

Helping Young Adolescents to Pay Attention

Catechists working with young adolescents face the challenge of capturing and keeping the participants' attention during sessions. A "wondering mind" and a short attention span is natural during adolescence. In addition, some youth have Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and face even greater challenges paying attention than their peers.

Most young adolescents want to remain focused and connected to the group. When they aren't successful, be a guide and mentor. Suspend judgment and try different techniques. Convey to them your belief that they are capable young people and that with the right strategies and support, they can manage their own behavior. This empowering approach will result in better attention and more learning!

If you know that a participant has ADD or ADHD, you can talk to his or her parents or guardians and learn what techniques they find helpful at home and in school. In addition, the following strategies can help you facilitate learning by enhancing the attention of all adolescents, not just those with attention issues.

Arranging Your Meeting Space

Create order and limit visual distractions. Use window shades to block out stimuli from outdoors and reduce distractibility. Keep the meeting space organized: use boxes or bags to keep supplies out of sight until needed.

Consider alternative seating. Some young people focus better when seated in the front, but some do better when seated in the back, on the side, or standing or sitting on the floor. Be flexible and let the participants choose the postures that work best for them.

Downsize. In group settings, taking turns answering questions can make focusing difficult if there is a long listening time. Try small groupings of two or three, or solicit only three "sample" responses from larger groups.

Allow breaks. Young adolescents need frequent breaks. Short breaks that allow them to stand, stretch, or walk around the room can help reduce stress and increase focus.

Attention-Enhancing Strategies

- Create order.
- Limit visual distractions.
- Be flexible about seating.
- Use smaller groupings.
- Give regular breaks.
- Communicate in more than one way.
- Check for understanding.
- Give step-by-step instructions.

Giving Instructions

Use multiple modes. Using multiple communication techniques enables catechists to reach more learners. Keep in mind that some young people focus best by listening, some by watching, and some by doing. Write instructions on the board, but also demonstrate the steps as you read the instructions aloud.

Communicate one step at a time. Young people may have difficulty retaining multistep instructions. Communicate steps one at a time, allowing the participants to complete each step before going on to the next, or provide a written reference on the board or an index card.

Check for understanding. After you give instructions, check for understanding. Use prompts such as “Who can tell me what we’re going to do next?” Avoid questions with yes or no as answers, such as “Does everyone understand?” Some participants might think they understand when they do not.

Helping Young People Who Are Distracted Bring Themselves Back into Focus

Despite all your efforts, some young people may still become distracted. Avoid embarrassing them; gently invite them back into focus using these subtle techniques:

Note physical proximity. Walking close by can refocus youth who are “lost in thought.” Integrate this into your natural movement so it is not seen as a “disciplinary” action.

Create personal signals. A personal “signal” is a phrase or action agreed upon in advance by you and a young person to alert him or her to refocus. Examples include a statement like “Think about this . . . ” or an action such as a hand on the shoulder or a finger snap.

(These tips are drawn from the “Strategies for Helping Young People to Pay Attention” section of the introduction to the catechist guides in the Catholic Connections program. Copyright © 2009 by Saint Mary’s Press. All rights reserved.)