

# Attention Problem or Sound Processing Problem?

By R.N. Whitehead

**A** student is able to concentrate on his or her work in the classroom, but as the noise level increases, ability to concentrate decreases, and attention wanders. Sound familiar?

Many parents and teachers might be forgiven for concluding that the child has an Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). However, in this case, the student suffers from a disorder called Central Auditory Processing Deficit (CAPD). An abundance of research (such as a 1991 study done at the University of Western Ontario by Jerome and Ivey) points to significant differences between these two disorders. Despite this, many teachers and school administrators are unaware of the latter and its effects on students.

Children with CAPD may not have actual hearing problems, as identified by standard hearing tests. The problem may lie in the child's ability to identify and route sounds so that they can be processed and integrated for understanding and retention.

In other words, something goes wrong between the hearing of sounds by the ears, and the understanding of them by the brain. If the central auditory processing system fails in whole or in part, there are many ways in which this becomes evident. The student may:

- not be able to appropriately monitor his or her learning environment and may appear distractible
- be unable to pay attention or understand in a noisy environment such as the classroom
- be unable to remember verbal information beyond one item
- appear to be distractible, fidgety, and unable to concentrate.

Children experiencing difficulty with this process often do not hear instructions and may not respond to the teacher's requests. It may appear that



this student is ignoring the teacher, but in reality he or she is just not monitoring the environment as well as the average student.

Such a student may begin by listening to the teacher, then some noise intrudes (a pencil dropping or another student coughing), and the student with a CAPD responds by paying attention to the sound of the cough or pencil, instead of the teacher.

The problem is that most children do not recognize that they have stopped listening. They just drift from one thought to another until the teacher's voice rises above the distracting background noises. This would then cause the student to suddenly "wake up" and begin to listen again. Unfortunately, the student has missed some of the information and is now falling behind. Much of what her or she does hear doesn't make sense!

Surprisingly, all this can be happening to a student who is actually hearing perfectly. If you were to test this student's hearing only, you would get a clean bill of health. This might lead assessors to assume that the student is suffering from ADD. The downside of such a misdiagnosis is that it could lead to stimulant medicine being used needlessly.

As teachers and parents, we must encourage the child to tell us when he or she doesn't understand. Make sure that you attach no guilt or anger to the interruptions this may cause. Unless the child feels totally safe, he or she may not tell you and may merely pretend to understand or may just drift.

It is important to always be supportive if the student does not understand. Remember that your child may not be ignoring you intentionally. Repeat instructions using different words when necessary. Also try to simplify your instruction and to keep background noises to a minimum.

Encourage discussions about what has and has not been understood. Keep the concept of Right or Wrong out of these discussions! The child did not do anything wrong. He heard what was said in the only way he could.

Identification of CAPD is valuable in that it allows the instructor to coach the student in a manner that is most appropriate and provides the student with an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of his own metacognitive process.



As the CAPD student understands how he or she learns, it will be easier to deal with and overcome the deficit. The personal gain will be evidenced not only in improved marks but also in a feeling of self-confidence, which is essential in the learning process.

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