

“Teaching Techniques That Minimize Off-Task Behavior”

by Angela Powell

Excerpted and adapted from ["The Cornerstone: Classroom Management That Makes Teaching More Effective, Efficient, and Enjoyable"](#).

In college, I was always taught that elementary-aged children can't stay focused for very long, and how it's best to break up their learning with movement, music, and play. What I never understood was, with all those interruptions, how was I ever supposed to teach? If the kids have to be ready for standardized tests in just a few weeks, and I've got them all focused with a great momentum going...am I supposed to stop and let them sing a wiggles song?!

Then, when I got my first classroom, I figured out what the real key is to keeping kids on-task: variety, variety, variety. When kids need to move around during the middle of a math lesson, it doesn't have to be with a trip to the playground or a stretching exercise that totally detracts from learning—the movement and learning can be connected! You can be as creative as you want in designing lessons that have kids standing up, switching seats, and doing related movements. Kids will listen more closely to your instruction when they know that at any moment, they could be asked to do something fun and out of the ordinary.

Another tip I picked up during my first year was from an early-childhood workshop I attended. The speaker adhered to what is a basically a fifteen minute guideline: never do any activity longer than 15 minutes with preschoolers. And you know what? It works with children of all ages! Just when they start getting antsy, it's on to something else.

Several years later when I moved up from preschool to third grade, I noticed that my students could work on certain projects for an hour or more and complain when it was time to stop. Then, when I gave other tasks, they would start playing around after five minutes! I knew that holidays, the time of day, and deviations from the daily schedule such as fire drills and assemblies can all influence student behavior and throw off even the best-planned lesson. But I started picking up on a general pattern: if the task was well designed, meaningful to students, and required their constant and active participation, they could stick to it for far longer than 15 minutes and really get into higher-level thinking processes.

I developed something I call the FMAP guideline to follow when designing and implementing lessons: Fifteen Minutes, Active Participation. This is based on my discovery that when I switched tasks at least every 15 minutes, my kids were more involved in the lesson and displayed fewer behavior problems. They also retained more because the information was broken into smaller chunks and I was more likely to engage them in their preferred learning style or modality.

FMAP in Lesson Design

Creating Effective Lessons With FMAP

The FMAP guideline is primarily followed during instruction in a spontaneous or intuitive way. However, it should be incorporated into your lesson planning ahead of time whenever possible.

It's much easier to use the lessons you were given by your school district. But we all know the difference in our students' behavior when we have an interesting, well-designed lesson and when we use a textbook-based one that we never bothered to tailor for own classroom. The feeling of satisfaction that comes from teaching without constant interruption and knowing that students were successful in learning makes the time spent planning well worth it. And the best part is, it takes less planning to teach this way after the first year you've tried it. Not only can you reuse ideas and materials, you know the outcomes that are expected and getting your students to master them becomes intuitive.

Reinterpreting Basic Lessons Using the FMAP Guideline

You can take a general lesson plan from your curriculum guide and reinterpret it using the FMAP guideline:

**An example of a 60-minute traditional math lesson
typically provided in curriculum guides**

- 5 min. Warm up** (independent written task, usually 3-5 problems in the text)
- 5 min. Review warm up** (teacher-led with student volunteers providing answers)
- 30 min. Teacher Modeling, Guided Practice** (teacher explains, writes on board, asks questions, students answer; might involve some manipulative usage)
- 15 min. Independent Practice** (worksheet or textbook problems)
- 5 min. Review/Assessment** (teacher asks questions, volunteers answer)

Yawn. I almost fell asleep typing that. The poor kids sit at their desks for the entire hour. There's no way to tell whether every student really mastered the concept taught, or to ensure that the class is even paying attention while the teacher blabs on and on, interacting with the five kids who always want to be called on. And which part do you think the teacher usually loses the kids on? The meat of the lesson—modeling and guided practice. It doesn't fully involve the students, and it goes on too long.

Let's see how the FMAP (Fifteen Minute, Active Participation) guideline might reinterpret that schedule—remember, activities can be shorter than 15 minutes, but not longer unless they involve every student's active participation, and that means more than simply listening to a lecture or discussion:

**Example of the same 60-minute math lesson
using the FMAP guideline**

10 min. Warm Up/Review

This could be a different partner game every week to practice basic skills. It could also be a textbook or workbook assignment, a fun activity sheet, writing a fact family, a higher-level thinking story problem, or a math sing-along with a CD. A review of the warm up can be done whole-class, or with a partner/group.

5 min. Introductory activity

Kids sit on the floor at the teacher's feet as he leads them in an anticipatory set that grabs their interest, e.g., a short role play, a real-life problem to be solved, or a song/chant.

10 min. Teacher Modeling

The teacher conveys the concept to be taught in concise, simple language, using lots of props, examples, the board or overhead projector, and student input as much as possible.

15 min. Guided Practice

While still sitting on the floor, students use manipulatives, wipe-off boards, or other props if possible to practice the concepts taught under the teacher's guidance.

15 min. Independent Practice/Partner Work

Students go back to their desks and complete a task by themselves to demonstrate mastery, or work with a partner if the lesson is a multi-day one. The tasks vary: further manipulative work, worksheets, math games, writing about what they learned, and applied problem solving. The teacher walks around the room to see who needs additional assistance and keeps kids on-task.

5 Min. Closure/Review/Assessment

Students respond to the teacher's questioning with as much movement and creativity as

possible—standing up or sitting to show whether they agree/disagree; writing an answer on an index card with markers and holding it up; or even just sitting *on* their desks instead of *at* them while reviewing a skill in unison e.g., skip counting or chanting a multiplication table. The closure could involve revisiting the introductory activity or another real-world application.

The basic components of the lesson are still present in the FMAP version. The teacher still teaches concepts from the state standards. But students are actively participating, and are not given the opportunity to daydream during lengthy modeling and discussion sessions. The teacher keeps the kids close to her during the most important part of the lesson to ensure they are on-task before releasing them to the distractions of their desks. Children get to move around in ways that add to—rather than detract from—the lesson, and a broader range of learning styles are addressed. By following the FMAP guideline, you can help ensure that students are learning and on-task the majority of the time.

Using the FMAP guideline will also encourage your students to follow the rule about not interrupting the teacher (“When I’m talking, you’re listening”). Children will be more attentive to your words when they know they will be constantly called on to participate in fun and interesting ways. They will follow along with you because they can’t wait to see what will happen next!

FMAP in Lesson Implementation

Creative Implementation Doesn’t Take a Lot of Planning!

You might be saying, “Sure, that sounds great, but when am I going to find time to design creative hands-on activities? It takes me hours each evening to plan for the lessons already in my curriculum guide!”

Designing innovative lessons takes time, but creative implementation can be very spontaneous. It’s about involving students in instruction and saying and doing things in different ways to keep their interest. Once you acquire a repertoire of teaching techniques that minimize off-task behavior, you can apply them to any lesson you present.

The following tips are designed to help you implement your lessons in a way that involves lots of variety and motivates students to stay engaged in the learning process. You should incorporate these ideas into your instruction in a natural way that makes sense for you and fits your teaching style.

Tip #1) Make your whole-class, teacher directed instruction as quick as possible.

Tip #2) Ask students to do little tasks during direct instruction to keep them involved.

Tip #3) Whenever someone writes on board (including you), have the rest of the class also write at their seats.

Tip #4) Ask students to write on the board whenever possible so you can focus on your instructional techniques.

Tip #5) Have children SHOW their answers on their hands.

Tip #6) Have kids make specific hand gestures to represent different needs or responses.

Tip #7) Use songs to teach and get students' attention.

Tip #8) Periodically have students stand up as part of your lesson, not as a break from it.

Tip #9) Try using Think-Pair-Share (TPS).

Tip #10) Be silly, use dramatics, and borrow some techniques from the gospel preachers!

Tip #11) Move students' seats often.

Tip #12) Develop a repertoire of very short, kind things to say to refocus kids without sacrificing the momentum of the lesson.

Tip #13) Use proximity control and teach around the room.

Tip #14) Know when to abandon a lesson.

Tip #15) Give kids a break when THEIR minds are full (not yours).

Learn how to implement these tips! [The Cornerstone book](#) has NINE pages of detailed explanations to help you keep your kids engaged during instruction—WITHOUT spending hours designing perfect lessons and activities!