

The Spy

Attention

About the Spy:

The Spy is the boss of your attention. They decide what is important to notice, and what you can ignore. They keep an eye on what you can see, hear, feel and think, and help you stay on track. If something needs your attention, they help you switch to it. When the Spy is doing a good job, all other parts of your brain can work better. That is because they are getting the right information at the right time.

When your Spy goes off mission

If your Spy needs some help, you might:

- Get distracted by things you see, hear, or think about.
- Drift off or “daydream” in class, when someone’s talking, or even during your favourite TV show
- Lose your place when reading or writing
- Forget what you’re meant to be doing
- Keep losing your stuff - like pencils, jumpers, or your phone
- Find it hard to stop one thing and start something new
- Get stuck thinking about the same thing and can’t move on
- Take a long time to get started, or find it hard to finish a job
- Feel like your head is crammed with too many thoughts to keep track of
- Make mistakes you know are wrong, but didn’t notice at the time

What you can do to help your Spy

- Sit somewhere with less to distract you – like the front of the class or next to someone quiet
- If noise bothers you, try quiet music without words
- A fidget toy or doodling can sometimes help you focus
- Keep your desk tidy so your Spy only sees what’s important
- Use a checklist or task board to remember what to do next
- Take short breaks to give your Spy a rest
- If you miss something, ask for it to be repeated or shown again - it’s always ok to ask
- Repeat important words in your head, or say them quietly to help you remember
- Write down ideas or things to remember in a notebook, on sticky notes, or on a whiteboards so you can come back to them later.
- Use your phone’s calendar, reminders, or alarms to help you stay organised.

Make sure the person is ready to learn these strategies. Remember, not every strategy works for everyone. When unsure, focus on what **you** can do to support the person

What other people can do to help your Spy

Getting their attention

- Get their attention before giving instructions – say their name, and wait until they are looking/listening
- Repeat important information, and ask the person to repeat it back
- Keep instructions short, clear, and broken into steps. They may need one step at a time.
- Give written instructions – if they missed what you said, they can read it instead
- Try and get their attention and speak to them when they are on a break, or clearly already distracted, rather than interrupt them when they are focused

Maintaining their attention

- Reduce or remove distractions (noise, clutter, visual busyness)
- Give gentle reminders or visual prompts to bring attention back.
- Give movement breaks, fidgeting or doodling if this helps their attention
- Check in during tasks. They may have missed what to do but be too unsure to ask
- Give short, regular breaks, and work in short bursts
- Avoids tasks which require them to divide their attention. They might find it really challenging to listen *and* take notes, to talk to someone *and* do a task or game. Think about tasks to avoid asking them to do two things at once.
- They might find it easier to focus on something if they can use more senses at once – if they are hearing, seeing, touching, or doing it, not just listening or watching.
- It is easier to focus on things you enjoy – try and use their interests if you can.
- Attention is like lifting a heavy weight – if you're getting lots of praise, there is a reward, or you know it is really important, you'll likely be able to hold it for a little longer than you thought. Giving them lots of support, praise, rewards and an idea as to why something is important may help them stay focused for a *little* longer.

Practical changes

- Make sure people know **how** they ask for help. Remember – this might not be with words
- Give extra time
- Everyone struggles to focus when they are tired. Try and do tasks requiring more/longer attention earlier in the day. Ensuring they have a consistent bedtime routine may help them get a good night's sleep and maximise their focus during the day.
- Routines will help them know what's happening, so there is less to pay attention to
- When anyone feels stressed or distressed, they will likely find it harder to hold their attention. If they are stressed, angry, or upset, it is important to help them with this before asking them to hold their attention for long periods.
- Technology can be really helpful for attention, provided it doesn't become distracting itself. It can give reminders/timers to break and to refocus. It can be set up to give reminders to check you have your keys before leaving the house, alert you if you've left something behind, and tell you when you need to stop what you're doing because you need to get ready to leave.

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