

# Age of Distraction: Why It's Crucial for Students to Learn to Focus

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Digital classroom tools like computers, tablets and smartphones offer exciting opportunities to deepen learning through creativity, collaboration and connection, but those very devices can also be [distracting to students](#). Similarly, parents complain that when students are required to complete homework assignments online, it's a challenge for students to remain on task. The ubiquity of digital technology in all realms of life isn't going away, but if students don't learn how to concentrate and shut out distractions, [research](#) shows they'll have a much harder time succeeding in almost every area.

"The real message is because attention is under siege more than it has ever been in human history, we have more distractions than ever before, we have to be more focused on cultivating the skills of attention," said Daniel Goleman, a psychologist and author of [Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence](#) and other books about social and emotional learning on [KQED's Forum program](#).

"Children I'm particularly worried about because the brain is the last organ of the body to become anatomically mature. It keeps growing until the mid-20s," Goleman said. If young students don't build up the neural circuitry that focused attention requires, they could have problems controlling their emotions and being empathetic.

**"It's about using the devices smartly but having the capacity to concentrate as you need to, when you want to."**

“The circuitry for paying attention is identical for the circuits for managing distressing emotion,” Goleman said. The area of the brain that governs focus and executive functioning is known as the pre-frontal cortex. This is also the part of the brain that allows people to control themselves, to keep emotions in check and to feel empathy for other people.

“The attentional circuitry needs to have the experience of sustained episodes of concentration — reading the text, understanding and listening to what the teacher is saying — in order to build the mental models that create someone who is well educated,” Goleman said. “The pulls away from that mean that we have to become more intentional about teaching kids.” He advocates for a “digital sabbath” everyday, some time when kids aren’t being distracted by devices at all. He’d also like to see schools building exercises that strengthen attention, like [mindfulness practices](#), into the curriculum.

The ability to focus is a secret element to success that often gets ignored. “The more you can concentrate the better you’ll do on anything, because whatever talent you have, you can’t apply it if you are distracted,” Goleman said. He pointed to research on athletes showing that when given a concentration test, the results accurately predicted how well each would perform in a game the next day.

Perhaps the most well known study on concentration is a [longitudinal study](#) conducted with over 1,000 children in New Zealand by [Terrie Moffitt and Avshalom Caspi](#), psychology and neuroscience professors at Duke University. The study tested children born in 1972 and 1973 regularly for eight years, measuring their ability to pay attention and to ignore distractions. Then, the researchers tracked those same children down at the age of 32 to see how well they fared in life. The ability to concentrate was the strongest predictor of success.

“This ability is more important than IQ or the socio economic status of the family you grew up in for determining career success, financial success and health,” Goleman said. That could be a problem for students in the U.S. who often seem addicted to their devices, unable to put them down for even a few moments. Teachers say students are unable to comprehend the same texts that generations of students that came before them could master without problems, said Goleman. These are signs that educators may need to start paying attention to the act of attention itself. Digital natives may need help cultivating what was once an innate part of growing up.

“It’s very important to amp up the focus side of the equation,” Goleman said. He’s not naive about the role digital devices play in society today, but he does believe that without managing how devices affect kids better they’ll never learn the attention skills they’ll need to succeed in the long term.

“There’s a need now to teach kids concentration abilities as part of the school curriculum,” Goleman said. “The more children and teens are natural focusers, the better able they’ll be to use the digital tool for what they have to get done and then to use it in ways that they enjoy.”

Some argue that the current generation of students grew up with digital devices and are much better at [multitasking](#) than their parents. But the idea of multitasking is a myth, Goleman said. When people say they’re “multitasking,” what they are really doing is something called

“continuous partial attention,” where the brain switches back and forth quickly between tasks. The problem is that as a student switches back and forth between homework and streaming through text messages, their ability to focus on either task erodes. That trend is less pronounced when the actions are routine, but it could have significant implications for how deeply a student understands a new concept.

“If you have a big project, what you need to do every day is have a protected time so you can get work done,” Goleman said. For his part, when he’s writing a book, Goleman goes to his studio where there is no email, no phone, nothing to distract him. He’ll work for several hours and then spend designated time responding to people afterwards.

“I don’t think the enemy is digital devices,” Goleman said. “What we need to do is be sure that the current generation of children has the attentional capacities that other generations had naturally before the distractions of digital devices. It’s about using the devices smartly but having the capacity to concentrate as you need to, when you want to.”

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