About Learning Disabilities: What's an Auditory Processing Disorder?

If your child has problems understanding and following your directions, she may have CAPD - an often-overlooked learning disability.

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Keep instructions simple and pause frequently to improve your child's listening skills.

Do you sometimes feel that what you say to your child isn't sinking in? Does he often misunderstand you, have trouble following directions, or respond to your questions with "What"?

These are signs of central auditory processing disorder (CAPD), a learning disability that impacts the brain's ability to filter and interpret sounds. Children with CAPD have a hard time receiving, organizing, and using auditory information. They're able to hear, but fall short at listening.

Pegging the problem

CAPD usually shows up in the early grades, when children are required to become active listeners. Even before school age, however, there may be warning signs. A young child with CAPD is fidgety at story time and overwhelmed in noisy settings. Sound discrimination problems may cause him to mispronounce words. Later, he may have trouble with reading, which involves the manipulation of sounds.

If you suspect a problem with auditory processing, first have your pediatrician rule out hearing loss. Identifying CAPD requires tests by an audiologist, typically performed after age seven, when kids can understand the instructions. An evaluation should distinguish CAPD from ADHD and other disorders that share some of its symptoms. In some children, these disorders coexist - and learning more about learning disabilities is a must.

School strategies

These academic accommodations can be included in your child's Individualized Education Program. A teacher can:

- Improve classroom acoustics. CAPD makes it hard to screen out background noise. Adding bookshelves, carpeting, and drapes to a classroom absorbs the extra sound.
• **Provide attention prompts.** Seat a child away from windows, doors, and other sources of distraction. Periodically touch her shoulder to remind her to focus.

• **Streamline communication.** Establish eye contact and insert pauses to allow time for sorting information. Ask questions to see if the child is following the lesson, and rephrase material that has been misunderstood.

• **Use visual aids.** Jot instructions or key words on the board, and provide simple written or pictorial outlines.

• **Build in breaks.** Children with CAPD have to work harder than other kids to pay attention, and may need more frequent downtime to consolidate information.

• **Use a microphone and headset.** The teacher's voice is amplified through a microphone connected to the student's headset. This helps to focus attention on the teacher.

**What parents can do**

Many of the techniques described above are helpful at home as well as at school. Try these strategies, too.

• **Boost auditory attention with games and tapes.** Games like Simple Simon teach a listening strategy and provide a chance to practice. A story tape, such as *Peter Pan*, can have the same benefit. Each time Captain Hook sees the crocodile, have your child raise his hand.

• **Look ahead.** Go over the basic concepts and help your child learn any new words in upcoming lessons.

• **Develop routines.** Provide a structure to help your child focus in chaotic environments. Before going to his school locker, for instance, have him check his assignment book and list what he needs to take home.

Above all, teach your child to create the conditions she needs for optimal listening. By the time she heads for high school, she should be well-armed with coping strategies.