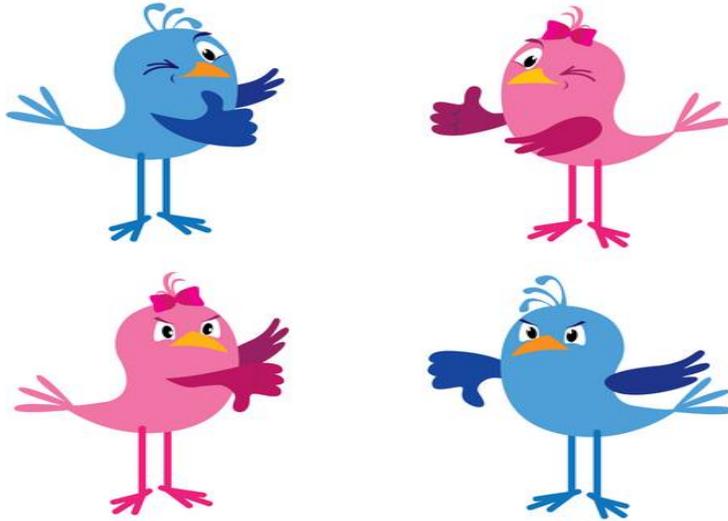


Student Attitude Adjustment or Teacher Attention Adjustment?

By [David Ginsburg](#) on December 3, 2011 8:35 AM



Like a lot of teachers, I believed at first that attention-seeking students needed attitude adjustments. So when kids acted out, I not only punished them but also preached to them about changing their attitudes. But nothing changed until I concluded that the best way to modify someone else's behavior is to modify your behavior. And the behavior of mine most in need of a change related to what I gave attention to and how I gave attention to it.

In particular, I needed to start focusing my attention on constructive behavior at the expense of disruptive behavior rather than the other way around. I shared several ways to do this in previous posts ([Responding--or NOT Responding--to Misbehavior](#) and [Let Kids Express Themselves Rather Than Exasperate You](#)), and here are a few more:

1. **Give attention to attention givers.** Students who act inappropriately do indeed deserve attention, since acting out can be a sign that children need help. But they don't deserve attention at the expense of students who are acting appropriately. So, as I've written before, unless it's a fire that needs to be put out now, either ignore it--which can often extinguish it--or address it at a more opportune time. Sometimes, however, even though you may ignore students' behavior, some of their classmates may indulge it. It often helps in such cases to

focus your attention on the attention *givers* rather than the attention *seekers*. Talk to students one on one about the consequences of letting someone else take them off their games, and collaborate with them on strategies for staying focused on learning. I've been in many classrooms where students' inappropriate behavior subsided once their classmates ignored it. No audience, no antics.

2. **Leverage all available attention.** Attention is attention, and since there's only one of you and 30 or so students, be sure to give kids opportunities to get their attention needs met from each other--in constructive ways, of course. This is one of many benefits of students collaborating in small groups, as illustrated by my [attention-seeking sneezing student](#), James, who had an "allergic" reaction when I didn't call on him during whole-group instruction but was symptom-free when he worked with classmates in small groups.
3. **Communicate non-verbally.** The more you're able to meet students' attention needs with actions rather than words, the more orderly your classroom. A smile, a scowl, a thumbs-up, a thumbs-down, a raised eyebrow, a note, close proximity to students needing redirection or assistance--just a few of many non-verbal ways to give students attention without any disruption.

There's no way around it: all children need and deserve attention. And how you manage a classroom full of kids vying for attention can make or break your overall effectiveness as a teacher. So if students aren't acting the way you want them to, pay attention to what you're paying attention to and how you're paying attention to it. You may discover what I did after reflecting on my frustrating first year in the classroom: it wasn't that students needed an attitude adjustment; I needed an attention adjustment.