The Light Switch Theory

A simple way to picture how the ADHD brain engages with a task — and why “just try harder” doesn’t work the way we think it does.

The Idea

Most brains work like a **dimmer switch** — attention gradually ramps up or down. The ADHD brain works more like a **light switch**: it’s either **ON** (engaged, focused, motivated, able to start) or **OFF** (stuck, distracted, unable to begin) — with very little in between.

This is why an ADHD brain can seem “unmotivated” one minute and completely locked-in the next. It isn’t laziness or defiance — the switch simply hasn’t been flipped yet. Willpower alone rarely flips it. The right **trigger** — interest, urgency, novelty, movement, or choice — does.

Switch OFF looks like

- Staring at the page, not starting
- "I don't know where to begin"
- Fidgeting, wandering, avoiding
- Getting stuck on one small step
- Frustration that builds quickly

Switch ON looks like

- Diving straight into the task
- Sustained, even surprising focus
- Losing track of time (hyperfocus)
- Willing to push through hard parts
- Visible energy and momentum

The goal isn’t more effort — it’s the right trigger

- nstead of asking “why won’t they just start,” ask “**what could flip the switch right now?**”
- The three strategies on the next page are simple, low-cost triggers you can build into any task or classroom routine.

3 Ways to Redirect the Switch

Practical triggers that help flip attention back “on” — without a fight.

Task Countdown Timer

What it is:
A visible timer (physical or on-screen) counting down for a task or work block.

Why it works:
The ADHD brain often responds to urgency more reliably than to importance. A countdown creates a natural, low-pressure deadline that can flip the switch on.

Try it:
“Let’s see what you can get done before the timer hits zero” start with short blocks (10–15 min) and build up.

Choice in Task Order

What it is:
Give the full list of what needs to get done, then let the student choose the order they complete it in.

Why it works:
Choice restores a sense of control, which is a strong trigger for engagement — even when the tasks themselves are non-negotiable.

Try it:
“Here are your 4 tasks — you decide what order to do them in, as long as all 4 get done by the end of class.”

Tasks in Motion

What it is:
Flexible working positions — sitting on the floor, listening to music, working outside, standing, etc

Why it works:
Movement and sensory input can help regulate an ADHD brain into a focused state. Rigid stillness often works against the switch, not for it.

Try it:
“You can work wherever helps you focus — floor, desk, outside — as long as the work gets done.”

The Common Thread

All three strategies keep the **end goal fixed** (the work still gets done) while making the **path flexible**. That flexibility is often exactly what’s needed to flip the switch from off to on.