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Technology Aiming To Get Kids' Attention

Adults Can Benefit Too

Play Attention platform boosts attention spans with low-stimuli games

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Imagine a video game where you move the on-screen characters with your mind. Could it get any better than that? Yes, it's also good for you.

The game is part of the Play Attention Learning System, which is designed to train kids — and even adults — to become more attentive.

The company that makes it, Unique Logic + Technology, claims it can help those suffering from attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, which affects 4% to 6% of the U.S. population.

The system uses a sensor-lined helmet attached to a module, which plugs into a PC. It monitors brain waves associated with attention and processing.

The better a Play Attention user focuses on a task — essentially exercising mind control — the more successful he will be at the on-screen games. "If (players) start fidgeting, call out, bite their nails, whatever they're doing to self-distract, the computer can see because it lessens their attentive state," said Unique Logic Chief Executive Peter Freer, a former teacher.

In one exercise, an alien space character flies above a mountain. The harder the player focuses, the higher it flies. If the player becomes distracted, it sinks to the bottom of the screen.

Another activity involves stacking building blocks, one on top of the other. Start thinking about soccer practice and the blocks fall down.

One doesn't normally associ-

ate video games with improving attention, but Play Attention's games are different from typical fare. They don't have the fast-moving shoot-'em-up action one finds in regular games, such as "Grand Theft Auto."

"We use low-stimuli video games," Freer said. "They're engaging, but they'll never be at the level of an off-the-shelf video game."

Parents often complain their children can play video games for two hours straight, but a 20-minute homework assignment takes "two hours and a fight," Freer says.

That's because kids don't have trouble watching a three-ring circus, Freer says. "They have a problem finishing homework, or if you're an adult, balancing your checkbook," he said. "What we do is, we give them stimuli that are equivalent to that."

If a user practices with Play Attention for 40 to 60 hours — in approximately one-hour sessions that last 20 or so weeks — the user's attention will be permanently improved, Freer says.

The product's technology is based on the work of two NASA scientists, Alan Pope and Olafur Palsson. They developed a system to monitor pilots' attention in flight simulators to determine the best flight deck and instrumentation design.

Pope has also adapted the technology to a video game system separate from that of Play Attention. In his device, attentiveness affects the hand controller.

"When a person presses the 'X' button to accelerate a car, for instance, it will only go so fast," he said. If that person concentrates, creating the right brain waves, the controller will become more responsive.

Play Attention has a "very good product," Pope says, and he admits it's more comprehensive than his technology.

Play Attention impressed



Play Attention's system monitors brain waves and helps users focus.

Melvin Woodard, pastor of Community Baptist Church and operator of CBC Learning Center in Lima, Ohio. He says he's helped 200 kids with Play Attention.

Woodard wanted to help children who were having problems in school. He's convinced that many of these kids have above-average intelligence. They create problems in the classroom because they're bored. His theory seems to have been borne out by his results.

"The children that completed the programs never had any reversal. We never had a child go back to their old ways," Woodard said. "Every last one of them started excelling. Teachers started sending us love notes: 'Whatever you're doing, don't stop. The classroom is a classroom now, not a war zone.'"

There are 20 Play Attention learning centers and 450 school systems in the U.S. that use the product. Unique Logic also has learning centers overseas and is even working with an Olympic team to improve its athletes' attention.

The company sells two versions of its system: a professional package for \$2,500 and a personal package for \$1,800, which limits use to two people.

More and more people may need Play Attention, Freer says. "(In daily life), we're constantly inundated with faxes, e-mails, pagers, cell phones, television," he said. This overstimulation affects attention spans, he says.

It's not known for certain how television and video games affect attention. A recent study in Japan shows video games may hinder frontal lobe development, involved in such things as impulse control.

And the same could be true of fast-paced TV shows, such as "The Powerpuff Girls" and other cartoons.

Dimitri Christakis, a pediatrician at Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center in Seattle, recently did a study to see how TV affected young children.

The study found that kids were more likely to have attention problems the more TV they watched.

"In contrast to the pace of real life, television portrays rapidly changing images and scenes," Christakis said. The brains of small children exposed to TV developed as if real life moved at a television pace, he says.

If true, it's no surprise that such children would find the pace of real life — say that of a classroom — boring.