

CORE SKILL: REGULATE

Focus and Attention



What You Need to Know

Preschoolers are increasingly able to sustain their focus and attention on a given task, but they still forget expectations in the moment, lose interest quickly, bounce from one activity to the next, or struggle to persist through difficult tasks. The best ways to help them build their capacity for focusing and sustaining attention are to allow them a choice in what they want to do, follow their lead, and modify activities to increase their engagement and encourage them to look or think a little deeper.

Things to Consider

Have you ever mused over a child who may be able to sit for 20+ minutes and play in the sand, but at other times it's nearly impossible to hold their attention and focus for even a few seconds? It's because focus and attention vary greatly and are dependent on *context*—especially in early childhood. Young children will be able to sustain their focus longer if their interest is peaked. In other words, if the content is:

- ◆ Related to their interests, lives, and/or previous experiences.
- ◆ Grounded in direct experiences (e.g., children see it, feel it, touch it, or smell it).
- ◆ Planned so children are encouraged to problem-solve and figure things out on their own (e.g., teachers scaffold rather than give the answers).

For some children, focus and attention may be restricted by a specific activity/behavior. Children with autism spectrum disorder, and other complex needs, may engage in stimulatory behaviors and become preoccupied with a certain toy/feeling/movement/etc. These behaviors are often used as a coping mechanism for stress and anxiety and may direct a child's focus and attention away from an adult-directed task. While everyone engages in some form of stimulatory behavior, some children's stimming may become disruptive or destructive. Consider the child's safety, quality of life, access to the curriculum, and any special instruction plans when redirecting a child's focus and attention. To support their attention to a task, monitor the child's level of stress/anxiety and modify your tasks as appropriate.

Development of Focus and Attention

Between 36 and 48 months, children may:	Between 48 and 60 months, children may:
Focus attention on tasks and experiences for short periods of time, despite interruptions or distractions, with adult support.	Focus attention on tasks and experiences for longer periods of time, despite interruptions or distractions, with increasing independence.
Persist on preferred tasks when presented with small challenges with or without adult support.	Frequently persist on preferred tasks. Sometimes persist on less preferred activities with or without adult support.
Work independently for brief periods of time without adult prompting.	

Setting the Stage

Children will show increased focus and attention if they find an activity or task interesting and engaging. Examples of ways to make activities engaging:

- ◆ Get children physically and verbally involved, manipulating materials, and making choices. Encourage children to help you set up tasks, choose the color material to use, or decide where to complete the task.
- ◆ Make it fun and in the context of play.
- ◆ Capitalize on children's innate curiosity of the world around them (e.g., go outside, explore freely, and create).
- ◆ See list above for additional suggestions related to making content highly interesting to support focus and attention.

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

- ◆ Reduce distractions during demanding tasks. For example, 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 for an appropriate amount of time.
- ◆ Use First-Then statements to state expectations prior to beginning a task.



Intentional Teaching Practices to Support Focus and Attention

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 asking you to read the same book over and over) or it can be subtle (e.g., quietly turns a sensory bottle multiple times, 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.
FOCUS	Explain Objectives/What Will Happen One way to increase focus is to explicitly draw children's attention to the objectives of the task or what they may experience. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ "Today, we will be scientists. We will make observations to find out more about how worms move. Then we will record our findings in our nature journals."◆ Use First-Then statements in-the-moment to help children know what to expect: "First, we will choose a song. Then, we will sing and dance!"
SCAFFOLD I	Promote Child Autonomy Children will show increased focus and attention when activities are connected to their interests, lives, and experiences and they are flexible to allow for individualization. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Offer choice/give a say in what they do: "Which center will you start in today?" (Without limiting centers or restricting the time they must be in a center, rather letting them choose) For nonverbal children, offer a choice of two or encourage them to point/gesture to what they want.◆ Build on interests: "Yesterday, you were really excited to walk on the balance beam. Should we try to build an even bigger one today?" or, "Oh, you'd rather use chalk to write your letters instead of crayons-okay!"◆ Connect to lives: A child is starting to lose interest in the Dramatic Play area. "This baby doll is just like your baby sibling at home. Let's take care of them. Show me how."◆ Provide alternative activities: "Oh, you're done with the drawings. Would you like to work with the play-dough while your friends finish up?"
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: "Here, you pour the powder in for our experiment!", "Please describe what you are seeing to your friends."◆ Ask questions: "What's happening?"◆ 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 level so you can provide support to re-engage children. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ "I see you are getting bored with that puzzle. Should we try another or try doing this one upside down?"◆ 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 or 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?"
KEEP IT GOING	Consider what you learned from observing children 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.