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The Working Memory Gap

Why ‘he just wasn't listening’ is almost always wrong.

Life Lifted · Scott Adams

The three-instruction failure.

‘Go upstairs, brush your teeth, and bring me the folder.’ The child goes upstairs. They come back with nothing. The parent reads this as inattention, or defiance. In most cases, it is neither. It is Working Memory. The child heard the instruction. They could not hold three items long enough to act on them.

What Working Memory actually is.

Working Memory is the short-term mental workspace that holds information for the seconds it takes to use it. It is finite, it is age-dependent, and it degrades sharply under emotional or sensory load. A child whose Working Memory span is two items will fail a three-item instruction every time, in every family, forever, until you change the delivery.

The one-instruction rule.

For any child flagging Working Memory as a friction domain, give one instruction. Wait for it to complete. Then give the next. If you must give multi-step instructions, externalize them — a sticky note, a visible checklist, a photo on the fridge. The scaffold is not the reminder. The scaffold is the externalization.

Where Working Memory hides.

Working Memory failures often look like other things. They look like ‘forgot the homework at school.’ They look like ‘lost the permission slip.’ They look like ‘started the project and never finished.’ If a child's friction is consistently ‘dropped a step,’ check Working Memory before assuming attention or motivation.

What to try tonight.

Reduce every multi-step instruction to one step. Externalize the sequence in a place the child can physically see. Give the child ownership of the checklist — checking it off is the transferable skill you're actually building.

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