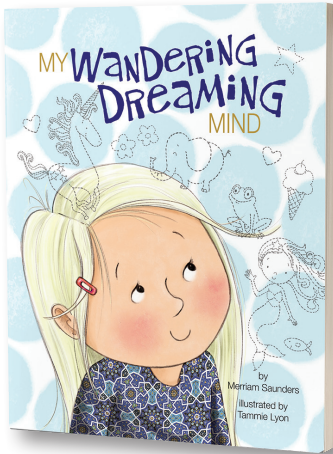




AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Supporting Your Child With Attentional Issues

by Merriam Sarcia Saunders, LMFT



This excerpt from *My Wandering Dreaming Mind* by Merriam Sarcia Saunders, LMFT, provides strategies you can use to help your child focus on the positive and keep trying when their efforts don't quite go the way they hoped.

You can purchase the full book with 20% off and free domestic shipping [here](#). Enter code **MPKIDS20** at checkout.

The invisible problem

A child with attentional issues is typically unaware when they are daydreaming or forgetting, so they are unable to prevent it. When a child experiences constant correction for executive functioning that is outside their control, they may begin to internalize the frequent reprimands. So, if the behavior is undesirable, they conclude that they must also be undesirable.

Focus on genuine positives

It's well established that motivation to change behavior is far more impacted by praise and positivity than by criticism and negativity. Setting expectations and noticing even small, positive things a child does every day can empower them to want to meet those expectations. For a child with attentional issues, it can be empowering to point out that their brain sometimes operates differently, which is why they may struggle, but because children often find alternate ways of coping, sometimes drawbacks of executive functioning issues can be flipped to a positive. But—children have great radar and can sense when an adult is inauthentic! It's important to provide positive feedback that is genuine and unique to your child.

- Think about the way your child moves through the world. Are there behaviors like daydreaming that can be thought of positively—such as being curious or imaginative?
- Emphasize those positives by encouraging activities that strengthen them. If they are curious, what are they curious about? If checking out library books on the topic isn't an option, try helping your child research the topic online or reach out to family or friends who might know about it. Note aloud the amazing things your child's curiosity uncovers.

- If your child is forgetful, perhaps it is because their mind is so busy! Ask your child what's on their mind—you may discover something you didn't realize, and you'll help them begin a practice of self-awareness by being mindful of their thoughts and behavior.
- If they daydream, you may find that their imagination is a spectacular thing, filled with creativity and joy. Perhaps they are artistic or tell wonderful stories. Give them a sketchbook to draw or record their stories. Dive into their imagination with them.
- Look for real life examples of how your child's positive qualities can make a difference in the world, such as Madame Curie's curiosity winning her the Nobel Prize, or Neil Armstrong's risk-taking sending him to space!
- For every corrective comment, incorporate a practice of sandwiching it with positives. "You are so observant! But now is not the time to be noticing the birds, we are doing letters. Later you can tell me all about your awesome detective powers and what you noticed the birds doing."

Allow them to try—and fail

Feeling confident comes from working toward something. A child with learning and attentional issues often struggles with the "doing" part. They may have been watching the birds and missed an instruction! It can be tempting for the rushed grown-up in their life to simply do the task for them. But they will have a harder time developing confidence in their own abilities if they aren't allowed to "do."

- Make sure they understand the steps, and then let them try.
- Praise their attempts, especially because you know it's hard for them. Praise for effort will motivate them to take a risk and try again, even if they don't succeed.
- Foster a growth mindset—believing that with practice, an ability will improve over time, and understanding that mistakes may happen along the way, but are sometimes also an opportunity to solve a problem.
- Acknowledge a mistake, and also point out times when things went right. "Yes, you forgot to do your math assignment, but you remembered to write in your journal. How did you do that? Let's come up with a similar way to help you remember to do your math."
- Notice your own setbacks aloud. Be open about—but don't overly focus on—your own struggles, with careful emphasis on how you overcome them. For example, if your child frequently loses things, relate it to how you sometimes misplace things, too. "I'm always losing my keys, but if I put them in the key dish when I get home, I know exactly where they are! Let's figure out how you can easily find your shoes!"

With praise and effort, encouragement to push past mistakes, and a reframe of the negative, your child will come to feel—despite the struggles—that they are, in fact, the amazing child you know them to be!

This Article's Author

Merriam Sarcia Saunders, LMFT, is a psychotherapist who specializes in helping families of children with autism spectrum disorder, AD/HD, and learning disabilities. She lives in Northern California.