

## T.O.V.A.<sup>®</sup> Individualized Success Strategies: Home

### INTRODUCTION

One of the characteristics of an attention problem is the variability (inconsistency) of performance across settings and tasks, and over time. Do not assume that if there is high performance on some tasks that low performance on other tasks is due to low motivation and willfulness. Students do better on tasks that they find inherently interesting and stimulating. They tend to do worse on tasks that require sustained attention and are more mundane to them. They often have difficulty with tasks that require complex problem-solving strategies. There is continued difficulty with “executive processes”, strategies that are used to organize and monitor thinking and action. They may be “stuck” using strategies that are ineffective. Although they may be verbally adept, they may have difficulty with written assignments, or vice-versa. Tasks that require extensive fine motor skills may also be difficult.

The following strategies are helpful for individuals with attention problems. It is recommended that the person to whom the strategies are targeted be involved in choosing and implementing these strategies when appropriate. This develops ownership for the results and decreases resistance. These strategies are best used in conjunction with similar strategies in the school or work environment. It is recommended that open communication be maintained with teachers, health care providers, and the workplace, if applicable.

Please review the strategies that have been marked in the box beside the title. These are the current strategies to be implemented and practiced.

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## HOUSEHOLD STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZATION

Household structure and organization are vital to the success of individuals. Visual cues, consistency, and prior planning create an optimal environment for success. These strategies are best when adapted by all members of the family.

### Post Household Rules

Limited, visible reminders are useful. It is helpful to post important rules of the house in areas where they can be easily seen. Keep the rule statements short and to the point. For example, “If we use it, we clean it” and “We respect each other” are examples of phrases that can be used in a variety of situations.

### Post Daily Schedule

Individuals can better anticipate and plan for activities that require increased concentration when there is a posted schedule of daily activities. A visual representation will provide another opportunity to learn home routines. This will include important daily routines such as meals and homework schedules, as well as necessary self-care routines, such as showers and bedtimes.

### Organize Daily Routine

A daily check-in time at home to review assignments and organize materials will improve performance.

### Schedule Demanding Tasks at Optimal Times

Individuals can have problems focusing and controlling impulsivity throughout the day, while others have particular times of the day when they do much better. If possible, schedule the most attention demanding tasks when the individual functions best.

### Morning Routine

Mornings are particularly difficult for some individuals. It is helpful to plan the morning routine the evening before. Clothes can be selected and laid out, back packs checked and left in the same place by the front door, jackets and boots found, work or school materials gathered, permission slips signed, etc. Leaving fifteen to thirty minutes of extra time in the morning schedule can also relieve pressure. A tight schedule leaves little room for error and provides many opportunities for frustration. As much as it might be tempting, sleeping-in should be avoided since it results in a delayed schedule with tension and stress becoming a possibility.

Appropriate Work Areas

Some individuals more often complete their tasks when they are able to work in an area with few visual and auditory distractions. As an example, completing homework or work assignments in front of the television or at the kitchen table can be very difficult. In contrast, some actually attend to task better with some unobtrusive background sound and action. Described as “white noise”, repetitious background sound can mask or cover up potentially distracting noises like the dog barking or the telephone ringing.

Display Monthly Calendar with Important Dates

Display a monthly calendar with important dates (project due dates, exams, games, appointments) noted in some colorful fashion. Cross out past dates to help the individual track the current day’s commitments.

Create a Message Center

It can be helpful to establish a family message center where notes, phone calls, calendars and other communications can be stored and later found. In a similar vein, Caller ID (where names and phone numbers of incoming calls are recorded) can provide an invaluable service in making sure necessary communications take place.

Evening Routine

Follow consistent evening routines. Self-care, bedtime routines, and preparation for the coming day enhance the next morning’s outcome. Review the next day’s activity before bedtime. Create routine and structure to provide a sense of security in the home.

Clean Backpack and Desk Weekly

There should be a regularly scheduled time for cleaning out backpacks and desks at least once a week. This will improve their ability to find materials. It may, however, require the assistance/instruction of an adult or partner.

## PERSONAL SKILLS

Self-reflection and the ability to receive feedback are important skills for individual success. Practice these strategies as needed to develop insight, follow-through in tasks, and positive self-esteem.

### Verbalizing Mental Processing

Encourage individuals to think out loud when problem-solving. You will gain insights into their reasoning style and slow them down before they respond impulsively. This will tell you about how they see the world and you can begin to correct misperceptions.

### Paraphrasing Instructions

After giving directions, have them paraphrase the instructions. This will increase comprehension and ensure that the individual understands what steps need to be taken for task completion.

### Avoiding Fatigue

Our behavior and performance worsen as we get tired. Individuals often return home after a long day and do not feel motivated to respond to many demands. It is important to analyze the individual's energy levels during the day and attempt to have them do their work and other responsibilities before they become fatigued.

### Manage Frustration

Monitor emotional responses to chores and homework. You can help individuals deal with frustration by breaking homework or work into sections, teaching deep breathing, offering positive reinforcement, and demonstrating empathy. Seeking educational or professional help to develop these skills may be necessary if negative emotional responses predominate homework, work, and chore performance.

### Identifying Impulsivity

Acting impulsively before thinking through the results of behavior is a frequent problem. This often appears as a lack of understanding of cause and effect. Individuals may be able to verbalize the rules in place for behavior but have difficulty internalizing them and translating them into thoughtful behavior. Difficulties in delaying gratification contribute to impulsivity. Difficulty inhibiting or controlling behavior may be a primary manifestation and may be even more important than their ability to pay attention.

### Stop-Think-Talk-Do

Demonstrate this process out loud with examples. This teaches an individual how to “stop” before acting impulsively, “think” about the cause-and-effect relationships of the intended behavior, “talk” or verbalize to themselves or others what they will do, and “do” the chosen behavior.

### “I” Messages

Model the use of “I” messages. “I need this to be done before we sit down to dinner” may work better than “You need to do your work before dinner”. Using “I” messages to communicate needs and wants helps the individual take responsibility for thoughts and feelings.

□ Self-Evaluation

Provide opportunities for self-evaluation and self-reflection on a weekly basis. Choose a specific time each week to have the individual evaluate performance on tasks and social interactions. Review successes, frustrations and difficulties. Create a plan for the next week based on the self-evaluation. Include self-stated goals to increase the chances for success.

## DEVELOPING SOCIAL SKILLS

The development of social skills is a key factor for interpersonal success. The following strategies may be used to increase awareness of self and others, develop skills in group settings, and prepare for future stages of development. Some individuals may experience many social difficulties, especially with peer relationships. They may experience difficulty picking up others' social cues, act impulsively, have limited awareness of their effect on others, or display delayed role-taking ability. They may over-personalize others' actions as being criticism and tend not to recognize positive feedback. They may play better when their roles are clearly defined. These individuals may repeat self-defeating social behavior patterns and not learn from experience. Conversationally, they may ramble and say embarrassing things. Areas and time-periods with less structure and less supervision, such as the playground and parties, can be especially problematic. Implementing the following strategies together models teamwork and promotes success.

### Support People

Carefully create a support network of peers and adults who can help give cues about when to slow down and when to focus.

### Planning Activities Prior to Visits

It can be very helpful to pre-plan a friend's visit by discussing and listing the activities (such as games, computer use, outside play) prior to the friend's arrival. Help choose a sequence of events that would promote friendship and foster cooperation rather than competition.

### One or Two Friends at a Time

Since understanding social cues can be a significant problem, individuals are more likely to have a successful social experience if their interactions can focus on one or two friends at a time. The greater the number of social interactions to interpret, the greater chance a problem will occur.

### Pairing the Child with Peers

Enlisting the support of peers in the classroom and neighborhood can greatly enhance self-esteem. Pairing can take the form of being a "study buddy", doing activities or projects, or playing on the playground. Cross-age tutoring with older or younger individuals can also have social benefits. Expectations and time commitments should be fairly limited in scope to increase the opportunity for success and lessen the constraints on the pair. Periodically monitor and evaluate the pairing.

### Structuring Play Groups

Small play groups of two to four peers can help the individual develop more effective social skills. These groups are most effective if socially competent peers are willingly included in the group. The group can focus on activities that promote interaction and cooperation. Board games, collaborative projects, and frequent verbal interactions provide the greatest opportunity for learning appropriate social skills and controlling impulsivity. The individual will benefit most when particular social skills are identified and practiced prior to the activity and reviewed after the activity.

Identify/Rehearse/Practice

Quite often, individuals will continue to have difficulty with certain types of interactions on a regular basis. Difficulty in taking turns, over-interpreting others' remarks as hostile, personalizing others' actions excessively, and misreading social cues are common difficulties. Identify problem areas and role-play typical interactions involving these behaviors. Identify and practice positive alternative responses. Have the individual practice these responses during the school day and have them give feedback on the results. Identifying critical incidents that occur will provide insights for program planning.

Monitoring Social Engagements

Some children are very socially adept. Planning time away from friends and family to concentrate on homework or chore completion may be necessary. Setting an established time each day for study and/or chores can be helpful in scheduling and prioritizing tasks. Holding firm boundaries until tasks are finished is needed to teach task completion and to provide balance between social and task orientation.

Guiding Observation

A subtle way for the individual to learn social skills is through guided observation of their peers at play. Accompany them to a play area and point out the way other children initiate activities, cooperate in a game, respond to rejection, deal with being alone, etc. After some practice, children can go out on their own and report back on their observations.

## STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

The following strategies can be chosen to suit the needs of the individual and the family. Understanding the specific needs of the individual, practicing consistency in tasks, and individualizing approaches to problem solving create a positive environment for growth and relationship.

### Individualized Plans

Individuals can benefit when specific behaviors are identified and rewards/consequences are established. An individualized plan that emphasizes stimulating positive consequences on a consistent basis has a good chance of success. Consequences and reinforcement should be as immediate as possible. Changing the reward frequently is usually necessary. A major consideration in forming an effective behavioral plan is assessing what is workable on a regular basis. Some plans that require extensive charting do not succeed because of the difficulty of following through effectively within a busy daily routine. Keeping the plan simple and flexible are the keys to success.

### Eye Contact

Make sure that the individual establishes eye contact when receiving direction/instruction. This will improve understanding and follow-through on the task.

### Focus on the Positive

Individuals respond well to positive feedback. Pointing out positive behaviors and social interactions focuses the individual on what they do well. This encourages more appropriate behaviors and interactions.

### Prearranged Cues

Some individuals respond to a prearranged cuing system. In this system, the parent gives a visual signal (for example, touching the ear) or verbal phrase (“Remember, it’s reading time”) when a targeted inappropriate behavior occurs. The cue can remind the individual to correct behavior without direct confrontation or loss of self-esteem.

### Frequently Monitoring/Providing Feedback

Homework is often a difficult task, and it can become even more difficult when fatigued. Check frequently during homework and tasks or have them check with you. Consider establishing a point system (see below).

### Verbal and Nonverbal Encouragement

It is important to pair verbal praise with a reward system. This will help them associate good behavior with positive feelings, moving from a concrete reward structure to an internalized system. Encourage the individual to also write or say self-affirmations (“I can do this”). A simple nod, wink, smile, or touch on the shoulder is a good positive reinforcement.

### Oral and Written Directions

When possible, accompany oral directions with written directions and/or visual representations on the message board or refrigerator. Using both visual and auditory instructions can improve the completion of tasks and assignments.

## Planning for Transitions

Changes in the predictable routine can be upsetting for some individuals and can cause increased anxiety and impulsivity. They perform better when alerted in advance of transitions. When a change in an activity is going to occur, tell them a few minutes in advance of the coming change.

## Hands-On Tasks

Some individuals do best when tasks have a hands-on component rather than a task that is only thought about. Actual hands-on activities help to focus attention and increase understanding.

## Timers

Managing and regulating time can be extremely difficult for some individuals. They may think that they have more time than they really do. They may have difficulty waiting (impatience), and may not schedule enough time for planning upcoming events (time management). Using timers can often help them stay on task and more accurately gauge the time to allot to various tasks. Egg timers and digital timers provide visual reminders.

## Limiting Choices

Some individuals may be easily overwhelmed by the quantity of their possessions, especially clothes and toys. When making selections of clothes, it is important to simplify the process (and leave the room less cluttered) by removing out of season clothing from drawers and closets. This same process applies to toys, games and other objects. By rotating these items and putting some away for a period of time, there is less clutter and more interest when the objects are exchanged.

## Limiting Over-Stimulation

Visual, auditory, tactile, and/or olfactory channels can over-stimulate some individuals. If over-stimulated, symptoms and impulsive behaviors (“acting out”) may worsen. Some individuals may use excessive sugar and caffeine to increase energy in the short term and may become tired or irritable later in the day. Eliminate or reduce factors that cause over-stimulation.

## Providing Examples

Combine verbal directions with illustrations or demonstrations of the desired task. Using multiple modes of instruction increases the probability of learning the task. Showing the child how to do a chore and illustrating the desired outcome increases the likelihood of success.

## Limited Instructions

When a series of instructions is given, retention beyond the first few directions is difficult. The individual will be more successful when given directions one or only a few steps at a time. Information can be gradually increased with age and demonstrated retention and follow-through of instructions.

## Providing Redirection

Instead of talking to individuals continually about activities and behaviors that are inappropriate, point out appropriate alternative choices that are available. This will make the expectations clearer to the individual and avoid the negativity inherent in what might be perceived as criticism.

Use Available Technology

It can be helpful to use computers, videotapes, audio recordings, and other media to complete homework and work assignments. Balancing use of technology for homework and work with recreational use is important. Use cell phones to set alarms and reminder messages. Texts from parents can be used as reminders for appointments and deadlines.

Modify Tasks

Long and multi-step tasks—like cleaning a room, paying bills, or completing a lengthy homework project—are often overwhelming. When a series of instructions is given, retention beyond the first direction or two is difficult. After providing instruction on how to complete the task, it would be helpful to break the task into smaller parts. For example, instead of the perceived overwhelming task of cleaning the room, ask the individual to simply remove articles from the floor or focus on cleaning their desk. Then, move on to the next step, and so on. It is helpful to do projects together and to prioritize the tasks that need to be completed. Some individuals may misjudge the importance of certain tasks or try to complete everything at once and finish nothing at all. Schedule brief breaks after the optimum attention time period.

Activities Between Study Periods

Along with breaking up tasks, frequent breaks for a brief walk, a snack, a chore, or stretching exercises are helpful.

When/Then Statements

Statements, such as “WHEN you are done with your math worksheet, THEN you may watch television”, provide a clear and direct statement of cause and effect. Keeping directions simple and to the point increases the probability of successful performance.

Written Contracts

Use written contracts to document agreements. If needed, the contract can be used to remind and clarify the agreements. Contracts can be utilized in point systems and rewards. Positive and negative consequences can be spelled out in the contract. Each party should have a copy of the contract.

Staying Present Until Tasks Start

Some individuals may get distracted and not begin a task, even after receiving and seemingly understanding directions. Staying with the individual until they begin the task will increase the likelihood that the task will be completed.

Paraphrasing Directions

After giving directions, have the individual paraphrase what you have said. This will increase comprehension and provide an opportunity to confirm understanding of the directions.

Decrease Clutter

Decrease clutter as it can be a visual distraction and may contribute to feeling overwhelmed. Keep only needed materials on the desktop and in the work area.

Team Approach

Create a team approach by working with teachers, physicians, mental health professionals, and other support people.

Teacher Requests

Request a folder be sent home each Friday with all schoolwork and homework assignments that are due. Notes and grades can accompany the folder. Request daily posts on the school website, so that schoolwork and homework assignments can be tracked.

## REWARDS AND POINT SYSTEMS

Point systems and rewards provide consistent positive feedback to individuals. Designs that are simple and easy to understand work best.

### Frequent Feedback-Point Systems

Prompt rewards and verbal praise on a continual basis are most effective in changing behavior. A “point system” provides immediate reinforcement and appropriate rewards based on behavior and interactions. Individuals earn points for a variety of accomplishments, such as achieving prearranged goals that have been discussed and agreed to by the individual, or for any valued activity or behavior that occurs spontaneously during the day. Point values are assigned to various tasks/behaviors with some flexibility to increase points or give any assignment or activity a point value. Points are accumulated and cashed in on a reward menu. Points can be added on a continuous basis for a running total kept in a central area. This menu can be a hierarchy of reward activities based on the number of points. To be most effective, reward menus may be designed with the participation of the individual. The individual can request when to spend their points. It is important in any behavioral system that there be early success to maintain the individual’s motivation. It is sometimes helpful to begin simply to ensure that rewards are obtained during the week.

### Using Response/Cost Point Systems

A Response/Cost system includes gaining and losing points as a consequence for certain behaviors. Response/cost means that the individual will gain points for appropriate behaviors and lose points that have been accumulated as a consequence for inappropriate behaviors. Clearly defined positive and negative points are essential to success. Everyone involved should know exactly what to expect. The success of a response/cost system depends upon parental consistency in applying the agreed-upon positive and negative consequences. Working with a knowledgeable professional to create an individualized and effective response/cost system is advised.

### Engaging Charts/Punch Cards

It is important that behavior systems have a method for keeping track of points and goal attainment. Charts may be attractively produced. Punch cards, on which the parent punches a reward card when a goal is met, can be a vehicle for immediate reinforcement. Various games can be represented on the punch card, such as rounding bases to get to home plate, rounding a track to cross a finish line, or crossing a soccer field to score a goal. Involving the individual in designing the chart or punch card may increase their buy in to the plan.

## MEDICATION

Understanding the effects of medication and its optimal use maximizes the benefits to the individual. Consistent communication with health care providers ensures appropriate treatment and follow-through.

### Optimal Use of Medication

The different medications that may be used to treat attention problems have different peaks and durations of effectiveness. For example, attention usually improves within 45 minutes after taking methylphenidate, and the effects usually last for 45 minutes to 4 1/2 hours. Other medications are different, and it is best to check with the prescriber to determine the timing of optimal medication effects. If possible, it is best to schedule the most attention-demanding tasks during this medication window.

### Review Medications with Prescriber

Individuals grow and change over the course of the year. Students and adults may need the prescribed medication adjusted from time to time. Schedule regular medication reviews with the prescriber and take information on performance, social interactions and concerns to each appointment. Let the prescriber know if there are ups and downs in the day. Some individuals may benefit from a small dose of short-acting medication when they come home from school or work.

### Chart Medication Changes

Keep a chart of medication changes. Report negative and positive changes to the prescriber. Note side effects, including irritability, weight loss, tiredness, etc. Request a behavior rating and a new T.O.V.A. after each change in medication.

## OTHER TREATMENTS

Understanding the effects of other treatments and their optimal use maximizes the benefits to the individual.

Inform Health Care Providers of All Treatments

Provide your health care professional with information on all treatment strategies being used. Biofeedback, supplements, dietary changes, meditation, and other treatment strategies that are being used to improve attention and behavior should be included in the reporting process.

Understand Interactions with Other Treatments

Consult with health care professionals to understand potential interactions between medication and any other treatment, such as biofeedback, supplements, diet, and any other form of treatment.

Use Technology To Focus Attention and Reduce Impulsivity

Biofeedback, brain development programs, and stability ball chairs are some popular forms of technology that have been shown to increase attention and reduce impulsivity.

Personal and Group Practices

Meditation, martial arts, yoga, and exercise programs are examples of strategies that can be done alone or in groups. These develop increased focus, "slow down" the mind, and reduce impulsivity. Each can be tailored to the needs of the individual.

Stimulants/Non-Prescription Drugs

Note the use of caffeine, nicotine, sugar, and non-prescription drugs. Provide your clinician with this information for comprehensive assessment and treatment.