



CAN ATTENTION BE TAUGHT?

What New Research Says About Cognitive Control and Self-Regulated Learning

Excellent Educator, 3(12), 9-10, 2026

WHAT RESEARCH FOUND

Attention is often viewed as a personal trait—something students either possess or lack. However, recent research suggests that attention can be strengthened through carefully designed learning strategies.

Researchers divided children into two groups. One group was taught using cognitive control strategies that emphasized **planning, monitoring, and reflection**, while the comparison group learned without these supports. By analyzing video recordings throughout the learning process, researchers tracked children's attention and emotional states at regular intervals. The results showed that children who used cognitive control strategies-maintained attention more effectively, displayed more stable emotional states, and achieved stronger learning outcomes than their peers.

The study draws on theories of **self-regulated learning**, which emphasize the importance of learners actively managing their own thoughts, behaviors, and goals. Cognitive control helps learners focus on relevant information, monitor progress, adjust strategies, and persist when challenges arise. Rather than reacting impulsively to distractions, students learn to direct their attention toward meaningful learning goals.

An important finding was the close relationship between attention and emotion. Students who maintained attention more successfully also tended to regulate emotions more effectively. This suggests that attentional difficulties are not purely cognitive problems; they are often connected to frustration, motivation, and self-management. By teaching students how to plan, monitor, and reflect on their learning, educators may simultaneously strengthen attention, emotional resilience, and academic performance.

The findings challenge the assumption that attention develops naturally. Instead, attention appears to be a skill that can be nurtured through intentional classroom practices.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Teachers often focus on teaching subject content while assuming students already know how to concentrate. This study suggests that attention itself can be taught, practiced, and improved through structured learning routines.



CLASSROOM REALITY

Teachers Want	Students Often Experience
Sustained focus	Easily shifting attention
Goal-directed learning	Impulsive responses
Emotional resilience	Frustration during challenges
Independent learning	Dependence on teacher reminders
Self-regulation	Difficulty monitoring progress

TRY TOMORROW

1. Begin tasks by asking students to set a learning goal.
2. Encourage students to monitor their own progress during activities.
3. Include brief reflection questions at the end of lessons.
4. Teach students to identify distractions and plan responses.
5. Use checklists that support planning, monitoring, and evaluation.

CAUTION

Teaching attention does not mean demanding constant concentration. Students need opportunities for movement, social interaction, and cognitive breaks. Effective attention-building balances focus with appropriate recovery.

ONE KEY TAKEAWAY

Attention is not simply an inborn ability—it is a learnable skill that can be strengthened through planning, monitoring, and reflection.

Keywords: cognitive control, self-regulated learning, attention, emotional regulation, executive function, reflection

Reference:

Fu, C., Hao, X., Shi, X., Qian, H., He, S., & Geng, F. (2025). *Effect of Cognitive Control Strategies on Young Children's Attention and Emotion During Coding Learning*. *npj Science of Learning*, 10, 67.