The Attention Trap: Why ‘Pay Attention!’ Isn’t Always the Answer

From the desk of Jenni Foley, Deputy Head (Academic)

Have you ever watched your child staring at a page, apparently doing nothing, and asked, “Were you even paying attention?”

Attention is more complicated than it seems. Understanding how it works can help us create the conditions in which children learn best.

Attention: the brain’s most important filter

In 1890, psychologist William James described attention as: “the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought.”

More than a century later, his insight remains relevant. Our brains are constantly filtering information, deciding what deserves our focus and what can be ignored. Attention is not simply about trying harder. It involves several processes: selective attention, which helps us focus on relevant information; sustained attention, which keeps us engaged over time; and reflexive attention, which draws us towards something sudden or unexpected.

Importantly, looking attentive does not always mean we are thinking attentively. A student can be looking at the teacher while their mind is elsewhere.

Why the brain sometimes switches off

Learning takes effort. When information comes too quickly, tasks feel overwhelming or distractions compete for attention, students can struggle to process and retain what they are being taught. The brain needs time to make sense of new information and connect it to existing knowledge.

This is particularly relevant during adolescence. Brain development continues through these years, with processes such as synaptic pruning and myelination helping neural networks become more efficient. At the same time, emotional and social cues can be especially powerful competitors for a teenager’s attention.

There are other barriers, too. Sleep deprivation, sensory overload, language demands and conditions such as ADHD can all affect how easily a student focuses. What looks like disengagement may actually reflect a mismatch between what a task demands and what a learner can manage at that moment.

Mind-wandering is not always wasted time, either. It can support imagination, creativity and the ability to make connections. The challenge is knowing when to let the mind explore and when to guide it back to the task.

So, rather than assuming a student is not trying, we need to ask a more useful question: What might help them focus and learn?

Learning starts with understanding learners

At Rikkyo School in England, we are asking these questions about our own teaching, too. As teachers, we are reflecting on how attention shapes learning and exploring the conditions that help our students learn most effectively. This means thinking carefully about the pace of lessons, the amount of

information we present at once, how clearly we sequence new ideas and how much time students have to think, practise and make connections.

By understanding attention better, we can make more informed decisions about our teaching and create learning experiences that are purposeful, accessible and effective.

Five ways to help attention flourish at home

- **One thing at a time:** reduce competing distractions where possible. Multitasking can fragment attention rather than improve it.
- **Break tasks into steps:** make a large task feel manageable and help your child see where to begin. And end…
- **Allow thinking time:** resist the urge to fill every pause. Processing information takes time.
- **Protect sleep:** tired brains find it harder to maintain attention and learn effectively.
- **Ask a better question:** instead of "Were you listening?", try "What do you think the most important idea was?" This invites your child to explain their understanding rather than simply confirm that they were paying attention.

As neuroscientist Stanislas Dehaene writes in *How We Learn* (2018): "A teacher's greatest talent is channelling and capturing the attention of children to properly guide them."

Attention is not simply something we can demand of children. It is something we can help nurture by understanding how they learn and creating the right conditions for learning to happen.

Perhaps the most useful question is not "Are you paying attention?" but **"What helps you learn at your best?"**