

Memory for Names

Is your child forgetting friends' names?



Is your child:

- Seeming unsure of his or her friends' names?
- Saying, "Sure, I have played with friends today, but I can't remember their names?"
- Likely to refer to friends by attributes like "he's a cute little fellow" or "my friend with shiny blue eyes"?
- Having trouble remembering names even after you practice?
- Acting like he does not know his friend from school?
- Being unable to recall the names of classmates?
- Never being the first one to say hello?
- Often being unresponsive when a friend or classmate says "Hi Johnny!"

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT

Some children forget the names of classmates, neighbors, and extended family members. You may find yourself reminding your child constantly, "That's Sarah from your class." Your child may not greet another child in response to a greeting.

He may be excited for school, but when a classmate says, “Hi Sam!” at the crosswalk he may not respond. Or maybe your child returns the greeting but is never the one to initiate an interaction.

Some children seem spacey or out of touch with others. They may wander around the playground counting rocks, oblivious to other children’s efforts to engage them. Physical play like tag may appeal to your child while more verbal interactions with peers do not.

Some children are like little professors, lecturing others about a topic. Sometimes children have excessive information about a certain topic, such as the Mesozoic era or WW I trench warfare. When asked about friends, these kids might say, “I haven’t had time to learn their names; I’m too busy doing my work.”

When asked about friends, your child may say that every single child in the class is her friend. Or your child may have a peculiar way of relating to other kids, saying something like, “I have 15 friends, one with brown skin and another with green eyes.” A problem with remembering names is particularly notable if the child’s skills are advanced in other areas. For example, a child who can speak in an advanced manner for his age but cannot remember anyone’s name is showing a concerning pattern. Sometimes, developmental milestones are met early in terms of motor or language skills, but social skills are not keeping the same pace. Some children speak in sentences at 9 months old or learn to read by age 3. Despite proclivity in these areas, deficits could be present in social understanding or social cognition. This pattern may indicate a delay in social learning in spite of adequate academic and cognitive learning.

CLINICAL DESCRIPTION

A child who struggles to know people’s names may have poor social skills, attention difficulties, or memory challenges. *Poor social skills* are indicated if a child is not forming age-appropriate relationships with peers.

It is noteworthy that children who forget important information about their peers are probably not forming strong relationships with them.

Even a child in kindergarten should know the names of a number of different classmates and be able to talk about what they do together for fun. Unusual descriptions like “my friend is a funny little fellow” could be scripted from a TV show or children’s book. Notice comments that do not sound like a child’s voice. Sometimes, children who struggle socially have difficulty conceptualizing relationships or understanding the value of them. These children may fail to acknowledge a classmate in another setting and may avoid peers on the playground.

When children have *attention difficulties*, look at their ability to focus on something for a reasonable period of time, even when that something is not very interesting. The ability to multitask or to pay attention in an environment requires the child to handle a number

of different sensory inputs and to ignore multiple distractions. For example, a child would need to attend to peers while as he is also listening to the teacher and completing seatwork. Challenges with attention may lead to difficulties making those social connections. If your child has ADHD, interactions with peers may be very uncomfortable. Many kids with ADHD also have social skills challenges, but the issues tend to follow a certain pattern. Kids with ADHD may be a bit abrasive, like a 'bull in a china shop,' and they may struggle with distractibility and forgetfulness [3,4]. With a little extra teaching and support (i.e. hang the class picture in your child's bedroom with names listed), your child should remember friends' names. A child with ADHD is not as likely to be uncomfortable meeting a classmate at the park or running into a friend at the grocery store.

The most likely diagnostic consideration for a child who can never remember classmates' names is an *Autism Spectrum Disorder* [1,4,5,6,7,8,9]. Very bright children whose social skills are developing at a slower rate than their cognitive and academic learning **may** have a mild form of autism. If your child can learn and remember a number of different things in class and from books but is not as interested in classmates, this behavior is a red flag for autism. Does your child love to read nonfiction but have less interest in character development in fiction stories? Learning about classmates, including their names, faces, and interests, is part of typical development that does not come automatically for children on the Autism Spectrum. It will be important to look for help if you notice your child is struggling with social development, social communication, and general friendship skills.

Finally, it will be important to look at *short-term or long-term memory* to be sure that your child isn't struggling across the board with encoding information into his or her memory. For example, a child who forgets classmates' names but can give the scientific name for many different dinosaurs probably doesn't have a general memory issue, but he or she may struggle with selective attention and social learning. A child who struggles with learning and memory in a global manner (in many subjects and situations) should be evaluated for learning or cognitive delays.

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR CHILD FORGETS FRIEND'S NAMES

Teach rhyming or association games to help your child remember names. Label pictures of the kids in the class with names and faces. Play a game with your child that involves seeing how many names he or she can remember. Talk about the children in class, and use their names frequently. Model this behavior for your child.

Put pictures of classmates with names and even some of the child's interests on your refrigerator. If your child can name all of the American presidents, he can learn the names of ten classmates.

Have playdates with children in class. Plan structured activities, like a Lego day, an art activity, or a trip to Jump Street. Enroll your child in structured activities that align with

his or her interest. Be careful with team sports like soccer, but individual sports like swimming, gymnastics and martial arts can be great for children who are learning social skills. The adult leaders in clubs and sports are an important component, and you want adults involved who are sensitive and flexible to the learning needs and learning styles of each child.

If you notice other social challenges for your child after providing lots of social outlets and opportunities, it may be time to consider an evaluation to assess for an Autism Spectrum Disorder. Significant challenges with attention can also have social ramifications. ADHD may be diagnosed if you find that your child's social skills are mostly age-appropriate and that the challenges are primarily due to inattention.

SIMILAR SYMPTOMS

If your child is struggling with a similar problem, not directly addressed in this section, see the list below for links to information about other related symptom areas.

- [Selective, Shifting or Sustaining Attention \(Focusing\)](#): difficulty with attention will often lead to challenges remembering things like names [2, 3, 4]
- [Perseverating](#): difficulties changing tasks due to excessive interest or focus on a certain topic. This difficulty is common in ASD and can impact a child's ability to remember information [1, 6, 7].
- [Executive Functioning deficits \(Organizing\)](#): difficulties related to planning, sequencing, or organizing information [2, 3, 4]
- [Processing speed](#): difficulties working quickly or within a time-limit. It is important to consider fluency in cognitive processing. A child may not remember information if he or she struggles to think quickly.
- [Memory & learning styles](#): a visual learner may struggle with names because it requires auditory learning – visual learners may benefit from labeling pictures or associating names with places or objects that are very familiar [1]
- [Social skills deficits \(Socializing\)](#): difficulties getting along with peers. Does your child stay on the outside of a group of people or play next to other kids rather than with other kids ([parallel play](#))?
- [Head Injury](#): Consider whether your child has experienced an injury, perhaps a bump on the head? This concern would be more relevant if memory deficits occur in many subjects and situations (not just remembering names).

POTENTIAL DISABILITIES

*Children who have significant problems in this area may have any of the following potential disabilities. *Note, this information does not serve as a diagnosis in any way. See the 'Where to Go for Help' section for professionals who can diagnose or provide a referral.*

- [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder \(ADHD\)](#): challenges sustaining attention; distractibility; impulsivity; difficulties with sustained attention, shifting attention, focusing attention, and screening out other sensory stimuli
- [Autism Spectrum Disorder](#): restricted interests or behaviors; hyper focus; challenges with social communication; social challenges as well as executive functioning deficits
- [Learning Disabilities \(Educationally Identified Disabilities\)](#): processing challenges leading to performance in one or more academic areas that is below grade level and overall ability
- [Traumatic Brain Injury](#): TBI may result in unexpected memory loss as well as emotional changes, headaches, and challenges with attention

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

If your child is struggling with this symptom to the point that it is getting in the way of his learning, relationships, or happiness, the following professionals could help; they may offer diagnosis, treatment, or both.

- [CLEAR Child Psychology](#): to obtain a *customized profile* of concerns for your child, or *consult 'live'* with a psychologist
- [Neurologist](#): to look at other brain-based causes for visual memory deficits if these deficits seem to be severe across multiple settings. It would be important to rule out TBI
- [School Psychologist](#): to determine learning needs based on neuropsychological profile; perhaps an IEP, 504 plan or RTI is warranted to help your child
- [Psychologist or Neuropsychologist](#): to consider a full assessment to consider possible symptoms in a mental health and/or behavioral context

These professionals may recommend the following tests for this symptom:

- [NEPSY, RAVLT, CVLT](#): evaluators might use these tests to consider memory, attention and processing strengths and weaknesses. The NEPSY provides a number of batteries looking at attention, motor, and memory (Neuropsychological or psychological evaluation)
- [WISC-V](#): evaluators might use this test to establish a baseline of the child's intellectual abilities and to determine what interventions may work best (Psychological or School Psychological evaluation)
- [WIAT-III/WJ-IV](#): evaluators might use these academic tests to consider a child's skills in reading, writing, math, and oral language. These tests can help us understand the impact of any executive functioning, processing speed or attention deficits on learning in multiple subjects (Neuropsychological, Psychological, or School Psychological evaluation)
- [TOL-2, CTMT, WCST, TOVA](#): evaluators might use these tests of executive function to determine the skills and resources a child has, such as the ability to plan, organize, and pay attention (Neuropsychological evaluation)

- [ADOS-2](#): evaluators might use this test to consider social communication concerns associated with autism
- [BASC-3, Clinical Interview, Brief Projective Measures](#): evaluators might use these emotional assessments through drawing tasks, open-ended questions, interviews, and rating scales to consider anxiety, depression, behavior, and self-esteem (Neuropsychological or psychological evaluation)

LEARN MORE

[1] Kroncke, Anna P., & Willard, Marcy & Huckabee, Helena (2016). *Assessment of autism spectrum disorder: Critical issues in clinical forensic and school settings*. Springer, San Francisco.

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[2] Barkley, Russell A. (2013) *Taking Charge of ADHD, Third Edition: The Complete, Authoritative Guide for Parents*.

Amazon: https://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_noss?url=search-alias%3Daps&field-keywords=taking+charge+of+ADHD

[3] Giler, Janet Z. (2011). *Socially ADDept: Teaching social skills to children with ADHD, LD, and Asperger's*.

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Socially-ADDept-Teaching-Children-Aspergers/dp/047059683X/>

[4] Cooper-Kahn, Joyce & Dietzel, Laurie C. (2008). *Late, lost, and unprepared: A parent's guide to helping children with executive functioning*.

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Late-Lost-Unprepared-Executive-Functioning/dp/1890627844/>

[5] Ozonoff, Sally & Dawson, Geraldine & McPartland, James C. (2014). *A parent's guide to high functioning autism spectrum disorder: How to meet the challenges and help your child thrive*.

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Parents-High-Functioning-Autism-Spectrum-Disorder/dp/1462517471/>

[6] Baker, Jed. (2006) *Social skills picture book for high school and beyond*.
<https://www.amazon.com/Social-Skills-Picture-School-Beyond/dp/1932565353/>

[7] Gray, Carol & Attwood, Tony (2010). *The New Social Story Book, Revised and Expanded 10th Anniversary Edition: Over 150 Social Stories that Teach Everyday Social Skills to Children with Autism or Asperger's Syndrome, and their Peers.*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Social-Story-Revised-Expanded-Anniversary/dp/1935274058/>

[8] UCSB PEERS Clinic <https://www.semel.ucla.edu/peers>

[9] Koegel, Lynn Kern & LaZebnik, Claire (2010). *Growing up on the spectrum: A guide to life, love and learning for teens and young adults with autism and Asperger's.*

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Growing-Up-Spectrum-Learning-Aspergers/dp/0143116665>

[10] Lorayne, Harry & Lucas, Jerry (2012) *The Memory Book: A classic guide to improving your memory at work school and play*

Amazon: https://www.amazon.com/Memory-Book-Classic-Improving-School-ebook/dp/B006Q1SQCQ/ref=sr_1_3?s=digital-text&ie=UTF8&qid=1484440705&sr=1-3&keywords=books+on+memory

[11] Higbee, Kenneth. (2008) *Your Memory: How it works and how to improve it (A book about Mneumonics)*

Amazon: https://www.amazon.com/Your-Memory-How-Works-Improve-ebook/dp/B00D0UZZFW/ref=sr_1_4?s=digital-text&ie=UTF8&qid=1484440705&sr=1-4&keywords=books+on+memory

[12] *The Learning Journey Match It! Memory Spelling (game)*

Amazon: https://www.amazon.com/Learning-Journey-Match-Memory-Spelling/dp/B004OL2D9W/ref=sr_1_12?ie=UTF8&qid=1484441982&sr=8-12&keywords=memory+books+for+kids

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