

ADHD COMORBIDITIES & RELATED CONDITIONS

Slow Processing Speed: Signs & Solutions for a Misunderstood Deficit

The concept of slow processing speed (SPS) and its effect on learning is still new, so parents should take the lead on working with psychologists, schools, and their own child to differentiate symptoms of ADHD from SPS and to manage delayed processing.

BY ELLEN BRAATEN, PH.D.

About 10 years ago, I became interested in a certain group of kids. Many of them had attention deficit disorder ([ADHD or ADD](#)) and some had other learning or developmental issues. All of them shared one thing in common: They had [problems with processing speed](#).

Processing speed is the time it takes for us to take in information, make sense of it, and respond. The information can be visual, verbal, or motor. Another way to define it is to say it's the time required to perform an intellectual task or the amount of work that can be completed within a certain period of time.

Because we place such a high value on doing things quickly in our culture, it is hard to live with a nervous system that needs more time to process information. Kids with [slow processing speed \(SPS\)](#) are usually assumed to be lacking in intelligence, but this isn't the case. My research indicates that processing speed problems cut across and affect many academic, behavioral, and emotional difficulties, with the largest group affected being kids with ADHD. In addition, research shows that 61 percent of kids with slow processing speed will meet criteria for a diagnosis of ADHD. Other information that has recently emerged from my SPS lab is:

1. **Boys are diagnosed with processing speed deficits more than girls.**
2. **Social difficulties** are common in about one third of the children, probably because social relationships depend on our ability to respond quickly to visual and verbal information.
3. **Language impairments were reported in about 40 percent** of our group, possibly because many children with reading- and [language-based learning disabilities](#) also have processing speed deficits.

[Read This Next: [What Is Sluggish Cognitive Tempo?](#)]

4. **Most kids with slow processing speed don't seem to outgrow their symptoms, and this is particularly true for boys.**
5. **Having a processing speed deficit is not the same as having ADHD**, but parents of kids who have ADHD and SPS often report that processing speed weaknesses are the most problematic symptoms. They report

that the ADHD label doesn't fully capture the upheaval, turmoil, and trauma generated by their child's inability to complete work in a timely fashion.

Does Your Child Have Slow Processing Speed?

Processing speed deficits should be evaluated through a formal assessment by a professional, such as a psychologist. The psychologist will give a battery of [tests to evaluate language, cognitive, academic, memory, and executive functions](#). This can be done through your local public school or an independent evaluator.

You'll want to make sure that the evaluation includes measures of processing speed and other timed tests. The most common measure of simple non-verbal processing speed is the Processing Speed factor from the WISC-V, particularly the Coding subtest, but any timed test will show how quickly a child can process information. The evaluator will also assess whether there are other underlying problems that can be addressed, such as ADHD, learning disabilities, anxiety, or depression.

[Self-Test: Inattentive ADHD Symptoms in Children]

Dealing effectively with processing speed deficits first requires an understanding of what it is. Once you understand that it isn't in your child's control to be the quickest one in the family or his class — and once you have a better sense as to why your child behaves as he does—the strategies for helping him become clearer. In some cases, just [understanding your child's deficits](#) can lead to improvements in his life and his relationship with you.

Coping with Slow Processing Speed

Getting a better sense of the problem is extremely helpful in coping with SPS. If you know something is going to take longer, it is not as frustrating when it does take longer. The most common strategy is to give kids more time to complete tasks. It is also important to determine whether your child has a co-occurring disability, such as ADHD or [anxiety](#), as you want to maximize treatments available for other conditions. Many kids will be eligible for support under an [IEP or 504 Plan](#). The best strategies include:

- 1. Smart use of technology**, keeping in mind that what works for one child might not work for another. Many children with SPS benefit from [dictation software](#), [text-to-speech software](#), and phone apps that help with time management.
- 2. Slot in break times during the day.** Multiple recess periods are good for kids with SPS to recharge and maintain their focus.
- 3. Give ample time to complete assignments and tests.**
- 4. Give finished models of longer assignments**, with explicit beginning and ending points for assignments.
- 5 Teach time management skills and how to tell time.** The [concept of time](#) is hard for these kids to learn.
- 6. Provide assistance with tasks such as note-taking.**

Advocating for a child is one of the most important roles parents play. You may find yourself needing to explain SPS to school personnel. If so, [approach the school as a collaborative partner](#). Eventually, you'll want your child to advocate for himself. Give him [information about his learning style](#) and the words to explain it.

Managing Slow Processing Speed at Home

Life at home can be stressful for parents of kids with SPS. You may feel overwhelmed and exasperated. Moreover, these issues often run in families, so you might find yourself struggling to get things done. Or you might be the opposite — a fast-paced mom with a slower-paced child. It's good to know how your own processing speed plays a role in family dynamics.

My research indicates that processing speed is a big issue in the home. The slower the processing speed, the more problems are reported with [chore completion](#) and daily life. When children with slow processing speed talk about family, they often report more negative relationships with their parents, at statistically higher rates than their peers. All these difficulties affect home life.

So what's a parent to do? It is essential to figure out where the problems are occurring. In my office, the most common complaint relates to homework completion. Working with the school is essential in determining how to make this better. Strategies can include [decreasing the amount of homework](#) or keeping to a set time, regardless of what is completed. Other helpful strategies include:

1. **Be more efficient** by keeping things in the same place and [doing routines the same way](#).
2. **Change the way you talk at home** by slowing down and giving directions in [smaller steps](#).
3. **Teach the concept of time** and how it relates to time management. Teach your child to read an analog clock.

Having a child with slow processing speed is burdensome at times, but it is important to remember that your child is working harder to keep up than kids who have quicker processing speed. Your child also has a lot to offer you. In a world that seems to be moving too fast for us to enjoy, he can teach us about the importance of taking extra time. These kids do well with tasks that require deep, slower thinking skills. Valuing that aspect of their personality will benefit them and the rest of us as well.

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