

CORE SKILL: REGULATE

Focus and Attention



What You Need to Know

The attention span of a toddler varies widely. They may focus on a stacking toy for 20 minutes in order to figure out how it works, and at other times it may seem impossible to maintain their attention to do anything. A young child may only pay attention to something for a minute or two before moving on, and that's okay! The best ways to help them build their capacity for focusing and sustaining attention is to allow choice in what they want to do. Follow their lead, join in the play, and sometimes gently encourage them to look or think a little deeper!

Things to Consider

- ◆ Even babies will pay increased attention to something that is new and/or more complex. For example, infants will look at a complex drawing longer than one that only includes a single color. This holds true as children develop, so keeping activities or materials interesting and introducing new activities helps children stay engaged.
- ◆ Some children need time to “soak it all in” before becoming fully engaged, while others will “dive right in.” When a toddler is carefully observing what is going on, they *are* attending and focusing. It is important to give children space when they need it so they can watch what's going on before joining an activity.
- ◆ Focus and attention may look different for each child. For example, some children with disabilities may have a *strong* focus on a toy/feeling/movement/etc. which may impact their ability to attend to an adult-directed task. Others may have difficulty staying focused and may need additional tools, such as a fidget to hold, to help them attend. Consider the child's safety, quality of life, and any special instruction plans when redirecting a child's focus and attention. To support their attention to a task, monitor levels of stress/anxiety and provide modifications as appropriate.

Development of Focus and Attention

Between 9 and 18 months, children may:	Between 16 and 36 months, children may:
Show increasing ability to attend to people, objects, and activities in order to extend or complete an activity, or to join others in a common focus.	Participate in activities and experiences with people, objects, or materials that require attention and a common focus.
	Maintain engagement in interactions with familiar adults and children.
	Choose to join in activities or pay attention to tasks and activities that are self-initiated.
	Maintain focus and attention on a simple task or activity for short periods of time.

Setting the Stage

Children's focus and attention increases when an activity or task is interesting and engaging. Make activities engaging by:

- ◆ Getting children physically and verbally involved by manipulating materials and letting them make simple choices.
- ◆ Making it fun and in the context of play.
- ◆ Capitalizing on children's innate curiosity in the world around them (e.g., go outside, explore freely, and create).
- ◆ Including/following children's interests.
- ◆ Relating things back to children's lives (e.g., “Don't you have a dog like the one in the story?”) or previous experiences (e.g., “This song is about rain. Remember when we got caught in the rain?! We got all wet and cold.”).

For children who may benefit from additional support, consider the following adaptations:

- ◆ Reduce distractions during demanding tasks. For example, while cleaning up, close the blinds if children are distracted by others playing outside your classroom window.
- ◆ Use visual schedules or timers to help children stay on task and encourage them to remain focused as appropriate.
- ◆ Use First-Then statements and/or visuals to state expectations prior to beginning a task.
- ◆ To support children to attend during adult-directed tasks, choose engaging activities that have a clear end point.



Intentional Teaching Practices to Support Focus and Attention

Monday OBSERVE	OBSERVE Carefully observe what children find interesting as well as what children find challenging to attend to. What sparks and sustains their interest? Increased engagement can be obvious (e.g., child shrieking with delight or bringing you the same book to read over and over), or it can be subtle (e.g., quietly turns a sensory bottle multiple times, or returns multiple times to briefly check on the class fish). Also, consider what's ignored. Are there centers or materials that don't hold children's attention long or are ignored altogether? If so, they may need to be revamped.
Tuesday FOCUS	Explain Objectives or What Will Happen One way to increase focus is to explicitly draw children's attention to the objective(s) of the task or what they may experience. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ "Today we will be engineers. We are going to build tall towers with these blocks. We will figure out what makes our towers strong and stable. Then, we'll knock them down!"◆ "After lunch we will clean-up. Then, we will have a few minutes to look at books before we go outside!"◆ Use First-Then statements in-the-moment to help children know what to expect. Pair this language with visuals/visual schedules to support children's ability to stay on task. For example, "First, we will choose a song (<i>pointing to song choice board</i>). Then, we will sing and dance (<i>pointing to 'sing and dance' visual</i>)!"
Wednesday SCAFFOLD I	Promote Child Autonomy Children will show increased focus and attention when activities are connected to their interests, lives, and experiences. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Offer choice/give a say in what they do: do so without limiting centers or restricting amount of time they remain at a center, for example, "Which center will you start in today?" For nonverbal children, offer a choice of two or encourage them to gesture to what they want.◆ Build on interests: "Yesterday, you really enjoyed playing in the water table. I brought some new tools for you to explore in there today!"◆ Connect to lives: for example, a child is starting to lose interest in the book so you say, "Look! This boy is going to the doctor. You went to the doctor yesterday. Did they have one of these (<i>pointing to tool</i>)?"◆ Provide alternative activities: "Oh, you're done with the drawings. You can play in the block center while the others finish up. What will you choose from the shelf?"
Thursday SCAFFOLD II	Promote Active Engagement Gently push children to get involved, think a little deeper, or focus a little longer on a given task. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Get them physically and verbally involved: "When you say 'Go-Go-Go!' the puppet will dance. Say it faster, and they'll go faster! Now, you move just like them!"◆ Ask questions: "Where did it go?"◆ Pose problems: "Uh-oh, the truck is stuck. How can we help them out?"◆ Make predictions: "I wonder what will happen if we..." Then, monitor engagement levels so you can provide support to re-engage children when needed. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ "I see you are getting bored with crayons. You don't want them anymore. How about markers?"◆ A child gets off-task during group dance, so you move closer and dance beside them.◆ A child is struggling with a task, so you modify it to be a little harder/easier to match their level.◆ Offer a sensory break: "You've been working very hard. Let's take a two-minute break before we keep going. Would you like to play with playdough or listen to relaxing music?"
Friday KEEP IT GOING	Consider what you learned from observing children on Monday as well as their reaction to your Focus and Scaffolds. Find ways to build the activities in the Setting the Stage into your regular routines.