

From Eric Jensen

Stop Telling Your Students To “Pay attention!”

Let’s explore the role of attention in your work.

This topic is always in the top 10 for requests, so it’s a good time for a review on the subject.

Whether you’re a teacher, staff developer or administrator, today’s audience expects quality. You need their attention for explicit learning. For starters, stop telling your audience to “Pay attention!”

What I have learned is below.

The Research

You do not need the brain’s attention for a large amount of input. For example, with implicit learning, the brain may pick up environmental cues using peripheral vision. Not all input to the brain creates changes we can document (cell size, connectivity, neurogenesis, etc.). The brain will not change in classroom direct instruction without the student’s attention.

When kids pay attention, cognitive activity usually goes up (Sarter M, Gehring WJ, & Kozak R. (2005). Yet all attention is not the same and the differences are critical. There are two primary types of attention. One type – “orient and focus” – is hard-wired in the brain. The other type is a learned skill.

Instead of saying to students, “Pay attention!” what you really want to say is, “Suppress interesting things!” Why? Students already DO pay attention. We’re all designed by nature to orient and pay attention to moving objects, contrast, novelty, peers or rapid environmental changes. Kids already notice a moving object, another kid walking by or even making a gross sound (novelty). What you were hoping for was focus and suppression of outside distractions.

You’d make more sense if you said, “Stop paying attention to biologically important, but highly distracting things!”

The second type of attention, the type you were hoping for in your classroom, is different. You want an academic focus and for kids to remain “locked in” on the content every time. But that’s a LEARNED skill set. It takes “practiced” skills to suppress potentially distracting stimuli and continually orient and focus on the content of the task. It takes musicians, writers, chess players, readers and artists months, or more commonly, years to do that well. Yelling at kids to “pay attention” doesn’t give them years of mental training.

So what can be done in a classroom?

First, stop expecting kids to pay attention. They're only in school because it's the law and their friends are there. There are two solution types. The first is a workaround. Here are some examples of short-term solutions for attention-building...

WHAT YOU CAN DO IMMEDIATELY

- **Use prediction.** Ask students to make a prediction on something related to your content (the process, outcome, circumstance(s), etc.) BTW...They care more about the outcome. Then help them get vested in their prediction by making the prediction public ("Raise your hand if you believe that ...") Next, increase the stakes of the prediction ("Those that predict correctly will get one free homework pass this month. Now, let's find out who was right.") Prediction forces the brain to care about the outcome because we get vested in being right.
- **Use the brief "pause" and chunk technique.** Give students a stand up break of 30-90 seconds (the "pause") to give them mental processing time for the content. It also adds a sense of anticipation or even importance to the content. Brief breaks just to stretch may help focus (Ariga,A. & Lleras,A., 2011). Be sure to also break your content into 5-12 min. chunks (depending on grade level).
- **Prime the learning with small hints, appetizers and teasers** ahead of the content to create a pre-attentional bias to the content.
- **Start getting "buy-in" to the content.** This is the "hook" that fosters attentional vigilance. Then, add a strong goal-acquisition to the activity, keeping them vested in reaching the target goal.
- **Do a fast physical activity** (like Simon Sez) first to activate executive function areas with the induced strength from the brain's internal focus-inducing chemical, norepinephrine and working memory ally, dopamine.

WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR THE LONG TERM

You can build long-term attentional skills many ways.

High interest reading material will not only engage but *almost compel* kids to pay attention.

"Fast writes" develop focus (save the editing for later).

Any of the following will also strengthen long-term attentional skills: playing a musical instrument, designing artwork, playing a sport and being coached, theater training, drama classes or dance training. These build the skill set of focusing, paying attention and suppressing irrelevant stimuli.

In short, you CAN have a fabulous class this year. Understand what it takes to get and keep the student's attention. Stop telling at them to pay attention and start hooking them in with natural, cool, intriguing, brain-based solutions.