

8 Working Memory Boosters

By Amanda Morin

Used with permission of Understood – www.understood.org

AT A GLANCE

- Working memory refers to how we hold on to and work with information stored in short-term memory.
- Kids use working memory to learn and follow directions.
- Working-memory boosters can be built into your child’s daily life.

Does your child have a hard time keeping one bit of information in mind while he’s doing something else? For example, if he’s helping make spaghetti and the phone rings, does he forget he needs to go back and keep stirring the sauce? If he often has trouble with such tasks, he might have working memory issues.

Working memory refers to the manipulation of information that short-term memory stores. (In the past, the term “working memory” was used interchangeably with the term “short-term memory.”) It’s a skill kids use to learn. It’s needed for tasks like following multi-step directions or solving a math problem in your head.

You can help your child improve this executive function by building some working memory boosters into his daily life.

1. WORK ON VISUALIZATION SKILLS.

Encourage your child to create a picture in his mind of what he’s just read or heard. For example, if you’ve told him to set the table for five people, ask him to come up with a mental picture of what the table should look like. Then have him draw that picture. As he gets better at visualizing, he can describe the image to you instead of needing to draw it.

2. HAVE YOUR CHILD TEACH YOU.

Being able to explain how to do something involves making sense of information and mentally filing it. If your child is learning a skill, like how to dribble a basketball, ask him to teach it to you. Teachers do something similar by pairing up students in class. This lets them start working with the information right away rather than waiting to be called on.

3. SUGGEST GAMES THAT USE VISUAL MEMORY.

There are lots of matching games that can help your child work on visual memory. You can also do things like give your child a magazine page and ask him to circle all instances of the word *the* or the letter *a* in one minute. You can also turn license plates into a game. Take turns reciting the letters and numbers on a license plate and then saying them backwards, too.

4. PLAY CARDS.

Simple card games like Crazy Eights, Uno, Go Fish and War can improve working memory in two ways. Your child has to keep the rules of the game in mind. But he also has to remember what cards he has and which ones other people have played.

5. ENCOURAGE ACTIVE READING.

There's a reason highlighters and sticky notes are so popular! Jotting down notes and underlining or highlighting text can help kids keep the information in mind long enough to answer questions about it. Talking out loud and asking questions about the reading material can also help with this. Active reading strategies can help with forming long-term memories too.

6. CHUNK INFORMATION INTO SMALLER BITES.

Ever wonder why phone numbers and social security numbers have hyphens in them? Because it's easier to remember a few small groups of numbers than it is to remember one long string of numbers. Keep this in mind when you need to give your child multi-step directions. Write them down or give them one at a time. You can also use graphic organizers to help break writing assignments into smaller pieces.

7. MAKE IT MULTISENSORY.

Processing information in as many ways as possible can help with working memory and long-term memory. Write tasks down so your child can look at them. Say them out loud so your child can hear them. Toss a ball back and forth while you discuss the tasks your child needs to complete. Using multisensory strategies can help your child keep information in mind long enough to use it.

8. HELP MAKE CONNECTIONS.

Help your child form associations that connect the different details he's trying to remember. Grab your child's interest with fun mnemonics like Roy G. Biv. (Thinking about this name can help kids remember the order of the colors in the rainbow.) Finding ways to connect information helps with forming and retrieving long-term memory. It also helps with working memory, which is what we use to hold and compare new and old memories.

Memory-boosting tricks and games are just some of the ways to help your child with executive functioning issues. If your child continues to have significant difficulties with working memory, it might be a good idea to get an evaluation for possible attention issues. You may also want to explore tips from experts on topics like getting organized and managing attention.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Teaching your child ways to visualize thoughts can help improve his working memory.
- Card games and other fun activities can help build working memory.

- Finding ways to connect information can help your child with long-term memory as well as working memory.

About the Author



Amanda Morin is a parent advocate, a former teacher and the author of *The Everything Parent's Guide to Special Education*.

Reviewed by



Thomas E. Brown, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist and clinical associate professor of psychiatry at the Keck School of Medicine of USC.