

Teaching Students About Attention

How Learning Depends on the Ability to Attend

No one can acquire knowledge and skills without the ability to attend. What that means is that we have to be able to focus our thoughts on one particular thing and resist all the other things that are distracting us. This ability is called Attention, and it is related to a particular kind of cognitive processing. Students must be taught to recognize that their ability to attend has two important parts: focus and resisting distractions. Attention can be disrupted by hearing loud noises or seeing something that draws our attention from what we are trying to think about. Teaching students to recognize when their ability to attend is good or bad is especially important for maximizing performance in and out of the classroom. When we teach children to be aware of their ability to attend, we are using a cognitive approach to instruction (Scheid, 1993), and this is an effective way to teach.

Everything we do requires the ability to focus on some things and ignore others. We simply cannot attend to *all* of the information that our brain is receiving. In order to be conscious and functional beings, we must limit the number of things we attend to. To do so, we must resist attending to some things and stay focused on what needs our attention. In school there is much to attend to and many things that distract us from attending. Students hear others talking, a noise in the hallway, or the beep of a computer; they see a flash of light from the window; and so forth. Academic work involves much focus of attention. Students must attend to the instructions teachers give to the class while looking at the materials on their desks and at the same time avoiding distractions in the class.

Sometimes the materials themselves are distracting. Multiple choice tests require considerable ability to attend. For example, a typical math test might have a word problem with an answer of 12.5 with multiple choice options of a) 125, b) 15.2, c) 1.25, d) 2.5 and e) 12.5. The student who does not carefully attend to each of the options may be likely to choose option a) 125 because it contains all the correct numbers in the correct order; however, the decimal is missing! Careful attention is needed to solve this problem correctly. Teachers should keep in mind that multiple choice tests can require *both* knowledge of the academic content *and* the ability to focus attention and resist distractions.

It is important to recognize that when a child is having problems with Planning ability, the control of Attention will sometimes be poor. This is the case with children who have attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. Those students have a failure of control (see Goldstein & Naglieri, 2007; Naglieri, Goldstein, & Conway, 2009) often related to poor Planning ability. Their problems with Attention are related to the inability to control thoughts and behavior except in some situations that are highly structured and engaging (e.g., some video games). Children with a true problem with the ability to attend are different from those with a failure in Planning; they have considerable trouble paying attention and resisting distractions in their environment; however, they have good control of their behavior.

When we teach students to recognize that Attention is needed to solve a problem, we are teaching students to use an important ability. This way of learning and the behaviors associated with the cognitive process of Attention presented in this book (see the handout Attention Explained, p. 57) will help students be more successful. We must teach children to be aware of this important ability and to use it effectively.

How to Teach Students to Attend

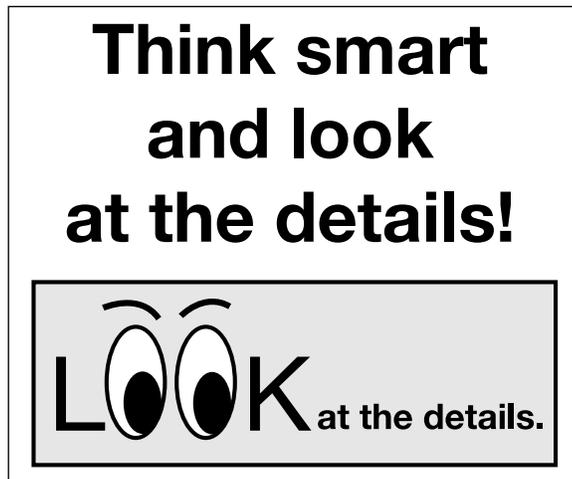


Figure 1. A graphic that reminds students to focus on information being discussed.

The first step in teaching children about their own abilities is to explain that they have many different types of abilities and that Attention is one of them. They also need to be aware of when their attention is focused and they are resisting distractions, as well as when it is divided among too many things, which leaves them unfocused and overloaded. In Figure 1 (which also appears in the PASS poster on the CD), we provide a fast and simple message: “Think smart and look at the details!” During appropriate times during the day, remind students to closely attend to information being discussed. We need to teach children to approach *all* their work with an understanding of how well they are focused on the details and resisting distractions in their environment. Throughout the day, the teacher should

1. Teach children to be aware of their level of attention and resistance to distraction.
2. Encourage children by asking: “Are you able to focus?” or “Are you getting distracted?”
3. Remind the students that Attention is necessary for reading, writing, and arithmetic, as well as in sports, playing a musical instrument, driving a car, and so forth.
4. Teach children that they may have to modify their environment so that they can attend better.
5. Remind students that learning requires attention to detail and resisting distractions.

Resources

- Goldstein, S., & Naglieri, J.A. (2007, October 22–27). Planning and attention problems in ADHD: What parents and teachers can do. *Attention*.
- Naglieri, J.A., Goldstein, S., & Conway, C. (2009). Using the Planning, Attention, Simultaneous, Successive (PASS) theory within a neuropsychological context. In C. Reynolds & E. Fletcher-Janzen (Eds.), *Handbook of clinical child neuropsychology* (3rd ed.). (pp. 783–800). New York: Springer.
- Pressley, M.P., & Woloshyn, V. (1995). *Cognitive strategy instruction that really improves children's academic performance* (2nd ed.). Brookline, MA: Brookline Books.
- Scheid, K. (1993). *Helping students become strategic learners*. Brookline, MA: Brookline Books.