

At the heart of all student engagement is the idea of student ownership of and connection to the content.

1. Engage first, then connect to content.

You cannot force a student to learn; they must choose to learn. This choice is made easier when a student is curious about a topic or has a connection to it.

- Mention the relevancy and purpose of what your student is learning and why. For example, if he/she is learning how to compare “how many more or less”, mention a real-life example (relevant to a student that age) of when he/she would use this skill (comparing how many pieces of candy you have with a sibling so you can get an equal amount, knowing how many more points you need to score in the baseball game in order to win or tie, etc.)
- In order to do this, you need to know your students! Find out their interests, etc. in quick little discussions (when picking students up (the power of the “walk and talk”), when laying out materials for the next activity). It may only take 20-seconds to do, but it means so much! Relationships are key.
- Relax and open up a little! Share a bit about your life. Choose some quick stories to tell about yourself to show students that behind the mask of ‘adult’ is someone just as human as they are. (Choose what you share discriminately use good judgement; it doesn’t need to be deeply private; it could be something funny that happened to you recently.

2. Give students a voice and a choice.

Having a voice and providing opportunities for choice allows students to feel heard and take ownership over what they’re learning.

- Allow students to make choices whenever they can: the color of connecting cubes, how long to set the timer for (reasonable amount of time), where to sit, what lesson activity is done first (when applicable and it makes sense to do so). If it’s something reasonable that they can choose, let them choose it!

3. Provide authentic, specific and frequent feedback.

Students love to know they’re making progress or are doing a good job; however they also can smell a fake compliment a mile away.

- Simply saying “Good job” or “Nice work” isn’t helpful. Be specific: name **what** the student did well!
- Praise specific actions rather than just saying a student is smart. For example, “You did a fantastic job counting on to change the number! **I like how** you counted out loud so I could understand how you were thinking.”
- “I like how _____” is a great sentence starter! Students like to please the adult they are learning with, so when they know that behavior is something the teacher/tutor takes notice of, they will continue to do it...thus reinforcing their learning!
- Reverse the role! You do a (quick) example and have them give you feedback about what you did well.

4. Ownership: allow students to self-monitor.

Students are more apt to stay on-track when they have something to keep track of their attentiveness.

- Sticker/Stamp Chart to track on-task behaviors: Using stamps, little stickers, stars, or smiley faces.
- “Our goal is five stars/smiley/etc. Every five minutes you are on track/complete your work; you get a star/smiley/etc. If at the end of the session you have your five stars/smileys, for the last three minutes we can play your favorite game (or draw, or play tic-tac-to, or learn to write in cursive).”
- Have a conversation with the student to agree on what on-task behaviors look like (ownership and value!)
- For students where five stars/smileys is an ambitious goal, start with a goal of three for the first few sessions. Then move up to four for the next several sessions, and finally move up to five.

5. Break the lessons/sessions into chunks, intervals or pieces.

Not all students can pay attention or stay engaged for the same amount of time. Children can typically concentrate on a task two-to-four minutes per year old.

- Have the student focus long enough to perform the first part of the activity, then give a 30-second break (stretch neck/fingers/wrists, talk about whatever he/she wants, play the “track the cube/bowl” game, etc.) **Key: keep it to 30 seconds so the lesson doesn’t get off track!**
- Be strategic about the materials needed for the lesson that day. Leave a few on the cart so these breaks could be students going to the cart to get a yellow-number cube, etc. This can provide the physical movement a child needs in order to stay engaged.

6. Remove Visual Distractions

When a child is struggling with a task, clutter on the desk or table can make it impossible to keep his/her brain where it needs to be.

- Remove unnecessary clutter and visual experiences from the workspace. Keep extra materials (cubes, dice, cards) that aren’t in use out of sight/reach of the student.
- Have student sit on the side of the table/desk where he/she is facing the least amount of distraction (other students, the door/hallway, etc.)

7. Rate the task

If you notice a student is avoiding work or constantly distracted, get insight into what you can do to help a student decrease his/her level of frustration.

- Using the number cards 1-10, ask the student to hold up a card to rate the level of challenge in the activity from 1-10. If the student holds up a card 8 or higher, ask what could be done to bring the rating down to a 2 or 3. Similarly, if the student holds up a 1 (and says he/she is bored), ask what is too easy about it.
- **Bonus:** This lets the student know you value his/her feedback and helps direct you in your tutoring!

Remember:

- Keep it quick! Students need to be getting 20-25 minutes of actual tutoring per session.
- Every student is different! Not every strategy will work for every child!

Sources:

1. ClassCraft.com: <https://www.classcraft.com/blog/features/how-to-promote-student-engagement-in-the-classroom/>
2. Edutopia.com: <https://www.edutopia.org/discussion/7-ways-increase-students-attention-span>