

SELF-REGULATION

Topic 2: Attention

Attention is another skill that contributes to self-regulation for an infant or a child. Attention is our ability to sustain focus on a particular stimulus.

There are a number of reasons why the assessment of attention is complex:

1. Attention is **not a single skill**, and therefore performance in one attentional task will not necessarily predict a performance on another. Thus children who have the capacity for sustained attention when there is no distraction (eg, to attend to Nintendo for several hours) may not be able to sustain attention when there are competing stimuli or when the main stimulus is not highly engaging.

Perhaps the most important attentional skill for children of school age is the capacity to attend to non-dominant stimulus. For example, a child needs to be able to direct attention away from something engaging (a noise outside the window; an intrusive thought about worries at home) and towards a less engaging stimulus (what the teacher is saying).

2. Inattention can be **primary** or **secondary** eg, anxiety is a potent cause for decrease in attentional performance.

3. Not all apparently inattentive behaviour has anything to do with attention at all.
eg, a child with a language disorder who is not watching or listening to the teacher may be employing a more or less deliberate strategy to avoid the distress associated with not being able to understand what the teacher is saying. Thus, what appears to be the failure of a self-regulating function (attention) is rather attempted self-regulation in the face of hyper-arousal due to recognition of a cognitive deficit (more about this when we look at the third self-regulation skill, the *management of arousal*).