



Managing Attention

To be a learner one must give attention to that which is desired to be taken in to the mind. Pretty basic. But oh the hindrances brought about by the lack of control!

Practicing what Charlotte Mason called the power of attention is a must for every learner. It is a power, indeed. It enables accomplishment. Modern theories have put it beyond the realm of the will and medicate children to inhibit distractions. But even they admit very few children have an attention disorder. It is true that many children are accustomed to high contrast visual stimuli, the pursuit of new and fun activities. They have little tolerance for more focused, tedious tasks. But managing self is a skill. Attention is part of that management and can be taught.

Dr. Larry D. Rosen conducted a study on college students and found distractions reduced their ability to focus. (No kidding. But wait.) In his article, *Attention Alert! Study on Distraction Reveals Some Surprises*, posted on the Psychology Today website April 9, 2012, he states the students only focused attention for an average of three minutes. Luring them away from their goals were social media alerts, music, texting, etc.

Distractions. Distractions they could have controlled but didn't. A variety of studies have reported less than 10% of people achieve their goals in life.

Managing distractions is yet another skill to be learned. Another study revealed 70% of children couldn't control their impulse to obtain a goal. In his marshmallow experiments, Walter Mischel put a marshmallow on a plate and presented the plate to children, instructing them that if they didn't eat this marshmallow, he would give them two when he returned. Only 30% of the children distracted themselves with something else while they waited for him to return. In essence they took their eyes off the temptation and were able to obtain their goal. So, distractions used as a tool can be a good thing. In follow up studies Mischel came to the conclusion that self-controlled children were happier and grew into happier adults.

Proverbs 25:28 says, "He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down without walls." (KJV) That doesn't sound happy. It sounds vulnerable to every distraction and outside influence to rule over you. Paul said, "All things are lawful to me, but not all things profit. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any." (1Co 6:12 KJV) We can also make this our motto. We can choose what is profitable for us and what controls or motivates us.

Attention is the act of focusing the mind and ear. In Proverbs 4:20-21, Solomon instructed his son to "...attend to my words;

incline thine ear unto my sayings. Let them not depart from thine eyes; keep them in the midst of thine heart." (KJV)

He mentions ears, heart and eyes as the path to focusing on his teaching. I know this means the Bible, but it is our guide in *attending*. Attend means to be present, to guard and to take charge over. The goal is to be present, in the moment, and to take charge of and guard our ears, heart and eyes from distractions. Distract means to separate, draw away or to disturb and trouble the mind. One definition of distraction is mental confusion.

Educators have long known the powers of attention and managing self. But accomplishing it during the school years is beginning after the horse has left the gate. It is much easier if parents begin early to help children learn the power of attention and managing self.

To help my children, I turned to the advice of parents and teachers more experienced than I. The following tips are those that worked.

The Power of Attention

Prepare the environment. Remove all distractions. This also means turning your phone off and whatever else needs to be done so you model focus.

Make the lesson interesting. Your good attitude helps. But always emphasize the benefits of knowledge as independence gained. Doing something tedious like learning to write may not be fun, but it enables something else like writing invitations for a birthday party, texting Grandma, etc.

Insist on full attention for short periods of time. Ten minutes for young children. The lesson must be completed in the time

allotted. Now. No dawdling. Instill the sense of satisfaction in accomplishing a task.

Never let wasting time on the sit-down task go unpunished. But the punishment is by their own hand. Perhaps there is now no time for snack, games, etc. They need to learn time lost is lost.

Vary your schedule so that not all lessons are the sit-down variety. Use hands-on projects, activities, singing, art. Mix them up so children get breaks from more intense mental effort and having to sit for long periods.

Slowly extend time limits. Encourage them to play longer with a toy, sit longer for a story, sing another song. But continue to keep lessons short: twenty minutes maximum.

The Power of Managing Self

Managing self is the art of mastering focus on what is before you or re-focusing to create a distraction to enable you to achieve a goal.

Distracting yourself to obtain a goal means getting your eyes off one thing and training them to another. Quantum physics is weird. But, it seems to give amazing insight into the Word of God. One example concerns an experiment that shows matter responding to the observer. (Wave particle duality.) It seems that what we focus on becomes real.

For the kids in the marshmallow experiment, those who couldn't take their attention off the marshmallow made the marshmallow bigger than their desire to have two marshmallows. The other kids ignored the marshmallow and focused on their goal of getting two promised marshmallows. Their goal became real. Both groups got what they focused on.

Think about Peter walking on water. *He walked on water!* Until— he focused on the impossibilities. Should have kept his eyes on Jesus, we say. Yes! It would have been a great time to move his attention from doubt to goal. And— he wouldn't have gotten wet. We all need to learn attending is a choice we make.

How can we use this information in helping children day to day? Point out what a distraction is. Help them to create an atmosphere in which to focus attention. Encourage them to see how quickly a task can be done when they choose to focus on it. Distractions become distractions when they encroach upon life's necessities and goals.

Practice the power of positive distraction during waiting for something they want you to do like feed them...or play with them. Enlist their help and refocus their ~~whining~~ petitions to get what they desire. Let them help set the table, stir a pot, fold laundry, feed the baby, etc. They learn self-control when they are motivated to do what matters to them. Use it in traffic, in line at the store and in the doctor's office. Train them to do it themselves by asking what they could do in the meantime.

Show them how to use distractions to manage their emotions. Use distractions to prevent temper tantrums and emotional meltdowns. Timing is key here because once begun, you are done. Endeavor to strike with a request or suggestion just as the first storm cloud appears. "Ready to go outside?" "Want to help bake cookies?"

What not to do is freak out and have a meltdown yourself. Like focusing attention, self control is modeled. Your reactions influence their reactions. If your child is emotional, fearful, impatient, flighty, they might be imitating you. Ouch.

Help children to manage themselves and their time by putting work first and rewarding themselves with a sense of satisfaction

from doing the right thing and having time to do something fun as well. Putting the two powers of attention and managing self together will help your child be successful in obtaining their goals, now and in the future.