

Can Processing Speed Ever Improve?

By Ellen Braaten



My son is in third grade and we had him tested this year. The testing confirmed that he's a smart kid who has very slow processing speed. Can processing speed ever improve?



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Nearly every child will be faster at age 12 than at age 7—and faster yet at age 16. But processing speed is measured by comparing a child to his peers. And since nearly all kids get faster as they get older, a grade-schooler with slow processing speed will be faster in middle school. But he will likely still have slower processing speed than his peers.

For a small number of kids, their processing speed may “catch up” with their peers. This isn’t very likely, but it happens in some cases. As traits go, processing speed is a bit like height. A child who for many years is shorter than most of his peers isn’t likely to have a big growth spurt in his teens that catches him up with his peers. But some kids do have these kinds of growth spurts.

So what can parents do other than wait and let nature take its course? Here are a few ways you can help your child increase processing speed:

Practice a specific skill. Practice can help improve your child’s speed at that skill. Research shows that repeating a task makes it become more automatic—and thus quicker to process.

This applies to everything from brushing your teeth to learning multiplication tables. The more you do a task, the faster you get at it.

Help your child be more efficient. Look for strategies that can make your child become more efficient. You can do this with nearly any task.

For example, here's a way to help your child cut down the time it takes to do a homework assignment. Help him make a list of what is required for the assignment and what *isn't* required. Your child can then feel confident that he is spending time on the right goals. Keep the list of requirements handy so he can review it.

Work on planning and organization skills. Planning can be tough for some kids with slow processing speed, especially if they have no idea how long it takes them to do a certain task. Keeping a log of start and stop times can help with this. So can estimating how long a project will take and then tracking whether enough time was allotted.

Putting more emphasis on planning and organization can also help your child be more efficient at routine tasks. You can also help by keeping things consistent and predictable. Sticking to routines means there will be less new information for your child to process.

Talk to your child's school. See if he qualifies for classroom accommodations for slow processing speed. Getting extra time to do things like take a test can help kids feel less stressed as they're doing tasks.

Consider ADHD medication. If your child also has ADHD, you may want to look into ADHD medication. It may not improve his processing speed directly. But helping your child focus could make him more efficient at homework and other tasks. Talk with your child's doctor if you want to explore this option.

Stay positive. It's easy to lose sight of the big picture when you're focusing on day-to-day tasks. But try to keep in mind that processing speed may become less of an issue when your child grows up.

That's because we tend to choose jobs and hobbies that are well suited to us. For example, a child with slower processing speed may not gravitate toward being an ER doctor, but he might be a wonderful radiologist.

Ultimately, you want to maximize your child's potential. And this involves keeping expectations realistic. You had your child evaluated, and that is a wonderful first step. Knowing what to expect will make it easier to know how to accommodate your child's needs or advocate for him.

About the Author



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