

Teach All of Me

Switching In and Out: High Concentration and Flow

The children came into the room with high energy and playful chatter. I greeted them individually and smiled inside as each responded so differently to my greeting. The room was filled with loud chatter and distinct personalities. How do I lead this great group of children into a unified activity?

Should I talk and talk? No. I start the first song, choosing it because of its high energy to match the children's energy. The activity with the song was movement, but in a controlled way to *help the children harness and control themselves*. Now...“boom.” We switch to the next activity, a high-concentration focus using mental energy to figure out the “puzzle” inside the song. Again, “boom.” We switch to a change-of-pace song and activity to give some gentle relief to the intense mental concentration by the children. Not much talk, just a lot of doing and switching in between activities. We finish up with a medium concentration activity and music time is over! The other adults in the room look up with amazed puzzlement that the time zoomed by, and the children are in a happy, lower-key state as I say good-bye.

The pattern and vitality of the lesson flow I just described was an up and down, wave-like feel. Each of the activities happened one right after the other, sometimes starting right on the heels of the song before. Some were an “up,” energetic feel, while others were intensely focused with a different energy. Some had a relaxed and gentle sense, while others were calm, but moving. The importance is the sequence of the different energy levels... how these activities fit together. A wavy line of ups and downs in the energy level makes up the lesson flow, and makes the time in the lesson fly by. We human beings need tension, then relaxation; ebb and flow; stress and relief. All of the happenings need an opposite feel... if everything is relaxed, we lose the children's interest. If everything is high intensity, the children react and usually lose control... either acting out to deal with the tension, or withdrawing to gain some relief. Like in all of nature around us, there are times of concentrated vigor and times of unwinding.

How do you know what activities to combine into one singing time?

Let's first sense what we are dealing with here by exploring the activities. What is the feeling of the activity? Does it require mental concentration? Do we gain a rhythmic sensation from the activity (rather than use a mental process)? Is this a high energy activity or a low energy activity? Is this the focused part of what I want to teach? If so, is the activity short and sweet so that it doesn't overtax the children's concentration? What could I use as a relief and change of pace activity? What might be my second choice for a focused activity (a medium concentration activity)?

When you have thought through the different activities you are thinking of using, you can sense when you might have too many high intensity activities, or even not enough. You can begin to recognize when you need something to change the pace.

How do you know which way to direct the flow?

If the children come in with high excitement, you will have to meet them with a high excitement activity, then switch to a change of pace before heading them into the high concentration activity that you want to focus on.

If the children come in sluggish, you will have to help the children “ramp up” in energy, grabbing their interest and sense of curiosity. Often this kind of activity will include movement to get the blood moving in their little bodies.

Here are three keys:

1. In every lesson, you want to have your first activity pull the children together and pull the children to you as the teacher. It needs to spark their attention, intrigue their sense of curiosity, or grab their awareness, often through movement. Sometimes this will be in only one song, and sometimes it requires two or even three (especially after lunch!).

2. After you have pulled the children together and pulled their attention to you, now is the time to offer an activity that requires high concentration and mental focus. Sometimes that focus can be a complicated movement to a song, or a memorization of words, or identifying the song element order through a game. Whatever the activity, I find that it needs to be succinct, not drawn out, and done in a way that in some way challenges the children to conquer or solve the problem. Make it short and sweet, but requiring lots of mental concentration for a focused moment.

3. Immediately after the high concentration activity, move into a change of pace activity... something that does not require much thinking, but it is fun for the children. Often times this activity will be very rhythmic, swaying, and will make the children feel like moving. This is not an activity that uses a lot of thinking, but moves into rhythmic movement in the body. Sometimes it is a song game with others where the children interact to a rhythm.

Using high concentration and change of pace in your lessons plans mimics the way the earth functions. The flow that comes naturally to the seasons, the plant cycles, and the weather teaches us about flow. The strong example of how our Heavenly Father works with His creations is also a strong example for us as teachers of how to best work with our students.