance to know when it's time to move on to something else or when a project is being finished."*

—Michelle Jones,  
second grade teacher

For more strategies to address weaknesses with attention, refer to the *Memory, Temporal-Sequential Ordering, Mastering the Challenge of Reading, Thinking with Numbers, Understanding, and Getting Organized* videos and guides in this library.