

Working Memory for Parents

What is Working Memory?

Do you have to ask your child to do something over and over again for it to get done? Does your child often seem forgetful or have trouble staying on task? These are common issues with young children. That's because a key mental skill called working memory is just starting to develop. Working memory is a core executive function skill. This skill allows us to mentally work with information that is briefly stored in memory.¹ Working memory is important for doing daily tasks as well as learning.

Children use working memory when they follow directions that have more than one step; it helps them keep track of where they are in the process so they know what still needs to be done.^{2,4,7} For example, you may tell your child to go potty, wash hands, and put on shoes and socks. Your child uses working memory to remember what you have asked him or her to do. Once the first step is done (go potty), working memory helps your child remember what to do next (wash hands). This is how working memory helps children stay on task.

Working Memory & Learning

Working memory helps children learn to speak and read, and is important for problem solving.^{1,2,3} It is linked to school readiness, social skills,⁴ and classroom engagement.^{1,3,5,6} Children with poor working memory may have a hard time following directions. They may also have trouble completing tasks. These children are more easily overwhelmed and may become easily frustrated. This can cause problems in the classroom and make learning difficult. Working memory affects a child's ability to learn and is key for success in school.⁸

Supporting Working Memory in Children

There are many ways parents can support children's working memory. To prevent frustration, break instructions down into small bits that your child can do one-at-a-time.⁷ This will help reduce frustration. When you ask your child to do something, have him or her repeat the instructions back to you. This will help your child remember what you've asked him or her to do.⁷ You can practice working memory with your child at the grocery store. Ask your child to help you remember a few items from your list. As you move through the store, ask your child to remind you to pick up those items. This fun and easy task helps strengthen working memory. Finally, make sure your child gets enough sleep. Not getting enough sleep leads to poor working memory.⁸

Citations:

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