

Dealing With Distractions

Mother looked around her dining room. Sally was curled up on the sofa, balancing her LightUnit on her knees. Roland was propping his head with his hands, as he lay on the carpet. Mike was tapping his pencil on the window ledge as he gazed at the John Deere plow inviting birds to lunch. Little Maribeth was swinging her legs from the chair at the dining room table, trying in vain to write neatly without having her feet on the floor. Maybe this idea of allowing the students to study wherever they please isn't the best approach after all, thought Mother.

What are some basic strategies for preventing distractions and providing the best possible opportunities for effective studying? Proper preparation for study plays an important role in receiving the greatest benefit from time spent studying, and in keeping distractions to a minimum. Three elements of preparation deserve special attention: physical preparation, environmental preparation, and mental preparation.

A. Physical Preparation

Students need to be rested and alert to concentrate. When the posture slumps, eyelids droop, enthusiasm declines, or the student stares at the page for several minutes and is obviously thinking about something else, you may want to give him a rest period and resume studies later.

Three keys to physical preparation are adequate rest, nutrition, and exercise. Establish a bedtime schedule to enable the student to get sufficient rest. Provide a nutritious meal before they begin their schoolwork. Send students outside for recess periodically. (Younger students need more frequent breaks than older students.) Short, frequent breaks are more effective aids to good concentration than longer, infrequent breaks.

Homeschoolers enjoy the flexibility of allowing students extra sleep or an afternoon nap on days following late nights. Flexibility in your schedule also means you can release drowsy students for ten or fifteen minutes of play, or some form of recreation—a good means of refreshing the mind. Some students may require a mid-morning snack to refuel.

Caution: Be careful not to allow excessive breaks and too much outside recreation during normal public school hours. Neighbors or other authorities might notice and get the opinion that you do not take homeschooling seriously. This caution should also be exercised when taking your students to town during normal public school hours.

B. Environmental Preparation

1. Provide a Properly Fitting Desk or Office

The student's legs should not be swinging in midair, nor should his knees be polishing the underside of the desktop. To aid concentration, the table the student is working at should be stable and of the proper height.

2. Regulate Temperature, Light, and Atmosphere

A room that is either too hot or too cold does not provide an ideal study environment. Fresh air and good lighting are important elements for successful studying.

3. Prepare a Suitable Student Area

The student's study area should provide him with a good pencil, erasers, ruler, and tissues. It should also include a protractor and a compass (when the time comes that he needs them). Students should have a comfortable chair and enough room for the materials they need for each work session. You may wish to allow students to decorate their study area, providing these things do not cause distractions.

4. Eliminate Noise in the Work Area

A quiet work area is important. Some students can tolerate certain kinds of noises. Some types of study can take place with a degree of background noise. Parents should be sensitive to each student's needs and do everything within reason to keep noise down. A student who is sensitive to noise distraction may study better in a room by himself; however, this can sometimes foster daydreaming, if the student is easily distracted.

Should you prohibit whispering, tapping on desks, humming, and singing during study times, or the play of younger students in the school area? Discover the needs of each student and tailor your school environment to those needs as nearly as possible. Remember, however, that living with a certain degree of background activity and noise can stretch the concentration muscles, and that a high sensitivity to distractions may indicate a lack of internal motivation.

C. Mental Preparation

Since study is primarily mental exercise, ideal physical and environmental preparation may not necessarily produce effective studying. But an inner motivation to learn will overcome significant obstacles. How can we help students prepare mentally to study? Try these suggestions:

1. Find Value

Once students recognize value in their subjects, they will be more willing to work. One teacher comments, “When I was in elementary school, I despised writing. Now as I try to communicate truth in print, I am glad for the training I received.”

2. Seek Personal Discipline

Perhaps students cannot convince themselves of the value of a particular area of study (“When will I ever need the Pythagorean theorem?”). Yet, they can see the importance of studying and learning, and the self-discipline they learn by sticking to their work. Persevering, when one can recognize no immediate personal benefit, builds the kind of character that works for others or for a common good. Help students see difficulties as challenges, rather than hardships.

3. Seek God’s Approval

Encourage students to desire God’s smile of approval, even above that of their parents or teacher (see 2 Timothy 2:15).

4. Pray

Encourage your students to pray about improving their concentration and desire to learn.

5. Teach Respect

Help students maintain a respectful attitude toward you; a lack of respect not only dishonors God but also interferes with the student’s ability to learn.

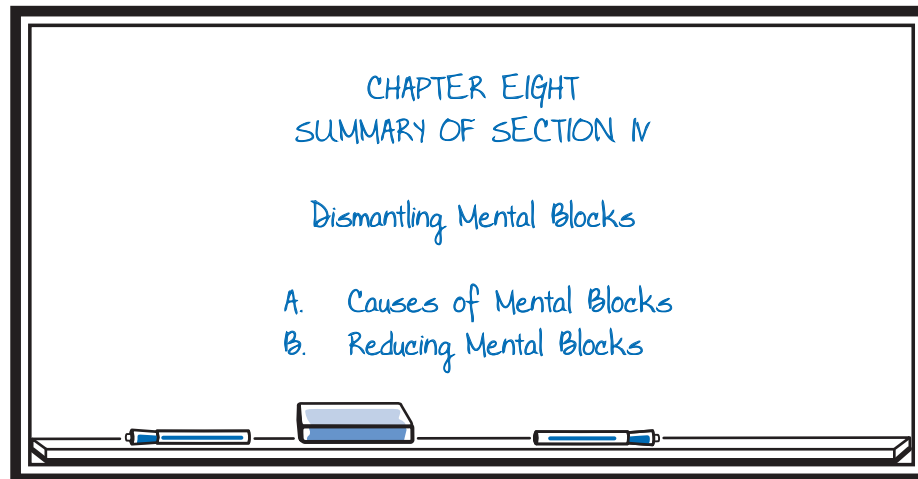
6. Maintain Peace

Peaceful relationships leave the mind free to learn without the hindrance of emotional upheaval.

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Dismantling Mental Blocks

When a student says, “I just can’t do it,” we may wish we were misunderstanding him! Is our little scholar being lazy or bluffing, or is he really grappling with something beyond his ability? Whatever the situation, we want to help him say, “I will try. I think I can do it.”

Certain assignments, materials, or situations in the student’s life may lead to mental blocks. We can recognize these and often avoid them. We have listed some causes of mental blocks below. Following these are some suggestions for creating a “block-free” learning atmosphere and for dealing with the blocks to learning when they do arise.

A. Causes of Mental Blocks

1. Many Pages of Reading or Long Lessons

Long assignments may overwhelm students, especially the slow reader or the student who struggles with concentration. Some students may benefit from devoting a manageable block of time to math in the morning, turning to other subjects, then returning to math later in the day. Completing their math in smaller time segments during the school day may be better than saving another large block of time for math homework in the evening. Watch the length of vocabulary lists for first graders. Break assignments into smaller parts.

2. Illogical Sequence in Explanations

Writers may leave materials out, assuming that the student already has knowledge or understanding of them. When this happens, the student may find it hard

to follow directions or explanations of procedures. Previewing materials during lesson preparation will help you anticipate problem areas. Asking your student to explain the instructions to you, can help show you if there is something he does not understand.

3. *Unrelated Facts*

Students may find it difficult to remember and use facts, rules, or concepts that are presented in isolation, as though they were unrelated to the other materials they are studying. Sometimes these may be drilled for memory, or you may be able to show the relationship between the new concepts and what the student already knows.

4. *Grade Placement*

Placement at the proper level is important for reducing mental blocks. If a student has been placed in materials that require reading skills above his ability, he will be frustrated.

5. *Boredom*

Following the same order of subjects, and the same method of teaching causes apathy. For example: reading and exercises, reading and exercises, or lecture, lecture, lecture. This hinders comprehension of new or difficult materials. Change the teaching techniques and procedures from time to time. Schedule breaks for the student to get exercise, or to do something hands-on. Plan experiments or demonstrations to vary learning activities.

6. *Tiredness*

Students who are tired will not be able to concentrate. Parents can help them by seeing that they get proper rest. Planning a lighter load the first day back from vacation can help prepare them for getting back to a full load. Students are often more alert in the morning and ready to tackle those difficult subjects.

7. *Laziness*

Too often the problem may be laziness. A key for detecting laziness is by comparing what the student will do when offered extrinsic rewards with what he will do on the basis of intrinsic motivation. Laziness is a motivational problem, which shows that the student lacks purpose. It needs to be dealt with by the words and actions of a parent who is diligent in his own responsibilities. Showing the student that you care for him, accept him, and have confidence in him can all help to build a sense of purpose. Reinforcing diligent work with praise and privileges is a great encouragement to the student.

8. *Complacency*

When students cannot grasp the value of the material they are supposed to learn, they will not be motivated to study. “I’ll never use this stuff,” will not produce an open, eager mind. Again, you may have to strive to demonstrate the “relevance” of the things students need to learn. Explain everyday uses of concepts. Discuss the importance of reasoning skills developed in the more abstract math lessons. Do some research to uncover evidence for the importance of good language skills. Have an “expert” give your students an introduction to his occupation (for example, carpentry, library science, or auto mechanics). Choose your expert carefully and ask him to explain the importance of an “I’ll never use this stuff” subject he studied in school. You might even be able to obtain a testimony from someone who failed to see the importance of school and later regretted it.

9. *Fear of Failure*

Students may experience real roadblocks to learning because they are afraid to try. It may be less painful to say, “I can’t do this,” than to try to do a task and fail. When they fear failure, students may say, “I can’t,” in hopes that parents will step in and do it for them. Repeated failure corrodes self-confidence; students begin to expect not to understand or succeed. Encourage them to keep trying by minimizing their failures and praising their successes.

10. *Turmoil*

Emotional or spiritual turmoil fragments the thought life. If students are dealing with guilt, bitterness, family conflicts, feelings of being unloved, or fear, the mind remains unsettled until these issues are addressed (though not necessarily completely resolved). Set aside an evening each week, or every two weeks, to discuss problems and work on solutions. Be careful not to use these times to criticize or lecture your student. Prayerfully approach him/her, purposing to lead the student closer to inward peace. Be patient and keep in mind that these things may take some time to work through, and that peace usually will not come all at once.

B. Reducing Mental Blocks

Following are some general strategies for reducing blocks to concentration:

1. *Prayer*

Praying puts you in contact with the Almighty One, who knows the situation completely and can bring solutions we do not think about. God can work in the mind and heart of both the teacher and the student, bringing right attitudes and gracious assistance where it is needed.

2. *Love*

Love your student toward achievement. Believe in him, be interested in him—not merely in his performance, but in his overall well-being. Students are motivated to work to please those they respect. When they know that they are important to you, they gain a proper self-esteem, which in turn inspires them to achieve the highest they are capable of achieving.

3. *A Listening Ear*

A loving, listening ear can work wonders. When students who are not ready to yield to Christ are carrying burdens, we can help them find rest by allowing them to confess to, or confide in, us. Older students need eventually to go to Christ, who will forgive them if they confess their sins. We want to be ready always to share with them in those times of confession and searching. When the heart is free, the day is brighter and there is a renewed readiness to learn.

4. *Enthusiasm*

Enthusiasm is contagious! Comment on things that interest you. Inspire your students by demonstrating the wonder of discovery, which will teach them to expect surprises. This will aid in keeping them alert and digging deeper.

5. *Godly Examples*

Characters in the Scriptures, who faced challenges and worked through them with God's help, demonstrate reliance upon God and build confidence that we *can* make progress by His grace.

6. *Proper Placement*

Students facing 50% or more new material will be frustrated. Ideally, students should be working through materials that are no more than 30% unfamiliar. Do not allow anxiety about advancement through grade levels hinder you from taking a student back through materials he has not yet mastered.

7. *Problem-Solving Skills*

Teach students how to deal with mental blocks to their studies. Teach them to read the difficult parts of the lesson again, making sure they understand the vocabulary, connecting previously learned skills or knowledge to current problems they need to solve. Have them begin by doing the things they know how to do and asking for help only when they really need it, rather than just sitting and staring at a page that seems incomprehensible.

8. *Simplifying Concepts*

Breaking complex concepts down into smaller parts can make them more easily understood. Illustrations are good tools for helping the student comprehend difficult concepts.

9. Logical Sequences

As you prepare your lessons, strive to make your explanations follow the most logical, natural sequence possible. There are several ways to organize information:

- a. By time sequence
- b. By steps
- c. By order of importance or appearance
- d. By cause and effect
- e. By physical placement or arrangement

Can you rearrange steps given in a textbook so that they will make more sense to your student? Have you been careful not to leave out steps in your directions or explanations? A beginner may not be aware of some steps that you are familiar with for the process. Ask students to repeat a sequence and watch for omissions in their explanations. Sometimes it helps to have a student carefully follow a certain sequence of steps (for example, in solving math equations) until he learns the sequence as second nature. Then he may be able to cut some corners. This is one reason we recommend that students write out their math solutions.

10. Improving Strategy

Do what is necessary to ensure mastery at each level of work. If your student struggles to finish each day's math lesson, you may decide that forty problems are just too many for him to complete in the allotted time, and allow him to skip his practice problems. After a few weeks you may see he is not getting the steps to the solutions firmly fixed in his mind; and it is taking him even longer now, because he has to go back to previous lessons to recall how to solve problems. You realize you have made a mistake! What shall you do? Admit your mistake and correct it—perhaps you could allow a longer time period, or have him finish the problems later in the day. Identify the areas of weakness and take one or more lesson periods to teach the procedures. Give your student extra problems and time to master the concepts, and then continue on.

11. Boosting Confidence

Plan for success. Teach good study habits. When you discover a difficult part of the curriculum, make a note of it and prepare to help students work through it. Point out and commend successes. Address failures sympathetically, but do not let failures upset you. Impatience about your student's failures tells him he is not "normal," or that he should be doing something he is not doing. Neither you nor your student is less valuable because of a failure. Capitalize on his strengths. Offer him extra opportunities to work in those areas in which he shines. Encourage the family "mechanic," or the family "vet." Let him know his unique skills are precious and wonderful!

12. Immediate Goals

Shorten assignments into achievable portions, even if it means setting two goals per day in the same subject. Completing goals gives students a sense of accomplishment. It prepares them to plunge into the next part of the assignment. Break long lists and several pages into segments. Timed word lists for first graders seem easier when half are read in thirty seconds, rather than doing all in one minute.

13. Conceptual Learning

When students learn concepts, they will be better able to relate facts that appear in isolation to concepts already known. New ideas will be better learned, memorized, and applied. Be careful not to overlook or omit items in the curriculum that are designed to develop conceptual thinking skills.

14. Variety

We have mentioned this before; however, it is important enough to mention again. Occasionally you may want to surprise students with an announcement that you are making a change in the routine today. This creates new interest and enthusiasm. Anticipation of an upcoming change of pace can be exhilarating. However, too many surprises, changes, or special activities may backfire. Do not create an expectation that school will disintegrate into play. You do not want anticipation of special activities to distract students from their daily work, or cause them to resent the routine.

15. Schedule

Plan to do strenuous work when the body and mind are the freshest. Concentration is best when there is not too much excitement and when the body is not too tired. Tackle the hardest subjects in the morning. Do not give tests immediately before or after vacations.

16. Study Habits

Teach students to find answers by making good use of tables, charts, dictionaries, headings, tables of contents, previous lessons, etc. Teach them to seek information on their own, rather than depending on you.

17. Repetition

Sometimes a student may have to repeat material: a set of exercises, a section in a *LightUnit*, or even an entire *LightUnit*. Do not let feelings of failure hinder you from having students repeat material when it is necessary. When a student scores less than 80% on a *LightUnit* test, refer to pages 9-23, 24 for instructions on how he can bring his score up to at least 80%.

18. Vision

Impart to your student the vision you have for him. Tell him how God used events in your childhood to prepare you for your life as it is today.

Your students do not know what God may have in store for them in the future. Understanding a certain mathematical formula may sharpen thinking skills a student will use in teaching his own students someday. A student may be dead set against pursuing a job that has anything to do with science. Later in life, however, he may find that his work brings him into contact with people who have backgrounds in science, and that his science studies have prepared him to better share his faith with them. A student's experience at ten or fifteen is inadequate to inform him of everything he may need to understand later in life.