

Paying Attention and Staying on Task

Helping students pay attention and stay on task consists of using strategies both when students are engaged in group instructional activities and when students are working independently. The strategies include teacher-led reinforcement procedures, student self-management interventions, and proven instructional methods, all of which are designed to encourage students to engage in the behaviors necessary to focus on academic tasks. The first step in helping students pay attention and stay on task is to develop a specific, concrete definition of on-task behavior that is clearly communicated and taught to the students.

Teacher-Directed Reinforcement Procedures

Students engage in off-task behaviors (e.g., talking to classmates, day-dreaming, playing at their desks) mostly for the two basic reasons of gaining teacher and peer attention or escaping from academic tasks. For students who engage in off-task behavior to gain attention (attention that is usually in the form of reprimands or other negative comments), teachers can increase on-task behavior by transferring attention from students who are exhibiting off-task behaviors to those who are on task. Otherwise, students learn that the most effective way (and sometimes the only way) to gain the teacher's attention is to misbehave.

Providing attention for on-task behavior begins with the teacher noticing that students are paying attention or staying on task and then providing specific praise or other reinforcing feedback to the students. One way for teachers to begin noticing on-task behavior is to use the off-task behavior of some students as a cue to look for on-task behavior of other students positioned nearby. For example, when the teacher notices that one student is drawing on a paper inside his desk instead of completing his math assignment, the teacher uses this as a cue to look for students nearby who are completing the math assignment and praises their on-task behavior. This procedure shifts attention from the non-desired off-task behavior to the desired on-task behavior. When this