



TEACH *for* ATTENTION!

A Tool Belt of Strategies for Engaging
Students with Attention Challenges



Ezra Werb, M.Ed.

PRAISE FOR **TEACH** for **ATTENTION!**

“This book is witty and spot on, perfect for the busy yet thoughtful teacher who needs effective strategies to engage that struggling K-8 student with attentional issues. If this book is in your hands, you’ll realize that Ezra’s tool belt is theoretically grounded, based on real-life vignettes, and readily applicable. Pick and choose or read straight through. You’ll easily access creative approaches that will effortlessly make a real difference in your classroom.”

—**Marcy Dann, M.A.**, board certified educational therapist

“Ezra Werb’s unique ability to make analogies from our adult lives to our students’ lives are what make this groundbreaking book a must read for all teachers.”

—**Christine Offutt**, education specialist, Mission Hills, CA

“*Teach for Attention!* is a superb read for K-8 educators of all experience levels. As a seasoned resource specialist, Ezra reminds us of the effective tools that are readily available within our reach outside of the usual choices, preferential seating, and mini breaks for our students. His frankness about speed bumps includes relatable situations while offering genuine tested solutions through various anecdotes. Furthermore, his inclusion of tech tools to help truncate and/or facilitate student work is veritably handy. This is an essential book that all educators can refer to time and again to help the kids who struggle in academic settings.”

—**Valerie Sun, Ed.D.**, EmpowerED Consulting

“With humor and great intellect, Ezra Werb has woven together a book that helps teachers, parents, and educators better understand students with attention challenges. His book is fun to read, offers different points of view, and contains concrete do’s and don’ts that can easily be implemented.”

—**Michelle Podemski**, third-grade teacher, Los Angeles, CA

“This book on how to promote kids’ attention in learning is filled with practical and simple strategies based on what we know about the ADHD learner. Ezra’s approach is positive and reflects a deep understanding that students’ interests, talents, and styles provide the best cues to engagement. My favorite chapters are on finding and incorporating students’ interests and employing strategies that allow movement. Using case studies and guest speakers in each chapter makes the reading both enjoyable and accessible. I highly recommend this book to everyone who cares about student engagement and enjoyment in learning.”

—**Susan Baum, Ph.D.**, author of *To Be Gifted and Learning Disabled* and director of the 2e Center at Bridges Academy

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Dedication

To Mom and Dad, the two best teachers I've ever known

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INTRODUCTION

Set the Stage to Get Engaged

It's three o'clock, and I didn't think I was going to make it.

The bell has rung, and the students are out the door. Sweet relief. All I want to do now is get in my car, throw on some *Hamilton*, and beat the traffic home. Oh wait, I almost forgot. It's Tuesday. We have our weekly after-school teachers' meeting.

I consider pulling the fire alarm.

Using better judgment, I end up sitting in the library on one of those stiff, plastic chairs while my school's technology specialist tells me how to properly input my progress reports into the new, very expensive, and very complicated online system. I know this is important, but I'd give anything at this moment to be home, relaxing on the couch or hanging out with my family and friends or prepping dinner.

Getting hungry now. Hmm, which frozen Indian meal to make tonight, the chicken masala or the lentils?

I know I should be paying attention to the tech specialist. Progress reports are really important. The parents are going to scrutinize them like tax returns. I'll have to make sure they're written perfectly.

Suddenly I'm fidgeting. Playing a light but steady drum rhythm with my pencil.

Wait, what did the tech guy just say about saving to the cloud? The reports are due Friday? I haven't even started! Oh man, I'm gonna have to write them at home. Homework is the worst.

I check the clock.

It's 4:15! I'm exhausted. No more gas in the tank. My head is so heavy, I can barely keep it propped up. I must look like a broken marionette. I really should be more awake. More engaged. Paying attention.

But sometimes, it's just really difficult.

It's difficult to sit in a room and sustain my attention on someone talking for longer than five minutes, especially when I have things I'd rather be doing, when I'm tired, when I'm hungry, when I'm fidgety, when all I want to do is jailbreak this place and escape to home.

I don't blame the tech specialist or my administrators. They're doing their best. I wouldn't want to be in their shoes, trying to teach me something at this moment.

Thank goodness this is only once a week for an hour.

And that's when it hits me.

My students with attention challenges experience this every day. They have to be in meetings for five hours a day, five days a week, thirty-six weeks a year! And *I'm* the one who is trying to engage *them*.

Sustaining engagement can be stressful for both the teacher and students.

The Challenge of Engagement

In 2016, it was estimated that 8.4 percent of US children ages two to seventeen had an ADHD diagnosis—about 5.4 million kids.¹ This is a staggering statistic that indicates a very high probability that you have at

least one diagnosed student in your class, if not more. This is not counting students who are showing clear signs of attention challenges but who are not diagnosed.

We see the impact of this in our schools, with about 30 percent of students with an ADHD diagnosis failing classes and/or repeating grades. Many of these students don't make it to the end of high school, since 35 percent of diagnosed children drop out at some point.² These students are falling through the cracks of our educational system, and it all starts with their engagement. If students are not mentally connected to the material, the teacher, or the classroom, they are going to have an extremely difficult time performing academic tasks or learning new information that is even the least complex. Their low self-confidence will grow increasingly lower until they simply give up.

And then there are the rest of your students. Maybe they're not showing significant signs of attention difficulties, but you might notice a few students that seem a bit distracted. That one girl who seems to check out mentally when writing projects are assigned. Or that boy who is obsessed with playing a full air guitar routine with his pencil during math. Some kids simply don't connect with certain material. Other kids might not be engaged because of social or emotional struggles or because something may be happening in their home. All kids are going to have difficulty focusing at some point during the day.

But it isn't always clear how to engage students with attention challenges. Compare this to other learning issues. When a student has dyslexia or a severe language comprehension issue, it's a bit easier for teachers to wrap their heads around the situation. For example, a teacher knows that phonics and fluency support are the standard interventions for a reading issue. I'm not saying it's easy, but at least we have a road-map. By comparison, students with attention challenges have a broad

range of symptoms that cover all sorts of different areas of academic performance. When it comes to engaging students with attention issues, there is no primary solution.

So, what can we do? How do we support students in our classrooms who struggle with attention challenges?

Teaching for Attention—An Origin Story

In my thirteen years of supporting struggling students, my experiences have been diverse. I began my career doing behavior intervention with students on the autism spectrum as well as students with ADHD, helping them learn in typical classrooms and integrate socially with their peers. I then earned my special education credentials and worked as a resource specialist teacher in low-income neighborhoods of the Los Angeles Unified School District, supporting students with dyslexia, language comprehension issues, high-functioning autism, and ADHD.

In my experience, it's extremely tough to connect students with attention challenges to academic material, both in classrooms and in one-to-one settings. Like you, perhaps, I searched for strategies online and in ADHD resource books. I found many good, common sense, researched ideas: Give frequent breaks. Shorten assignments. Allow extra time for quizzes and tests. Show videos when possible. Give preferred seating. Offer choices. Repeat important information. Provide visual and verbal cues. Use positive behavior support.

I certainly use these basic supports and refer to them in this book. However, what I found time and time again was that they weren't enough. They helped in the moment but failed to result in long-term gains in engagement.

It wasn't until I earned my master's in educational therapy that I started to fully understand the implications of attention challenges on

the academic lives of students and on their self-confidence. I learned to change my perspective from seeing these students as a collective group needing a strict, uniform set of supports to applying one of the principles of my educational therapy program: that every student has his or her own unique set of challenges and, more importantly, each has a unique profile of strengths and interests you can leverage to help improve his or her weaker skills.

My mission was to focus on what these students *could* do. I began to assemble a tool belt of strategies that would build off students' strengths and make students feel confident.

As I provided academic support in typical classrooms and also conducted educational therapy sessions with students after school, my mission was to focus on what these students *could* do. I began to assemble a tool belt of strategies and supports that would build off of every student's strengths and engage each individual on a level that made that student feel confident.

If that sounds like it would take a lot of time, it did. But that doesn't mean it has to take a lot of time for you. That's what this book is for. These pages catalog all the different ways I've tried and succeeded (well, *mostly* succeeded) to engage my students—the “tools of engagement” in my tool belt—including how to harness students' interests and strengths, use technology effectively, make reading tasks feel manageable, integrate physical activity, and reinforce self-management, among many others.

In my various teaching roles, I've used all my studies, training, research, and creativity, and have tried every idea under the sun to capture students' attention. Some have worked. Some have failed. Miserably. *Teach for Attention!* is the culmination of those efforts; I wrote it to help you learn from those successes and failures because I

believe engaging kids—especially kids with attention challenges—is one of the most important things teachers can do in our highly distracting world.

Who Is This Book For?

This book is primarily for K-8 classroom teachers—or teachers of any sort, really—who want to increase their students’ engagement. These strategies will help you whether you teach in a general classroom or specialize in reading, language arts, math, science, Spanish, or any other special subject. None of them require you to be an actor or a comedian or have a talent for silly voices—this book is not about putting on a show to be more engaging (of course, if you are a performer, you should definitely use that!). My tool belt has tools anyone can use without having to change your personality or style.

The *Teach for Attention!* strategies will also be helpful for specialists outside the classroom who support students with attention challenges, whether you’re a tutor, educational therapist, speech therapist, occupational therapist, or in another role. Anyone who provides one-on-one support knows that even in calm, well-structured environments, it can still be extremely difficult to engage a student with your material.

Parents, too, may find ideas in this book that they can apply at home to help with the homework process.

And for the students, educators can use these strategies to help reach all those students discussed earlier—including those who are just having a tough time connecting *today* or those who struggle with a certain subject. But the students who will benefit the most are the ones with ADHD and related attention challenges.

An important point must be made here. Your students with attention deficits may also have concurrent learning and developmental challenges, including dyslexia, dysgraphia, language processing, dyscalculia, auditory or visual processing, spectrum disorders, anxiety disorders, executive function deficits, or serious behavioral challenges. Along with any of these, they may also be cognitively gifted and considered twice-exceptional; sometimes a student's cognitive gifts may result in less engagement because the student doesn't feel intellectually stimulated.

With some students, it can be extremely difficult to determine where an attention issue stops and where another deficit begins. If we suspect a student may have a concurrent cognitive or developmental issue, we as teachers have to be vocal about it. Student success teams should meet with parents and discuss what supplemental supports a student might need: It could be a phonics program, a specialized math tutor after school, or an educational therapist to lower a student's anxiety about writing. A psychologist might also be brought in to conduct assessments and generate a cognitive profile for the student.

To be clear, my tool belt of strategies focuses on the components of attention, and the strategies are designed to be applied simply and with little preparation. In other words, they don't target specific academic muscles in the same way that a supplemental reading or writing program would, and they do not eliminate the need to deal with those other challenges. What the strategies do is target things like students'

The strategies target students' confidence, anxiety, interest, self-awareness, sensory needs, and mental energy so students are more likely to engage with your lessons, no matter the subject.

confidence, anxiety, interest, self-awareness, sensory needs, and mental energy so that students are more likely to engage with your lessons and projects, no matter the subject.

Attention and Executive Functions: The Basics

To better understand the strategies in this book and, therefore, better employ them, it's helpful to have a basic grasp of how attention and executive functions work. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* divides the symptoms for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) into two categories—inattention and hyperactivity/impulsivity—and lists the specific behaviors that correspond to each. Inattentive type is characterized by distraction and lack of focus, while students with hyperactive/impulsive type are the ones who seem energized and always on the go. Students may be diagnosed with the inattentive type, the hyperactive/impulsive type, or both, depending on their symptoms and if the symptoms appear in multiple environments.

Our attention components, as listed in the *DSM-5*, are affected greatly by our executive functions. Executive functions are how we manage ourselves and our cognitive resources in order to complete tasks and achieve goals. We're not necessarily conscious of most of these functions—like managing time, modulating mental energy, pacing ourselves, controlling impulses, switching focus, and planning ahead, just to name a few—but they are in constant use in our daily lives.

Though these functions are vast and complicated, for our purposes, we can organize them into two basic categories: our *input* abilities and our *production* (output) abilities. If students are having difficulties with input abilities, they struggle to absorb and understand material presented to them. In the classroom, that can look like this:

- appearing more interested in seemingly small stimuli around the room
- unable to stop playing with utensils at seat (rulers, pencils, sharpeners, and so on)
- asking questions about things from ten minutes ago
- unable to repeat information or directions just given
- difficulty connecting new information to what's already been taught
- seeming to be generally lost

These all are related to our ability to input information and sensory stimuli from the environment.

Then there are attention-related functions that affect our production—that is, our ability to transmit information from inside of us out to the world. Issues with work production often look like this:

- slow work production, not finishing work
- difficulty starting projects
- disorganized desks and folders
- drawing unrelated pictures on worksheets instead of working
- impulsive talking and calling out
- impulsive body movement

To help us relate to our students, consider how we all have strengths and weaknesses in these areas. For example, I consider myself a writer, and yet I have to take breaks every ten minutes when I'm writing. I have to stand up. Stretch. Walk around. Get something to eat. Send a text. Watch a stupid video of a parrot who can sing like Neil Diamond.

The takeaway is that I can produce writing, but mental energy breaks are a key part in making that happen. If I were forced to sit and produce on command without the freedom to stand up, walk around, and do something stimulating other than writing, it would be incredibly

frustrating for me. And I don't have significant attention issues. This helps me realize that many of our students with ADHD may experience something similar, only much more severely, when called upon to produce work. If I can relate to a student's challenges and frustrations, it may be easier for me to find the right support.

Consider your own production abilities:

- Can you do your taxes in one sitting or do you have to take lots of breaks? Perhaps breaks are crucial for you to sustain mental energy over a long period of time.
- Do you wash dishes right away or leave them in the sink for days? Maybe you tend to avoid tasks because you perceive them as too taxing in the moment or just not much fun.
- Do you send emails and texts impulsively without really thinking about your intended meaning? You may struggle with self-editing.
- Do you obsess about paying your bills on time while your bedroom is a total disaster area? Maybe you have difficulty monitoring how much of your mental energy to put into certain tasks.
- Can you stop yourself from talking during a meeting? It may be that when you have something to say, you just have to get it out or you feel like you'll burst.

Let's talk about input abilities. Sometimes, I mentally zone out while I'm driving. I'll be cruising down the 101 freeway, thinking about the season finale of the show I just binge-watched and how disappointing it was, but I'm so invested now that of course I'm going to watch the next season, but anyway, shouldn't I be spending more time exercising or something . . . wait, where am I? I'm three miles past my exit, that's where!

Ten minutes of driving on autopilot. Yikes!

It's extremely frustrating and unsettling to know that I zone out like this sometimes. I want to be fully present at all times, but it's something I have to actively practice. Thankfully, my cognitive functions are only mildly impacted.

I have students who probably have this very sort of "missing time" experience, but for them, it happens consistently throughout the day. I can imagine what that must feel like for some students in our classrooms; they may want to be listening, following the lesson, but their minds just keep wandering. How frustrating it must be for them to feel lost every few minutes.

- Do you ever zone out while you're reading a novel and have to reread the last page or two? It may be challenging to ingest so much written language at once.
- Are you able to get work done on your laptop in a coffee shop or are the conversations around you too distracting? You may have difficulty filtering out background stimuli to focus on what's important.
- How much time can you spend on social media at one time? Five minutes? Ten? An hour? Maybe with certain media, you can intake more information at once than with other types.
- If you've skipped a meal, do you find it hard to focus on things? Maybe your body and mind can't afford to miss breakfast, and if you're hungry it affects your ability to concentrate at work.

Again, we're trying to find entry points into understanding our students' experiences in classrooms. If we can relate to their experiences, we can be more accurate in finding solutions. And remember, all of our students have a range of strengths and deficits in the areas of input and production. And so, all of our students potentially benefit from engagement strategies.