

10 New Focused Attention Practices

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Brain-Based Learning

Whether students are in class or at home, these quick breaks can help them find calm and prime their brains for learning.

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The traumatic conditions of isolation, chronic unpredictability, and physical and emotional distance over the past year are affecting everyone, but children and adolescents are experiencing these effects as they are still developing. Toxic levels of stress can wear out their nervous systems, and they find themselves in elevated states of anxiety, depression, and sometimes hopelessness.



Our children and adolescents who appear withdrawn, detached, oppositional, defiant, or aloof may often be exhibiting negative behaviors because they are in pain and are responding as their stress response and nervous system dictates. When we feel threatened or unsafe or when something feels unfamiliar, our response is reactive and reflexive. In such moments, students often don't have the resources to self-regulate.

When students are able to achieve a calm state, they can think clearly, problem-solve, and create stronger memories of what they are learning with increased attention. To help them find that calm, I recommend regulatory activities called focused attention practices, which provide a stimulus that students can focus upon, including deep breaths, sounds, visualizations, movement, rhythm, art, and sometimes taste.

Focused attention practices prepare and prime our brains and bodies to create and hold a state of relaxed alertness. They can calm and/or energize the nervous system. They broaden and deepen our awareness while promoting emotional, social, and cognitive well-being for all students and can be integrated into procedures and routines in our classrooms and schools and students' homes.

10 Focused Attention Practices for Distance and In-Person Learning

1. Fist Pumping: Have students stretch their arms out, palms up, to each side at shoulder height and hold their elbows straight, and then have them open and close their fists with an energizing breath. I have students do this for 30 seconds and then take a long slow deep breath and do it again for 30–60 seconds. Ask students to focus on their movement and breath. Ask them to flip their hands over and open and close their fists again for another minute. This exercise brings an oxygen flow to the brain and strengthens the nervous system.

2. Crossing Movements: Have students make a fist with the thumb inside and raise their arms up and slightly out to each side, making a 60-degree-angle V. They inhale with their arms straight, and bend their elbows to cross their fists in front of their forehead on the exhale. Then they straighten their arms and inhale back into the raised-arms V, and then bend their elbows and cross their fists behind their head. Continue with this powerful breath exercise, which releases calcium deposits in the shoulders and improves blood flow to the brain. This is an energizing movement.

3. Punch and Grab: Have students stand with feet about three feet apart and make fists. One arm at a time, have them reach in front of them, opening their fist on the inhale and closing it and drawing it back to their body on the exhale. They will move back and forth with a powerful inhale and exhale, opening and closing their fists and alternating arms as they pretend to grab something they need. This is much like a boxing movement with one arm at a time, at any speed that feels comfortable.

4. Blossoming Flower: With the fingertips of both hands touching, students begin by opening their thumbs with a deep inhale and then exhale; as they continue to breathe, they open their forefingers, then middle fingers, the ring fingers; when they come to the pinkies, they pull their hands apart and take the biggest breath as their flowers bloom. As they open each pair of fingers, you can also ask them to say an affirmative sentence such as “I am peaceful,” “I am strong,” “I am ready,” or “I am getting there.”

5. Frog Breaths: Standing up with their heels touching and toes pointed out, have students squat down and touch the floor with their fingertips. They should inhale when they stand, and exhale when they squat. Aim for 20 repetitions. This exercise energizes students and strengthens the nervous system.

6. Balancing the Plate: Have students balance a light object such as a paper plate or cup, or even a book, on their heads and hold a variety of poses. They can try balancing on one leg, squatting down, walking, or bending forward as they steady their heads and seeing how low they can bend and still keep the object on their heads. You can try coming up with new poses with students.

7. Dedicate This One: Have students create an image or write down a few words that they want to share with someone they appreciate. As they think of the person, they should breathe deeply for one minute, mentally expressing their love and their image or words with the thought of this person.

8. Give Me Yours, and I'll Give You Mine: Have students write down or draw a worry or concern they have and then fold up the paper and hand it to a friend. As they share their worries, have them breathe together for one minute, breathing in strength and love and breathing out this strength and love to their friend. Whether they share the worry is a choice; if you want students to share these with one another and with the class, you will need to set guidelines and agreements for everyone.

9. Vision Quest: Have students focus on one specific object in the room or within the setting where they are. After focusing their attention for 30 seconds, have them broaden their gaze and create a gentler, more open vision of their setting. When they do this, their heart rate, respiration rate, and blood pressure will lower.

10. Reveal: Bring an object to Zoom or the classroom that is covered with a towel or cloth. Hold the covered object with just a small part being revealed in front of the students, and with every deep breath they take, you slowly peel back the cloth, revealing a bit more of the object. After a few deep breaths, they should now see enough to begin guessing in the chat box or by calling out. You can ask how the object is related to your content or to social and emotional learning.