

# How to Help Kids With Working Memory Issues

## Supportive strategies

Rae Jacobson

**P**roblems with **working memory** — the ability to keep in mind the information you need to complete a task — affect kids both in and out of school. But there are things parents can do and strategies kids can learn that can help them succeed, even if it doesn't come automatically to them.

### Get to know your child's limits

If you've given your child what feels like a **reasonable set of instructions**, but he keeps getting off track, it's a good sign that he's reached the limits of his working memory. Tuning in to when — and how often — he starts to lose the thread will help you get a clearer picture of your child's capacity to hold information. Once you know where his limits lie, you'll be able to use that as a guide for giving effective directions.

For example, if you notice your child has a hard time following multi-step directions, try breaking tasks down into smaller, more manageable steps:

- **Don't:** give a string of instructions, like "Go put your toys away, then put the bike back in the garage, wash your hands and let your sister know it's time for dinner."

- **Do:** Try focusing on one task at a time: “We’re getting ready to have dinner soon. It’s time to put your toys away. When you’re finished, let me know and I’ll tell you what to do next.”

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### Break it down

Schoolwork that seems simple on the surface may actually require *a lot* of working memory. With kids trying to tackle too much at once it often translates to sloppy — or unfinished — work and creates anxiety. **Teasing out the micro-tasks** will help you and your child break the assignment down into manageable parts.

For example, if your child is writing an essay he’s using his working memory to recall important information, generate and **organize ideas**, use correct spelling and grammar, and even make sure his writing is legible. Trying to think through everything at once can clutter up his mental scratchpad. Instead encourage him to approach one task at a time:

- Generate and write down major ideas
- Examine the information and create a thesis statement
- Outline the structure
- Write a rough draft (don’t worry about spelling or punctuation)
- Edit and polish

Breaking homework assignments or study sessions down into manageable chunks will help your child avoid cognitive overload, work more effectively and develop good study habits.

Helping kids get into **routines** is essential for helping with working memory.

“Routines are the goal,” says Linda Hecker, MEd, the lead education specialist at the Landmark College Institute for Research and Training. “When we’re able to automate a task it no longer requires working memory to function.

Remembering what to do next takes up cognitive workspace — and that’s not necessary.” Here are some tips for **creating routines**:

- **Be consistent:** Routines should be just that — **routine**. Find a pattern that works and stick with it.
- **Be patient:** It takes time to **build effective habits**, and distractions happen. Don’t expect kids to get it right away. Offering reminders and praising your child’s efforts to stay on course will help him stick with the routine until it sinks in.
- **Use verbal and visual cues:** Help kids internalize routines by adding verbal and visual backups.
  - For example, visual clues could be: Drawing a picture to illustrate how an essay is structured, writing out the order of steps for a math problem, using post-it notes as reminders around the house
  - Verbal cues could range from saying each task out loud before he does it, “Step 3, put my homework in my backpack for tomorrow...” to making up a song or poem to help him commit important information — like commonly used math formulas or the names of all 50 states — to long-term memory.

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### **Outsource**

Not everything needs to be remembered. Tools like to-do lists, organizers and reminders free up vital “workspace” and make it easier for kids to remember important information. “Externalizing organizational tasks takes some of the pressure off working memory,” explains Hecker. “I encourage my students to

write everything down — assignments, ideas, anything they want to remember later.”

But remember, organizational tools only work if they’re used. Help your child find the tools that work for him and make the tools part of his routine.

“Kids often truly believe that they’ll remember information later on, so they don’t write it down,” says Dr. Matthew Cruger, senior director of the Learning and Development Center at the Child Mind Institute. Then later, when they can’t remember all the things they need to finish the homework assignment, they’re frustrated and embarrassed.

But the next day the same thing happens again. They’re sure they can remember what they need to do — right up until they can’t.

Help your child get into the habit of writing down important information — **homework** assignments, dates for field trips, his brilliant idea for building the best robot ever — right away, even if he thinks he’ll be able to remember it.

## Medication

“Medications that enhance attention can help with working memory,” explains Dr. Cruger. **ADHD medications** don’t treat working memory issues, but they do reduce distractibility and increase focus, which makes it easier for kids to access their working memory. But Dr. Cruger notes, “It’s still essential to provide clear direction and manageable instructions.”

## Gaming

Researchers are studying if methods like **brain training** can actually improve working memory capabilities. As research expands, we may learn more about the effectiveness of these strategies, but at the moment the long-term benefits

aren't clear. Computer games, apps and memory games can be used alongside other strategies, but it's important to stick with established supports as well.

## The bottom line

For now the best way to help kids with working memory issues is to focus on creating and practicing healthy, effective coping strategies. Creating routines, using tools and offering support will help your child develop strategies he'll be able to fall back on for the rest of his life.

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