

How to...judge levels of attention

A child's ability to control and focus their attention develops gradually, in the way that other skills do. It is important when working with children to know if their level of attention is appropriate for their stage of general development and to adapt your input to match it.

This book remains the definitive source on developing attention control used by SLTs: Cooper, J., Moodley, M., & Reynell, J. (1979). *Helping Language Development*. Edward Arnold.

The Development of Attention

(Cooper, Moodley, & Reynell, 1979)

Level 1 (0-12 months) Attention is held momentarily by whatever is the dominant stimulus. Attention is fleeting and the child can easily be distracted.

Level 2 (Age 1-2) The child can choose his own activity and concentrate on it for a considerable amount of time. They will find any intervention by an adult difficult to cope with as they cannot attend to two sets of incoming information at the same time. It also breaks the threads of concentration so that the child needs to cut out all other events around him. The child may appear obstinate or wilful.

Level 3. (Age 2-3) Attention is still single channelled but the child is beginning to be able to shift his attention from his current activity to another event. He cannot therefore listen to an adult's directions whilst he is playing, but he can stop to listen to an adult and then shift his attention back to his original activity with the adult's help.

Level 4 (Age 3-4) The child must still alternate his whole attention between the speaker and his task but he now does so spontaneously without the adult needing to focus his attention.

Level 5 (Age 4-5) The child's attention is now two channelled. He can listen to and cope with spoken instructions related to his activity without interrupting his attention to his task. His concentration span may still be quite short. He can now be taught in a group. He needs this level of attention to operate well and get the most out of group activities.

Level 6 (Mature school entry) Looking, listening and doing are fully integrated. At this level, inattention is usually by choice.

Inattention at earlier levels may be by choice, but is usually because the child cannot.