

Why Don't Students Pay Attention?

www.bryan-harris.com

Have you noticed that some of your students (maybe *many* of your students) struggle to pay attention for even a short period of time? Does it seem that “kids today” have a shorter attention span than just a few years ago? As classroom teachers, we are in a constant battle to gain and maintain student attention. After all, students that can attend to the content and lessons are more likely to recall information at a later time (Medina, 2008). As classroom teachers, we first must understand *what attention is* and what role it plays in the brain.

Eric Jensen, author of Teaching with the Brain in Mind, says, “Pay attention” is appropriate because attention requires the expenditure of the brain’s resources...It requires that we orient, engage, and maintain each appropriate neural network. In short, paying attention is not easy to do consciously.” Jensen goes on to describe that the brain generally pays attention to three things: that which is related to survival, that which is novel, and that which is pleasurable. He notes that the brain typically pays external attention to contrasts in sound, movements, and emotions.

Robert Sylwester, author of How to Explain a Brain, adds, “It seems our brain was designed to pay attention to sudden, dramatic changes and to simply ignore or monitor subtle differences, steady states, and gradual changes.”

The brain has a system and physical structures that regulate attention called the Reticular Activating System (RAS). The RAS decides what sensory input goes to the higher brain to be processed. In short, it acts as an involuntary filter that determines what events, situations, or content gets attention. In order for something to maintain our attention, it must get through that filter.

So, what kinds of things get through the filter? Dr. Judy Willis, neuroscientist and middle school science teacher, suggests that the following types of activities and challenges get attention:

- Realia and physical objects related to the content
- Use of student names
- Stories
- Changes in voice, volume, inflections, dramatic pauses, etc.
- Changes in physical appearance
- The element of surprise
- The ability to predict an outcome and track progress towards goals
- Images, pictures, visual tools
- Role playing
- Movement