

Alert and Attentive

Strategies to Support Focus
and Concentration



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Introduction

Hey! Hey, you! Yes, you! Over here! Pay attention!

As an early childhood educator, chances are you've used (or thought about using) one of these phrases as you try to gather the attention of the children you are working with. It can be challenging to get a class full of preschoolers to eat their meals and snacks in a timely manner. It takes a lot of work and planning to keep a class of three- to five-year-olds attentive for all of circle time. It's definitely difficult supporting a class full of kindergarteners as they complete learning activities within the time allotted. A primary reason for these challenges is because young children are still learning how to develop their attention skills.

Attention is the ability to focus on something specific while ignoring the nonimportant sights and sounds happening simultaneously. Good attention is necessary to learn and succeed at all of life's tasks. It helps us start and complete activities. It allows us to focus when we are engaged in a conversation in a noisy environment. Attention also keeps us safe from harm and injury.

When children struggle with attention, they may:

- Have difficulty completing work in a timely manner
- Find it hard to start activities on their own
- Miss key details when listening to instructions
- Have difficulty remembering rules and directions
- Exhibit disruptive and impulsive behaviors
- Distract children around them
- Appear forgetful or misplace things often
- Struggle to make and keep friends

As adults, we've become accustomed to blocking out the continual barrage of incoming sights, sounds, and sensations that are not relevant to what we are paying attention to. We ignore the feeling of our clothes

and shoes, the swishing of our hair when we turn our heads. We ignore birds chirping outside, dogs barking, and conversations around us. Without thinking about it, we filter out the inputs that fill our field of vision so that we can remain alert and attentive to what matters to us.

Unlike adults, young children are learning to pay attention to what is important and to block out the irrelevant sights and sounds happening all around them. As they interact with the world, they are figuring out what they should ignore and what they should pay attention to. But, it is hard for them to not become distracted by competing sights, sounds, and feelings. Helping children learn how to pay attention supports their cognitive skills.

- When children are good at focusing, they are better able to absorb and retain information, follow instructions, and complete tasks to the best of their ability.
- Attention skills help children socialize, supporting their ability to listen carefully to others, respond to nonverbal cues, and participate in conversations.
- Learning how to focus and pay attention is important for self-regulation. Students can persist at activities that are challenging, control impulses, and maintain an alert and calm state of mind.
- Good focus is closely related to working memory, inhibitory control, and problem-solving, which are critical executive functions necessary for school success, social skills, and safety.

Consider the following: The majority of adults who have been driving for a long time are able to remain alert and attentive to what is going on around them so they can safely arrive at their destination. Most of the time, they are able to concentrate on the road and the other vehicles while listening to music or talking with people in the car. However, those same drivers may struggle to pay attention to the road during inclement weather. They may need to turn the music off or ask their companions to be quiet as they focus more intently on the road. This is also true for veteran drivers when they are traveling somewhere they've never been before. The need to focus on the road increases, and distractions

become difficult to ignore, when we are driving somewhere new. The same is true for young children. When they engage in new tasks and activities (which is often), it is difficult to focus and attend to what they should while filtering out and ignoring the distractions around them.

People with good attention skills are not only able to focus on what they are supposed to, they are also able to concentrate on that for as long as they need to complete the conversation, activity, or task. This is not easy for young children, in part because they are learning this important skill and because they have a limited attention span. Therefore, it is easy for them to lose interest if an activity is too long, the environment is filled with an abundance of distractions, or the activity isn't one they want to engage in. Consider the following examples.

Brayden transitions with his class to lunch. They eat in the cafeteria, which is just a short walk down the hallway from their kindergarten classroom. He sits down in his usual seat, observing everything going on all around him. The cafeteria is noisy, as many other classes are also eating at the same time. Children pop out of their seats, line up for hot lunch, and talk loudly with their classmates. After a few minutes, his aide notices that Brayden hasn't taken anything out of his lunch box yet, so she encourages him to start eating. Shortly after she walks away, someone at Brayden's table drops his milk carton and it spills all over the table. Instead of starting to eat, Brayden watches the commotion as people move away from the spill and the lunch monitor rushes over to clean it up. The lunch period ends and Brayden has eaten almost nothing. He gathers his lunch items and transitions out of the cafeteria with his class. Brayden exhibits difficulty with attention. Even though he doesn't disrupt or distract anyone, he has difficulty attending to what he should because he is paying attention to the sights and sounds happening all around him.

One morning during circle time, Ayla sits on the carpet and plays with the toy she has taken from the pretend-play bin. She shows it to the children sitting near, shaking and spinning it around. When her teacher asks her to put the toy

where it belongs, Ayla complies. She returns to the carpet, sitting down in a new spot, and begins to talk with the child sitting next to her. The teacher tries to shift Ayla's attention to focus on circle time, but Ayla continues to play and talk, distracting the whole class. Ayla exhibits poor attention that affects her ability to attend to her teacher talking and concentrate on the circle-time activities.

Alivia has come to preschool sad. She had difficulty transitioning from her mother at drop-off and struggles to join her class to participate in the morning activities. During morning centers, Alivia sits at the table and asks repeatedly, "When is Mommy coming back?" Her teacher has put out an open-ended play activity using sand, shaving cream, and plastic farm animals that the whole class can engage in as they choose. Instead of interacting with the activity, Alivia continues to seek her teacher and inquire about when her mother will return. Alivia's attention is directed at when she will see her mom again, impairing her ability to concentrate on the activity in front of her.

How This Book Is Organized

Chapter 1 introduces the different components of attention—attention span, sustained attention, selective attention, and divided attention—and how each one is essential for children's success in learning, socializing, and completing daily activities. The chapter emphasizes that attention is not innate but improves with age and practice, making early childhood classrooms an ideal place for nurturing this skill. The remaining chapters explore strategies and tips to nurture and support the development of strong attention skills in young children.

Chapter 2 discusses the impact self-regulation has on attention. Self-regulation, the ability to remain calm and in control of thoughts, actions, and emotions in response to an external event or stimulus, is closely linked to attention and focus. When children are well-regulated, they are better at remaining alert and attentive to what they should be.

In chapter 3, we look at the connection between attention and executive function. Executive function is a group of mental skills that includes attentional flexibility, working memory, and inhibitory control. Children rely on these three executive functions to learn, play, and socialize throughout the school day as they:

- transition,
- take turns,
- practice self-control,
- problem solve,
- remain on task and complete activities in a timely manner,
- socialize successfully with peers and familiar adults, and
- negotiate conflict.

In chapter 4, you'll learn how the classroom environment impacts attention. You will learn ways to support children's ability to pay attention to what they should be with intentional classroom design, limiting visual and auditory distractions, and encouraging predictable classroom rules and routines.

Chapter 5 provides sensory-focused tips, ideas, and strategies that will help children attain and maintain an alert and attentive arousal level throughout their day.

Chapter 6 offers cognitive-behavioral strategies, games, and activities to support children's focus and concentration.

Finally, in chapter 7, you will learn simple and effective games, activities, and strategies to improve and support attention during specific parts of the school day, including mealtimes, circle time, and center time.

Use *Alert and Attentive* as a reference for strategies to help young children attend to what they should be so that they learn, play, and grow to the best of their ability. Rich with games, activities and easy-to-implement ideas, this book provides suggestions for environmental supports, sensory inputs, and cognitive behavioral strategies to help improve the attention skills of young children. *Alert and Attentive* also

describes the relationship between self-regulation, executive function, and attention and the impact these have on one another.

Let's get started!

Chapter 1

Attention: What It Is and Why It Matters

What exactly is attention? It is a person's ability to focus intentionally on something while tuning out the other sights and sounds happening at the same time. People rely on attention in almost all aspects of life: to pay attention at school, to complete work obligations, to finish chores around the house, and to socialize. In the early learning environment, children continually rely on attention. They use it when they focus on schoolwork or activities while blocking out classroom distractions. They use attention when socializing with peers because they need to focus on what's being said while tuning out nearby conversations. They also use it when listening to their teacher give important instructions or tell a story, while tuning out the other sounds around them.

Attention is not a skill that is present at birth. Rather, it improves and develops over time, with marked improvement between three and five years of age (Gomes et al., 2000; Krauzlis, Wang, Yu, and Katz, 2023; Posner, Rothbart, Sheese, and Voelker, 2014). This means the early childhood classroom is an excellent environment to help nurture and develop this critical skill. Over time and with practice, children learn how to recognize the difference between what is important to attend to and what should be ignored.

Consider the attention skills required of children as they play together during free time. During this time, children must focus on a play activity

they chose while blocking out what other children in the classroom are doing. At the same time, they socialize with the children playing alongside them, focusing their attention to what is being said to them so they can make proper verbal responses. When the classroom teacher gives a five-minute warning alerting the class that free-play time will end soon, they must divide their attention on what she is saying and also continue to play as they have been without losing focus. When free time ends, children must stop focusing on what they have been, transition to the next activity, and become ready to focus and attend once again.

In this chapter, we explore the different components of attention, highlighting their crucial roles in children's ability to learn, interact socially, and handle everyday tasks. You'll also see how this skill is best developed over time through practice.

Understanding the Components of Attention

Attention is made up of multiple components that work together to help children as they focus on the correct task, person, or activity, sustain this concentration, and remain capable of shifting their attention to something different as needed. The components of attention include:

- attention span,
- sustained attention,
- selective attention, and
- divided attention.

Attention Span

Attention span refers to the amount of time a person is able to concentrate. In the classroom, it is the period of time children can concentrate before becoming distracted. As children age, their attention span increases (McClelland et al., 2013; Posner, Rothbart, Sheese, and Voelker, 2014). Not only does attention span improve as children age, but their ability to maintain focus on what is happening in the moment is a skill that children learn and become better at as they mature and

practice. Children's attention spans may also vary depending on the activity and whether the child is hungry, tired, or bored.

Consider a time you've attended or listened to a training where the content didn't really apply to you. You may have struggled to pay attention. In contrast, if you've attended a training that was highly meaningful to your everyday life, you may have found it easy to focus and have a long attention span. The same is true for young children: When a task or activity is of interest or meaningful to them, children will demonstrate a longer attention span than when they are supposed to pay attention to something they are not interested in. The good news is, as children grow and practice, their attention span grows with them.

The average attention span by age is as follows:

- Two-year-olds: four to six minutes
- Three-year-olds: six to eight minutes
- Four-year-olds: eight to twelve minutes
- Five- to six-year-olds: twelve to eighteen minutes
- Seven- to eight-year-olds: sixteen to twenty-four minutes
- Ten-year-olds: twenty to thirty minutes

From two to four years of age, children's attention span has doubled. By the time a child reaches kindergarten, they should be able to focus on one activity for three times as long as they could when they were toddlers. In other words, the younger the child, the harder it is to attend to a task, activity, or conversation for long periods of time. With this in mind, children, especially very young children, should not be expected to pay attention to something longer than what is listed above. In the classroom, lessons and activities should extend for only as long as the average age of the children in the classroom. For example, in a multi-age preschool classroom of three- and four-year-olds, learning activities should last for up to eight minutes. Activities in a class of two- and three-year olds should last for a maximum of six minutes.



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Charting a Course for Focused Minds

Do children in your classroom have a hard time starting or completing activities? Do they struggle to remember directions? Are they easily distracted? Do they have a hard time making and keeping friends? *Alert and Attentive* offers practical strategies to help young children develop the attention skills they need to thrive. Learn how self-regulation and executive function skills work together to support attention and focus. Discover ways to create a calm and supportive learning environment that fosters concentration, helps children ignore distractions, and promotes learning.

Discover how to:

- Boost self-regulation skills to manage emotions and behaviors in response to classroom distractions
- Develop children's problem-solving abilities
- Use games and activities to strengthen executive function skills such as attentional flexibility, working memory, and inhibitory control
- Support children's skills in navigating transitions and negotiating conflict
- Create optimal learning environments that promote focus and minimize distractions
- Harness the power of sensory input to support attention and concentration

Alert and Attentive is your go-to guide for creating a classroom where children thrive. With practical tips, real-world stories, and evidence-based strategies, you'll empower young learners to reach their full potential.

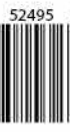


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