

Week 1: Getting Attention

The first step to learning is paying attention. You can't teach if you don't have your students' attention. When they are engaged and interested in what's going on in your class, everyone benefits. Whether it is to give directions, begin a discussion, or transition to a new topic, the first essential step to effective classroom management is getting your students' attention.

There are three main ways we get information into our brains: visually (through the eyes), auditorily (through the ears), and kinesthetically (through movement of the body). Our brains constantly receive millions of bits of information from all of these systems. If we consciously paid attention to each bit of information, we would do little else but try to make sense of the cacophony of input. Luckily for us, Mother Nature created a wonderful system called the reticular activating system, or RAS. To get students' attention, you have to get the students' RAS to bring your signal for attention to their conscious awareness.

There are many factors involved in getting attention in a classroom. Students' attention will wax or wane depending on factors such as how interesting the presentation is to each student, how interested the learner is in the subject, how novel the information or presentation is, how meaningful the information is perceived to be by the student, and so on.

But classroom management starts with attracting the attention of every student in the class. This week, you'll learn how to get everyone's eyes on *you!*

There are five components for getting attention in Week One:

MONDAY Signals

TUESDAY Patterns

WEDNESDAY Music Anchors

THURSDAY Location Anchors

FRIDAY Novelty

HERE'S THE RESEARCH

The reticular activating system is located in the brain stem, and lets into the brain's conscious awareness what information is important (Kinomura et al., 1996).



Signals

An effective teacher needs a variety of signals to get the attention of the class. Some teachers use an auditory cue to get attention, such as a bell or a chime. That works, but after a while, the students get habituated to the sound of the bell and tune it out instead of recognizing the signal that it is time to tune in to you. Some teachers use a purely visual signal to get students' attention, such as turning off the lights. That can work, too, but you're not always near the light switch when you're teaching.

A cue given by the teacher that is both visual and kinesthetic is a very effective classroom signal for attention. A kinesthetic cue activates several areas of the brain, including the brain stem, the motor and sensory cortices at the top of the brain, and the nerves and muscles involved in the movement.

Today's skill is a signal that will attract your students' attention so they are ready to learn. Read the directions, practice the skill, and then try it today with your class.

Skill: Cross Clap

Start your week by using the Cross Clap, a powerful signal to get students' attention that appeals to both the visual and kinesthetic regions of the brain.

Here's how to do it:

- 1 Stand in front of the class with a big smile, quickly making eye contact with as many students as you can. Your face should convey the message, "This is going to be fun!"

HERE'S THE RESEARCH

There are hundreds of millions of brain cells that are used to process visual information, which account for about thirty percent of the brain's cortex. In comparison, only eight percent of the cortex is dedicated to touch, and three percent to processing auditory signals (Grady, 1993).

- 2 Hold your hands out, one above your head, one straight out in front of you, with both palms facing inward.
- 3 Say to the class, "Every time my hands cross, you clap."
- 4 Switch your hands vertically in front of you, so that the hand above your head moves down, and your lower hand moves over your head.
- 5 The students should clap each time your hands cross each other in the middle.
- 6 After three or four repetitions, start moving your hands, but trick the students by quickly stopping your hands from crossing. The students will clap anyway, and since it is a break in the pattern, they will laugh.
- 7 Now that you have the students' attention, begin to give your directions.

Explain and practice the Cross Clap before you want to start using it in class, so students understand how it works. After they know it, you can start using it to get your students' attention.

When you want to try the Cross Clap for the first time to get the students' attention, raise your hands as described in step one. Then catch the attention of two or three students in different parts of the room and mouth the words, "Are you ready?" with a big smile.

Switch your hands three or four times. More and more students will join in as you're doing the Cross Clap. When the class is quiet and watching you, give them your next directions.

After your class responds well to the Cross Clap signal, try some of these other signals to add some variety in your classroom:

- **Rhythm Echoes**

Clap out a rhythm, and have the students echo the same rhythm back to you.

- **Lap-Clap-Snap**

This signal works well for getting the attention of a whole classroom full of students, or even a full auditorium.

Do this rhythm: hit your lap with both of your open palms, then clap your hands, then snap your fingers. As you do the Lap-Clap-Snap, count down each pattern; "Three" (lap-clap-snap), "Two" (lap-clap-snap), "One" (lap-clap-snap). After the last lap-clap-snap, all of the students will be quiet.

In the classroom, stand in front of the room and start the lap-clap-snap pattern. Catch the eye of one student and say, "Join me when you can." After

a few patterns, all the students will have joined in. Then countdown your lap-clap-snaps: “Three—two—one,” and the class will be quiet and ready to listen.

- **Sit and Shhh!**

Use this skill when students are moving around the room, and you want them to transition to sitting on the floor in front of you.

Turn some music on fairly loud. Then start to turn the music down (a remote control for the audio player can make this easier). As you turn the music down, sit down sloooooowly. Your students will watch you and match your movements as you slowly sit down and turn the volume down. Time sitting and turning the volume down so that the music is gone at the exact moment you are fully seated.

- **Press Pause**

Ask the students to press “pause.” Demonstrate this cue by reaching above your eye level and press the imaginary *pause* button on an imaginary DVD player. Tell students that the DVD player is on a high shelf in front of them, so they have to reach up to press “pause.” When they have pressed “pause” the students are quiet and ready to listen.