



I SPY: AN SEL KERNELS BRAIN GAME

"You will never reach your destination if you stop and throw stones at every dog that barks."

-Winston Churchill

OVERVIEW

Students use their "Focus Binoculars" to guess what the teacher or a fellow student is looking at.

LEVELS

- PreK/Lower Elementary
- Upper Elementary
- Middle School

PLANNING FOR IT

WHY DO THIS?

- Focus Power helps students to listen and follow instructions, stay engaged in classroom activities, and persist even when interrupted or when facing challenges. They also use Focus Power to pay attention to others and have engaging conversations with peers.

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- Integrated into a daily or weekly schedule as a routine
- During a designated SEL block of 10-15 minutes per day for Kernels practice or as time allows
- During a morning meeting, a transition, after recess, or at the end of the day
- Throughout the school year to create a supportive classroom community

TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 15 minutes

MATERIALS

- None

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Practice focusing and attention

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)?
- Take a few minutes to read the [“Focus Power”](#) practice before introducing the game.

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

The game is about practicing careful looking so you can find the object I’m thinking of.

INSTRUCTIONS

- Introduce [Focus Power](#) to students, if necessary.
- Say the Big Idea (see above).
- Gather students in a circle. Say:
 - *Let’s make sure our [Focus Binoculars](#) are working before we play. See if you can catch what I do.*
 - Make a small movement with your face (e.g., wink one eye, blink twice, or wiggle your nose).
- Say:
 - *Now let’s use our Focus Binoculars to see if you can guess what object in the room I’m thinking about. I spy with my little eyes something that is _____ (e.g., choose a color).*

- Students point their Focus Binoculars at their best guess. Ask them what they are focusing on, and the first person who guesses right gets to pick the next object!

MUST DO

- Must require students to ignore distractions/irrelevant information.

CAN ADAPT

- Look for more complicated objects.

ADAPTATIONS

- The first time you play, try starting with 2-3 rounds of guessing, then do a post-game talk.
- To make it easier, give students hints about where they should point their Focus Binoculars. If no one has guessed after about a minute, give a second clue (e.g., location, size, etc.).
- Invite students to take a turn leading the game.
- To make the game more challenging, add more rounds and choose clues besides color (e.g., shape, texture, first letter/sound of the word, etc.).

AFTER THE ACTIVITY, DEBRIEF

- *During this game, were you able to notice small things that you don't normally see? What made it hard? What made it easy? Why do you think that is?*
- *How did you feel when you couldn't find an object?*
- *When are other times during the day that we need to focus, but might have a lot of distractions around us?*
- For more debriefing questions, see [Brain Games Practice](#).

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- For emergent bilingual learners, incorporate color words from their home languages (e.g., say “azul” in addition to “blue” if you have Spanish-speaking children in your class).
- Give students who may need additional support extra time to prepare by practicing with them ahead of time (just the two of you) prior to playing the game with the whole class.

SOURCE

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

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Do you notice students' ability to focus improving?

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.

Greater Good in Education is a free online resource produced by UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center. Visit our website at ggie.berkeley.edu to choose from more than 300 practices that can be incorporated into all aspects of a school community, from academic instruction to staff meetings to engagement with parents.

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

With gratitude,
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