

Ants in their pants

Physical activity is to be encouraged, but it's also important to help children learn to be still. **Sue Cowley** explains how to succeed without resorting to extreme measures...

Young children love to move – this urge is apparent from the earliest age as babies roll over, or try to sit up. Indeed, with tiny children it can seem like the only time they are still is when they are asleep. Movement is vital for children's development: it helps them build strength and learn how to control their bodies. However, as children move towards school age, they also need to learn to be still, and to focus their attention on what an adult is saying. These skills are vital for them to get the most out of carpet-time sessions in a Reception classroom and beyond.

The scenario

You have a group of five or more children who simply cannot sit still. At story time they wriggle around, roll on the rug, and behave exactly as though they have the proverbial 'ants in their pants'. Your fidgety children also find it hard to keep their hands to themselves on the carpet. You have noticed that the same children often rush around the setting, without settling for any length of time to a single activity.

The issue

It is completely normal for young children to want to be on the move – this is a key way for them to learn and develop. However, it is also important that they learn how to be still and particularly how to focus their attention.

Some children find it harder than others to stay still, perhaps because of an underlying behavioural difficulty, or because they have never been encouraged to calm themselves at home.

Dealing with the behaviour

1 The ability to focus, to pay attention and to be still is a skill that you can help your children build up over time. Here are some points to consider:

2 Consider how long you are asking your children to be still, and whether this might be more than is appropriate. There is no specific amount of time that every child should be able to sit still. Instead, you will need to build up the duration gradually, taking individual needs into account.

3 Story sessions are a great time for children to learn how to be still. There is something very calming about listening to an adult read a story to the group.

4 You will have seen how young children can focus really well when they are engrossed in something of keen interest to them. Consider how you can make use of your children's interests to encourage focused attention.

5 Look at the overall layout of your setting, and the resources you offer, to ensure there are spaces and activities that encourage calm, quiet behaviour and focus.



about the author

Sue Cowley is an educational author, trainer and presenter, and also helps to run her local preschool. For more information, visit suecowley.co.uk

Finding solutions

To help those children with 'ants in their pants', and to build your children's focusing and listening skills, particularly during story time:

- Talk over the rules around time spent on the carpet – especially that the children should keep their hands to themselves and not distract others.
- Encourage your children to find a comfy position before story time starts. There is no need to insist they always sit up straight – some may find it easier to be still if they lie down.
- Use a quiet, soothing tone to help your children settle, calm themselves and focus in on the story.
- Sometimes, incorporate an interactive element to story sessions, so that there is plenty going on to hold your children's interest. You might do this by asking the children to join in with some of the movements in the story, for instance, pretending to climb a tree like a character in the story.
- When you talk to the group as a whole, use lots of different tones of voice to help the children tune in to what you are saying. Young children, and those who have English as an additional language, will find this especially useful in understanding what you are saying.
- Use a 'statues' game to help children learn how to keep their bodies still. Do a count down and on the word 'freeze' ask all the children to freeze as still as a statue. Gradually build up the length of time you ask them to stay still.

