

15 Strategies For Managing Attention Problems

By Glenda Thorne, Ph.D., Alice Thomas, M.Ed., Candy Lawson, Ph.D. The following strategies are offered for enhancing attention and managing attention problems. This listing is by no means exhaustive, but rather is meant as a place to begin. The best resources for strategies are the creative, inventive minds of enlightened assessment professionals, teachers and parents, in partnership with the students they serve. Together they can create multiple alternative strategies.

1. Take the Mystery Away

The first and perhaps most important management strategy is to insure that all students understand how attention works and identify their particular profiles of attention strengths and weaknesses. Then, students should be taught attention management strategies.

2. Understand Consistent Inconsistency

Teachers and parents should understand that the inconsistency of children with attention problems is not evidence of a poor attitude or lack of motivation. It is a part of their biologically based attention dysfunction, and is beyond their easy control.

3. Explore the Option of Medication

For many children and adolescents, medication can be helpful in dealing with attentional difficulties. Medication can improve mental alertness and the intensity and duration of concentration. In addition, it may diminish impulsivity and hyperactivity. The student and his parents may wish to explore this option with his physician.

4. Allow for Movement and Breaks

It is helpful for students who have problems with inconsistent alertness and mental effort to be provided with opportunities to move around. For example, at school, teachers could ask the student to erase the board, collect papers or take a message to the office. At home, parents and/or the student could schedule regular breaks and change work sites. That is, the student could work several minutes at the kitchen table and several minutes on the living room floor. Each time the location is changed, the student may experience a burst of mental energy. Additionally, students may need to be doing something with their hands while seated. They may doodle, roll a piece of clay or perform some other manual tasks that enhance their alertness and arousal.

5. Vary Instructional Strategies

Teachers should use a variety of instructional strategies and these should be changed approximately every 15 to 20 minutes. For example, they could deliver information for 15 minutes via lecture. This strategy could be followed by small group work or cooperative learning for 20 minutes. Next, students could engage in individual seatwork or watch a video.

6. Use Signals

The teacher and parents should have a private way of signaling students when they are tuned out. For example, a gentle tap on the shoulder may be effective. Also, the student's teachers and parents may need to signal him when something important is about to be stated. Looking right at him, his teacher or parent could say, "Now listen very carefully. I am about to give you important instructions about tomorrow's test."

7. Leverage Interests

Attention is enhanced when interest is heightened. Thus, students should be encouraged to read, write and talk about subjects in which they are interested. Additionally, students' attention is enhanced when information is personally relevant to them. For example, if students need to learn a chronological timetable, the teacher could begin with having the students develop a chronological timetable of the important events in their own lives.

8. Minimize Noise & Other Distractions

Students who are easily distracted should benefit from a structured auditory environment. They may need preferential seating near the front of the classroom so that noise and distractions from other students are minimized.

9. Develop Previewing and Planning Skills

Teachers and parents can help students develop previewing and planning skills by requiring them to formulate plans for writing reports and completing projects. For example, when completing a book report, the students could submit plans for how they are going to accomplish this task. They will likely need specific instruction, followed by modeling, then guided practice, and finally feedback on performance. The concept of previewing should be explained to the students and they should be aware of the fact that the activities they are engaging in will help them develop previewing/ planning skills. It is helpful if they are first given practical examples of planning, such as planning for a party.

10. Use Behavior Modification and Self-Assessment

The use of behavior modification and self-assessment strategies can be helpful in increasing desired behaviors (e.g., task completion) and/or decreasing behavior problems (e.g., impulsive blurting out during class). The specific behaviors that need to be changed should be identified (e.g., completes reading classwork; raises hand before answering questions; brushes teeth before going to bed; puts dirty clothes in laundry). The specific consequences for behavior change should also be identified. The consequence for positive behaviors must be more rewarding to the student than failure to complete the positive behavior. For example, if the child is allowed to stay up an extra 15 minutes in the evenings, this behavior must be more rewarding than leaving his/her dirty clothes on the bathroom floor. Additionally, performance of the targeted behavior must be the only way that the student is able to obtain the reward. In the previous example, the child is only able to stay up the extra 15 minutes at night if he puts his dirty laundry in the designated place. School-home notes can be used to communicate back and forth between home and school. In both settings, charts and graphs can be used to monitor progress toward the goal. Students should be encouraged to assess their own behavior in addition to being assessed by the adult. They could be given an additional reward for accurate self-assessment.

11. Discourage Frenetic Work Patterns

To help students refrain from rushing through their work, teachers and parents could avoid making statements such as, "You can go out to recess as soon as you finish your assignment" or "You can watch television when you finish your homework." Offers such as these may inadvertently encourage students to work too quickly and carelessly.

12. Get Organized

A notebook with three sections labeled "Work to be Completed," "Work Completed" and "Work to be Saved" may be used to help students organize their assignments. Color-coding notebooks for different subjects may also be helpful for organizing work.

13. Use Daily Planners

A student should use a structured daily planner to help him organize his assignments and activities. A planner that is broken down by subject within the day and has sufficient room to write all the information he needs would be preferred. ELAN Publishing offers a number of good student organizers. Alternately, he may benefit from using a personal digital assistant (PDA).

14. Set Up a Home Office

At home, parents should guide their child/adolescent with setting up his/her own well-organized "office." Parents should schedule a weekly time that their child/adolescent will dedicate to straightening up the office and making sure all office supplies are well-stocked (e.g., post-its, pencils, pens, highlighters, paper, paper clips, stapler). The student should find his/her best time(s) for studying (his/her most alert times of day), and post these times as his/her "Office Hours." The student should also experiment with different kinds of background noise levels that work best for him/her when doing homework or studying. Some children/adolescents actually concentrate better in a noisy environment or while listening to music while others may need to use ear plugs.

15. Allow Time to Wind Down

Many students with attention problems have trouble falling asleep at night. It is helpful for them to have an established routine for going to bed at night. For example, they could read a book or have a book read to them. They can engage in stretching exercises before getting in bed. They could drink a glass of milk or hot chocolate prior to going to bed. They might also listen to quiet, easy music while falling asleep. ?White noise,? such as a fan, may also be helpful in facilitating sleep.

About the Author

The authors serve on the professional staff of the [Center for Development and Learning](#), a nonprofit organization that specializes in the development and dissemination of research, knowledge, and best practices that impact teaching and learning.

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