

Understanding Montessori

The Kids Talk Way



Increasing Your Child's Active Working Memory

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"Is there something wrong with Henry?" Dee inquired about her four-and-a-half-year-old son. "Henry can only accomplish one task at a time. When I ask him to brush his teeth and put on his pajamas, he can do one or the other, but not both."

Dee was describing Henry's "active working memory." Henry was having difficulty keeping two or more tasks in his mind.

Neuropsychologists refer to three basic types of memory. Active working memory gives us the ability to stay on task and keep all the steps of a job readily in mind. Short-term memory helps us remember what we did today. Long-term memory helps us remember everything. These three types of memory interact with each other to enable us to learn and respond to any situation.

Visiting with Dee, I discovered that Henry had a strong visual memory. He loved to build with interlocking blocks and could follow the picture directions that came with each set. Henry enjoyed singing and had good language skills. Dee told me that Henry often didn't hear his name when involved with an activity. Having clues about Henry's strengths and weaknesses, I made the following suggestions to Dee.

- 1) Be sure to give clear and concise directions.
- 2) Be sure Henry is looking at your face when giving instructions.
- 3) Create "visual" memory directions if possible. For example, "Henry, brush your teeth with your blue toothbrush. Then put on your red dog pajamas. Can you see that in your mind?"
- 4) Ask Henry to check back with you after completing a task.
- 5) Use singing to help lengthen active working memory by singing songs like "Little Cabin in the Woods," "If You're Happy and You Know It" and "This is the Way We...."
- 6) For daily routines, such as getting ready for school or bed, make a sequenced picture list of each activity. Magazine cutouts or photos of Henry could be used. For bedtime routine have pictures of the bathtub, pajamas, toothbrushing, reading a book, prayers and lights off.

A request for Henry to put on his shoes and coat might go like this:

"Henry. Look at me please. Please put on your shoes and coat. Then come back into the kitchen. Do you have a good picture in your mind of what you need to do? Right, black shoes and red coat. Then come back. Thank you."

"What's Missing?" is a fun memory game. Gather five or six items and a small towel to cover them. Name the items-spoon, fork, pencil, eraser, cup and saucer. Cover the items and ask your child to count to ten with his or her eyes closed. While he or she is counting, remove an item and place it behind your back. Uncover the items, and ask, "What's missing?" Continue to add an item or two a day, or take away two or more items at a time to challenge and increase active working memory.

Kit Carson, the famous American frontiersman, was reported to recall over 100 items after viewing them for a minute. Our brains have tremendous capacity for active working memory. Help your child's memory and independence by playing memory games and giving instructions with multiple steps.

Next week: We Have Two Seconds To Change Behavior