



# BRAIN GAMES FOR “STOP AND THINK POWER”: A SET OF SEL KERNELS PRACTICES

*“Discipline is choosing between what you want now, and what you most want.”*

-Abraham Lincoln

## OVERVIEW

Introduce students to “Stop and Think Power”-the ability to control impulses and to “think before you act” -and then choose a “Stop and Think 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 “Stop and Think Power” game from the Brain Games Pack:
  - [Simon Says](#)
  - [Silly Stories](#)
  - [Sing It with Style](#)
  - [Freeze Feelings](#)
  - [Wait For It](#)

## LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Practice controlling impulses and thinking before they act

## 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
- Responsible Decision-Making

## HOW TO DO IT

### REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

How well do you practice self-control when faced with a challenging or tempting situation? What strategies and practices help you to practice self-control (e.g, taking deep breaths, walking away from the temptation, counting to ten)?

*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 Stop and Think Power (see “Three Brain Powers” above for a definition).*
- Share the following information about **STOP AND THINK POWER:**
  - **WHAT IS STOP AND THINK?**
    - The ability to control impulses and to “think before you act.”
  - **WHY STOP AND THINK IS IMPORTANT:**
    - *It helps students to wait patiently, to resist temptations, and to think carefully before making important decisions. Students also use stop and think to self-monitor and to reflect.*
  - **THINGS THAT HELP US STOP AND THINK:**
    - **Taking deep slow breaths** can help you focus even when you feel angry, frustrated, overwhelmed, or confused.
    - **Counting quietly or singing to myself** when I need wait.
    - **Thinking aloud to notice and describe how I am thinking or feeling**—this helps me to consider what I should do next.
    - **Telling myself to “stop and think”**—first I pause and give myself time to think, then I decide what to do.
- **INTRODUCE THE HAND SIGNAL:**
  - Hold one hand with palm facing out, and with the other hand point to your head, when you want students to think before they act.
- **WHEN DO WE USE STOP AND THINK POWER?**
  - *When I have an idea to share, instead of shouting I can raise my hand and wait until the teacher calls on me.*
  - *When I need to wait my turn, I can tell myself to be patient: in line at the doctor’s office, at the grocery store, or when playing a game.*
  - *When I want to do something difficult, I can tell myself to move slowly and carefully.*
  - *When my ball rolls into the street, I can tell myself to “stop” before running after it.*

- *When my friend is upset, I can stop and think about whether I need to apologize or ask how I can help.*
- Play one or more of the following **STOP AND THINK POWER GAMES:**
  - [Simon Says](#)
  - [Silly Stories](#)
  - [Sing It with Style](#)
  - [Freeze Feelings](#)
  - [Wait For It](#)

## 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 control their impulses or to think before they act? 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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