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Am I Becoming More ADD?

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When I was an elementary school student, I don't believe any of my teachers would have been concerned about attention deficit with regard to me. Though I was frequently day-dreaming from sheer boredom, I was quiet and turned in assignments. In my adult life, as we have become more sophisticated in our identification, I have certainly observed some of my "ADD tendencies," particularly the challenges I experience in blocking out background sounds and peripheral visual stimulation. However, I certainly recognized myself in a recent *New York Times* article titled, "You There, at the Computer: Pay Attention." The story described the many distractions that we encounter as we begin a task at the computer. We hear the "bing" that signals a new e-mail message and we leave the document we're writing to respond immediately to the message. Perhaps the e-mail we receive suggests a website we might want to visit. Quickly, we check out that location. Minutes later, we may return to the document we were composing — only again to be distracted by other "calls" from the computer.

Dr. John Ratey, a teacher at Harvard Medical School who specializes in attention problems, calls this phenomenon "pseudo-ADD." But there are serious implications, for us as adults and for children. Certain activities, such as writing, call for sustained involvement. Noted psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes this concept as "flow" or "a state of deep cognitive engagement people achieve when performing an activity that demands a certain level of focus." (See his book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*.) To what degree is the quality of a piece I am writing impacted by the distractions of my computer? How much longer does it take for me to complete a task because I am frequently shifting focus? Are our children really able to give a paper they are writing the quality of attention it deserves while pausing for instant messages and listening to music they've downloaded? How do we provide the opportunity for the focused attention that writing or solving a complex math problem deserves?

Of course, sometimes the distractions of the computer really serve as an avoidance technique. In the same way that I spent a great deal of time during my college days arranging

the papers on my desk, making sure I had the appropriate pens, and finding the right music, some computer distractions may serve not simply as a procrastination technique, but as a way to buy time while I consider what I'm actually going to write. Words flow most quickly and easily when I've had time for "rehearsal" of what I'm about to write, when I've considered what I want to say and how I might say it. All writers need "rehearsal" time. Elementary students often shape their written pieces by drawing before they begin. While this may seem to be in conflict with the traditional notion of writing and then illustrating a book, young writers (and readers) often organize their ideas through drawing. The setting is created. The authors consider plot developments and even lines of dialogue.

The reality is that this kind of preparatory activity calls for a certain level of focus as well, one that may be more easily achieved while out on a bike ride, walking along a beach, or drawing than by responding to the incoming messages on our computer or downloading a new game from the Internet. And even if some ideas need incubation time, a period to mull around in our subconscious, new insights are more likely to happen during quieter, more reflective periods than during times of computer stimulation.

I raise these questions because I know that we, as parents and teachers, are constantly struggling to find a balance for our children. We know that, in some ways, our children handle increased stimulation differently than we do, as they've been raised with computers and very fast-paced visuals in films and on TV. Yet, the need for the focus to assure sustained flow is about providing reflective times when stimulation is reduced — whether we have attention deficit issues or not. Finally, these are questions that I certainly can be asking myself. They are issues that we can re-consider as we look at how we use our time. Perhaps, if I don't respond to the "bing" that signals a new e-mail message, the piece I am working on might be of better quality — and my e-mail reply may also benefit from a less distracted and hurried approach.