How do you get and keep the attention of kids in a large group?

We were running late by four hours on a Christmas short-term mission trip into Baja. We were bringing presents to the village children. There were nearly four hundred children of all ages waiting for our arrival. The children were noisy and restless from sitting on the concrete floor for many hours. It was almost impossible to get their attention—there was just such an undercurrent of noise from the younger ones. So how were we going to get their attention? The leader attempted to gain control and a quiet decorum, to no avail. He got frustrated with them, got angry and threatened to not distribute the gifts, if they failed to quiet down. Then he handed them off to me. It was nearly impossible situation. It was not their fault we were late, but now the blame was shifted to them.

Also, I have observed some well meaning, but inexperienced leaders hype the kids up and turn right around and scold the kids for being out of control. When children are hyped they are only doing what the leader wanted them to do. It is unfair to hype them up and then ball them out. This is wrong in my opinion. There is a skill to getting kids to respond. It is more about audience control, to bring them up and knowing how to bring them down or even how to turn their fun into seriousness with a purpose.

Here are my Top Eight Principles for Getting Attention of children in large groups!

Getting attention is about getting the eyes of the children. If you can “get their eyes you can usually get everything else.”

Give them something to focus on—an object, a picture, a puppet—any visual. What is this? What is this for? What can we do with this? Can you see it? Look closely! Have you ever seen one of these before?

Singing a song can help, it can be something very familiar—like Jesus Loves Me. But once you try this be prepared to speak quickly or you loose their attention again.

Some groups use counting to three, three being the most serious infraction.
However, again, once you train them to respond, (and you can) have something to say important immediately after the count up works or you lose them again. Once you get their attention, do not break eye contact, or you lose the attention you just got, and have to start all over again. Begin a dialogue about what they are focusing on—you want something participatory to engage their thinking. How long do you see a visual until you have seen it? They will only watch an unanimated visual just so long and then they have seen it. What will they see next? Think about it. Large Objects, a Gospel Magic Trick or puppetry tends to work for me. They can quickly imagine that something special is about to happen. Costumes help!

**Here are some do’s and don’t about working with large crowds of kids.**

Do not hype them up and then scold them for being hyper. Never yell at children to get their attention. This means you lost it. Once you get their attention do not break eye contact, move quickly into what you want to say. Animate and visualize. You can loose their attention as soon as you got it. You must be prepared to control their eyes! Watch this, by watching their eyes, you can notice when you are loosing their attention. Reading to a large group of children is usually perceived by children as an invitation to look elsewhere. You broke eye contact. This can even happen with extended Bible reading. So read in smaller portions.

It is one thing to get their attention. It is quite another to keep them attending. The secret is good preparation and planning. Many express surprise that I am able to hold the attention of children for 45 or 60 minutes. They think children have short attention spans, and they are right. However, if you keep introducing more to attend to, they will attend longer.