

Grabbing Our Attention

We've talked in previous modules regarding the nature of attention and we've made reference to three attention networks or regions that are bridged and bound to work together so we can direct and sustain our attention, complete tasks, fend off distractions, etc.

I want to talk about things that are central to what we have called the salience network, the network that grabs our attention and we use it to shift to things that are important for us to pay attention to.

These things are very important when you're working with children, particularly in a group, because you can take advantage of these dimensions to manage a child's attention and a classroom's attention.

One of the things that's very powerful is proximity. We are kind of hardwired to pay attention to things that approach us. This is why a teacher that walks towards a child as their talking to them is likely to grab their attention.

Another thing are tight timelines or pressures. Some degree of anxiety or performance pressure, not overdoing it, will grab a child's attention. If they hear that they only have a certain amount of time to get something accomplished, it's going to light up their attention center.

We already talked about how something that's interesting to a child will grab a youngsters attention. If they are fascinated with Pokémon cards and someone walks by with Pokémon cards, that will grab their attention.

We've talked about intensity. There are time intensities, there are other intensities that if you make the goal very, very important, a child will direct their attention to what's being asked, what's being done, what's being taught.

Then we talked about danger. A person with ADD will pay attention to a coiled rattlesnake about to bite, for as long as it takes. That snake will grab that person's attention and the person will stay focused on the snake. Their mind will not wander. They'll pay attention until they are safe.

It's also true that congruity and contrast will grab a person's attention. If I'm playing poker and my wife asks me about my winnings, my hand, something that fits with what I'm doing, I'm more likely to shift attention to what she is saying than if she asks me which of three paint chips I prefer using in the dining room. If you present something that's congruent with the person's focus, it's going to help them shift their attention.

Motion and movement grabs a person's attention. That's why the most effective teachers and coaches are the ones who move about. As they are moving, people shift their attention to them.

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Some novelty. If you come into the classroom with a different voice or a hat, or you rearrange seats, or you change something in the home. If you add novelty to an environment or a task, you're going to grab a child's attention.

There are certain things that provide what I call jolts. Activating the orientating response. A classic one is video games. The video games have a frequency of information, visuals, auditory stimulation. There's just so much in a video game that has what I call jolts and keeps grabbing a person's attention. I think that's also true why many of these video games produce irritability when the jolts are gone, and then the child has to go to doing their homework and reading a book. The jolt is lost.

We should talk about value. Any time you introduce something that produces something important to the child, that has value to them, it's more likely to grab their attention, and of course anything that's fun.

The more we introduce fun into what we expect them to do and how we schedule their day, the more likely it is to grab their attention. These are just some examples of what we can do to grab a child's attention. We'll talk more later about how to maintain a person's attention.