



BRAIN GAMES FOR FOCUS POWER: A SET OF SEL KERNELS PRACTICES

“Concentration is the secret of strength.”

–Ralph Waldo Emerson

OVERVIEW

Introduce students to “Focus Power”—the ability to sustain attention and ignore distractions when needed—and then choose a “Focus Power” game to help them develop these skills.

LEVELS

- PreK/Lower Elementary
- Upper Elementary
- Middle School

PLANNING FOR IT

WHY DO THIS?

- If students practice and build executive function skills, they can organize their thinking and behavior to meet goals in order to engage deeply in learning with each other.

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- Integrated into daily schedules as a routine or used as-needed throughout the day
- During a designated SEL block of 10-15 minutes per day for Kernels practice or as time allows
- During a morning meeting, a middle school advisory period, class transitions, after recess, or at the end of the day

TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 15 minutes

MATERIALS

- A “Focus Power” game from the Brain Games Pack:
 - [Hocus, Pocus, Everybody Focus](#)
 - [I Spy](#)
 - [My Hat Has Three Corners](#)
 - [Who Stole the Honey Pot?](#)
 - [Zip, Zap, Zop](#)

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Practice learning how to sustain attention and ignore distractions

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Self Management
- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

How well do you sustain attention on something or someone, while ignoring distractions? What strategies and practices help you to maintain focus and attention (e.g, mindfulness, removing distractions from the room or setting)?

Note: *Click here to download and print a card version of this practice that can be added to the other [Brain Games](#) practices to make an easy-to-use hand-held collection. See the [SEL Kernels](#) pack for additional activities.*

THE BIG IDEA

- Playing Brain Games helps us to build our “brain powers,” or executive function (EF) skills.
- **Executive function (EF) skills** are the mental processes required to focus, plan, and control behavioral responses in order to reach a goal.
- **They’re important because...** They help students to listen carefully, follow directions, use self-control, and think flexibly. These basic skills are foundational for academic achievement, interpersonal skills, perseverance, and critical thinking.

THREE BRAIN POWERS

- **Focus:** The ability to sustain attention and ignore distractions when needed.
- **Remember:** The ability to keep track of, update, and use information over short periods of time.
- **Stop and Think:** The ability to control impulses and to “think before you act.”

INSTRUCTIONS

- Introduce **THE BIG IDEA** (above) and define “executive function skills” and their importance, as necessary.
- Explain that the brain has three powers: Focus, Remember, and Stop and Think. Tell students:
 - *Today we’re going to talk about Focus Power (see “Three Brain Powers” above for a definition).*
- Share the following information about **FOCUS POWER:**
 - **WHAT IS FOCUS?**
 - *The ability to sustain attention and ignore distractions when needed.*
 - **WHY FOCUS IS IMPORTANT:**
 - *It helps students to listen and follow instructions, stay engaged in classroom activities, and persist even when interrupted or when facing challenges. Students also use focus power to pay attention to others and have engaging conversations with peers.*
 - **THINGS THAT HELP US FOCUS:**
 - **Covering my ears** to keep out distracting noises.
 - **Putting on my Focus Binoculars** and pointing them in the direction of what I’m supposed to be learning or doing.
 - **Noticing when I am distracted** and reminding myself to focus.
 - **Going to a quiet spot** to finish my work.
 - **Using my active listening skills** to sit still and keep my eyes on the speaker so I can listen carefully to what is being said.
 - **INTRODUCE THE HAND SIGNAL:**
 - Use **Focus Binoculars** (make circles around your eyes with your hands) when you want students to pay careful attention to something new or important. Say:
 - *Binoculars point your eyes at something you want to see more clearly, and they can block out distractions.*
 - **WHEN DO WE USE FOCUS POWER?**
 - *When I want to listen carefully to a story or learn the words of a new song.*
 - *When I am tying my shoes and I must focus carefully in order to do each step in the right way.*

- *When I am finishing an activity or project, and I need to ignore other sounds or distractions.*
- *When I am feeling tired or frustrated, and I have to work extra hard to pay attention to what I am doing in order to finish my task.*
- Play one or more of the following **FOCUS POWER GAMES**:
 - [Hocus, Pocus, Everybody Focus](#)
 - [I Spy](#)
 - [My Hat Has Three Corners](#)
 - [Who Stole the Honey Pot?](#)
 - [Zip, Zap, Zop](#)

SOURCE

This practice is part of the SEL Kernels project developed by the [EASEL Lab](#) at Harvard University.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

Do you observe changes in your students' ability to focus or maintain attention over time? Which games are more challenging for students? Which games are easiest for them? Why?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND IT

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

Children who are able to effectively manage their thinking, attention, and behavior are also more likely to have [better grades and higher standardized test scores](#).

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Children use [cognitive regulation skills](#) whenever faced with tasks that require concentration, planning, problem solving, coordination, conscious choices among alternatives, or overriding a strong internal or external desire—all key skills for behavioral and academic success.

These skills enable children to prioritize and sequence behavior (e.g., put their pants on before their shoes), inhibit dominant or familiar responses in favor of a more appropriate one (e.g., raise their hand rather than blurt out the answer), maintain task-relevant information in mind (e.g., remember the teacher's request to wash hands and then put coats on before going outside), resist distractions, switch between task goals, use information to make decisions, and create abstract rules and handle novel situations.

TERMS OF USE

Thank you for downloading this resource! Please feel free to share it with friends, teachers, colleagues, and anyone else who might benefit from it.

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Please email us at ggsceducation@berkeley.edu with any questions about our programs and resources for educators.

With gratitude,
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