

When and how children focus on activities

Question from a group member - explain the outcomes related to concentration in simple English - the different levels of focusing on an activity.

Communication and language – listening and attention

Each age range for communication and language – listening and attention contains a short statement about how the child might be concentrating.

The statements are an explanation of the journey a baby takes from being unable to focus on anything for more than a few seconds to being ready to start school, demonstrating the ability to stay at a task for longer periods... 'when they are interested in what they are doing'... many experts would add.

	Typical behaviour	What does it mean?
0 – 11 months	Fleeting attention – not under child's control, new stimuli takes whole attention.	You observe the baby looking from one thing to the next, unable to concentrate on anything that is happening, especially if something new attracts their attention. The child has no ability to deal with distractions and has to look or listen when disturbed. For example, they will watch a toy or you singing to them but if they hear the door banging they will turn to look.
8 – 20 months	Pays attention to dominant stimulus – easily distracted by noises or other people talking.	The toddler will sort of listen to you – until something more exciting comes along. Toddlers are rarely able to sit still and concentrate for more than a few seconds at a time because the world is full of too other exciting things for them to look at, listen to and do.
16 – 26 months	Rigid attention – may appear not to hear.	You observe the child totally transfixed by what they are doing to the exclusion of everything else around them. For example, you call them to do something else and they appear to ignore you – they are not being rude: they are simply completely engrossed in what they are doing. It is how they learn at this age.

	Typical behaviour	What does it mean?
22 – 36 months	Single channeled attention - can shift to a different task if attention fully obtained – using child’s name helps focus.	<p>At around the age of 2.5 – 3 years, children’s levels of concentration start to change. They can sit for longer when reading books or singing songs and, as long as you have their full attention, they will look at you and listen more carefully to what you are saying.</p> <p>However, they will still struggle to pay attention to other stimuli (auditory or visual) from different sources at the same time and you will often need to work hard to hold their attention.</p> <p>Grab their attention by using their name first... then you will find they can listen and do something – but usually only one thing at a time.</p>
30 – 50 months	Focusing attention – still listen or do, but can shift own attention.	<p>You observe the child concentrating on whatever they are doing, but they are able to move on and try other things if they hear you asking them.</p> <p>They are more likely to hear you because they are less focussed on what they are doing and more aware of others around them - this new ability helps you to teach them to share their time between different learning experiences.</p>
40 – 60+ months	Two-channeled attention – can listen & do for short span.	<p>Also known as ‘integrated attention’ this describes when children are more able to stay at one task for longer – auditory and visual - but still only for short periods of time (depending on the child).</p> <p>For example, they can listen to instructions about what to do next ... and do it when asked. Children are more likely to be able to be taught in a group by this age – but some children might still need support.</p>