

Squeaky Wheels

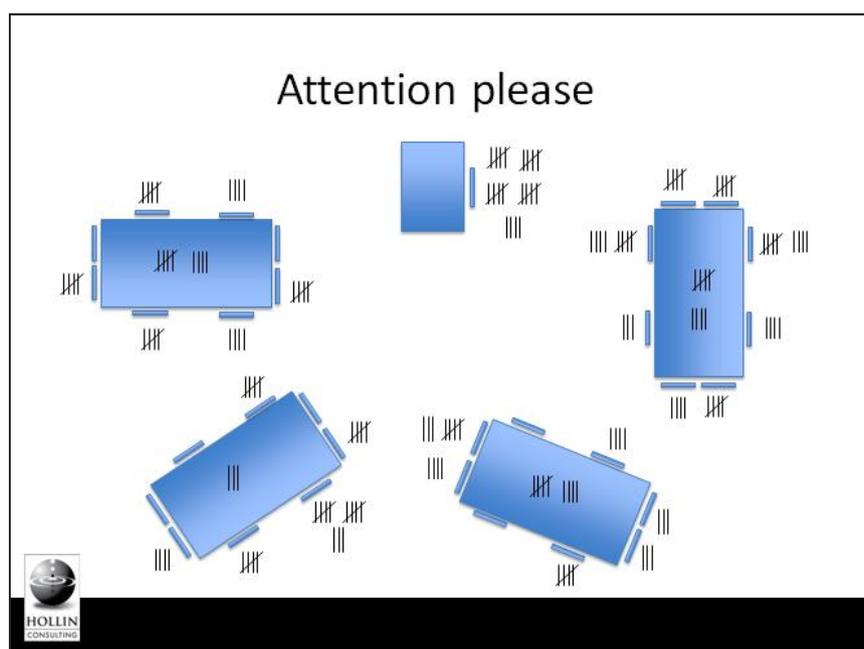
Alison Lees

I have been with Hollin for 2 years now. Before I joined the company I was working in childcare. It is something I still hold very dear to my heart and am very passionate about it. One thing I really want to get going is getting behavioural science into schools, so my first step into research was building a relationship with schools and teachers. Luckily nearly half of my friends are teachers so I was already halfway there.

Next I needed to answer these questions: Is there need for it? Where it is best placed? What would be the best fit for schools? I started visiting some schools and spending time there. It was pretty fun for me because I got to hang out with some eight and nine year olds. When I went to one particular school, they were practising for assembly, so I taught half the class how to do a play. It was really fun; also it was a good way for me to build a relationship with these children quickly as I was with them every day. By the time I started doing observations and seeing what was going on, I had built the relationship with the children. I already had it with the teacher as she is one of my close friends.

As I said, the children were eight and nine years old. I started to look at where the teachers' attention was spread over a normal class. Every day they had an hours' maths lesson so I thought that would be a great starting point. It's repetitive, it's every day, it's only an hour – it's nice and quick. I could go in there and sit at the back and watch what happened in an average lesson. The first thing I did was set the new expectations with the teacher by saying, "I am going to sit at the back and observe. After two days I will let you know what I am up to."

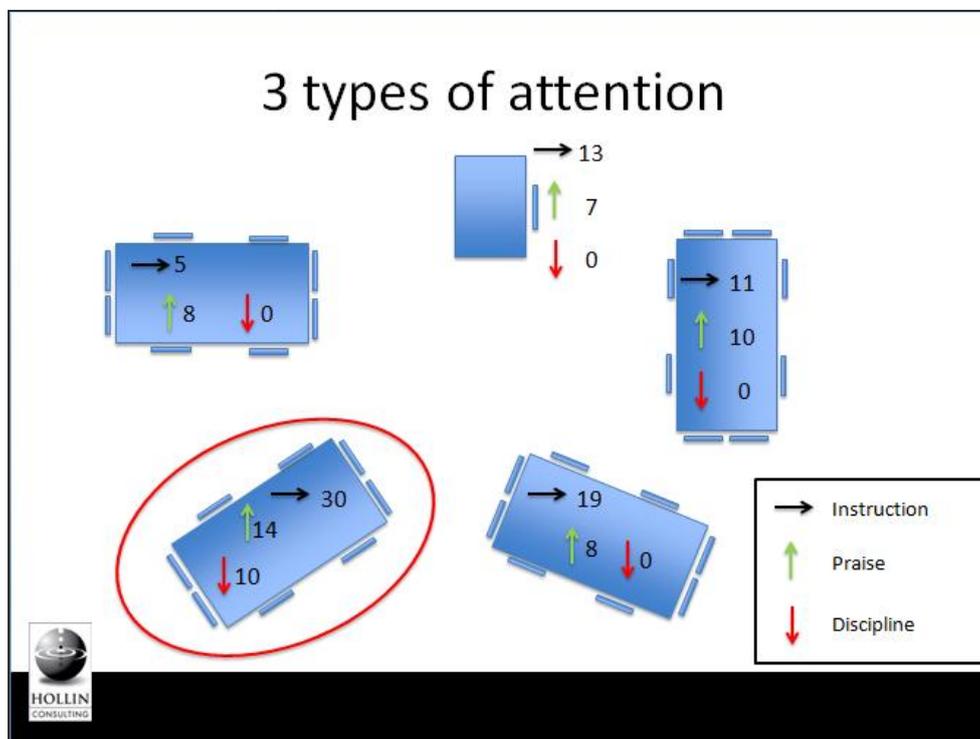
This is what I came up with:



I tallied when the teacher was addressing the whole class, individual children and whole tables. If you see a chair with no tallies on it there was no child sat there. An interesting thing I found was that by the end of the lesson every single child has a tally beside their name. I cannot imagine that it's the norm in every classroom that every child gets attention, so I thought that was really interesting. On this day the teacher had told the class to sit in their maths groups.

On the second day, I decided to look at three different types of attention that I was seeing. These were instruction, praise and discipline. I did a slightly fancier tally with an across-arrow for instruction, an up-arrow for praise and down-arrow for discipline.

This is what I observed on the second day:



Firstly, the environment had changed because the teacher said, "sit wherever you like today." So instantly it was different.

At the top right table they got 11 instructions and 10 praise; that's looking pretty good. Top left was 5 instructions and 8 praise, no discipline. The bottom right group has slightly more instruction but still a good amount of praise and no discipline. That bottom left table looks a little different. We have 30 instructions, 14 praise, so that's still pretty good and 10 discipline. So, let's have a little social experiment: who thinks they were all boys or all girls at this table?

It was all boys and there were two boys in particular sat on this table who, on the previous day, had been really attentive, listened and had got on with their work. On this day, they spent the majority of the day talking to each other and messing about. Not being really bad – they are still only 8 years old - just little natterings. Compared to the previous day, it was really different. I was interested in how the teacher reacted to this at the end of the lesson. She didn't shout at them, she didn't force them to stay for the whole break, she simply asked them to stay behind for a couple of minutes and then they could go out to break.

I had time to talk to the teacher before the kids came to talk to her. I showed her what I had been doing. The first thing she did was sit the boys down and showed them the piece of paper. She said, "this is where you sat on the first day and this was where you sat today. What do you think is different?" They replied, "well, on the first day we were sat in our maths group and we listened and we got on with our work. On the second day we sat together and we didn't really listen." I thought, "oh great, that's interesting." Then she asked what they thought they were going to do differently next maths class and they were great. They said, "well, it will probably be better if we don't sit together, and maybe if we sit in our maths groups, and then we will get on with our work." So the teacher didn't have to do anything as the children knew exactly where they had gone wrong, why and what they were going to do differently next time! This was just brilliant; they had made the decision as to what they were going to do. No need for the teacher...

So, the main things that I got out of this were that really small changes to the environment can make a massive difference. These boys just sitting in slightly different seats in the classroom had a huge impact on their attention and you can probably see this sometimes in meetings. If you sit next to a certain person who is "the chatter", then you might get drawn into that, or if you sit next to someone who is really attentive, listening and nodding along then maybe you will be carried along with that as well. It's a bit of peer pressure going on.

The great thing I observed was children being allowed to make decisions on their own behaviour. They weren't being forced to come up with the right answer, they weren't being shouted at; they were simply being allowed to make the decision as to what to do with their behaviour next time. If we can start getting children doing this when they are really young then maybe they will get to the right decision a lot quicker. They might make the wrong decision first but they will be more equipped to start making the right ones quicker and this avoids blindly failing. The next time they are going to sit on their normal seats so they can listen; they are not going to wait to be told what is right and what is wrong.

This is huge because if a nine year old can tell us where they went wrong, why and what they are going to do differently next time, then we need to be reinforcing the heck out of this so that when they get to the workplace they are not just waiting around for permission.



Alison Lees is a graduate of Manchester University and is a Hollin training consultant with a background in childcare and education. Alison delivers training courses and coaching and she is also currently researching the benefits of using behavioural science in the 'early years' educational sector. Alison is currently working with a group of international educational experts connected to the BMT Federation.