

## THE 7 ESSENTIAL LIFE SKILLS

# Skill 1: Focus and Self Control

In her book *Mind in the Making*, author Ellen Galinsky outlines seven essential life skills that all draw on executive functions of the brain—the network of abilities that allow us to manage our thoughts, emotions, and behavior as we pursue goals. In this issue, Galinsky delves into the first life skill, focus and self control, and offers teachers practical suggestions for promoting this skill in their work with preschoolers.

This is the second article in an eight-part series appearing in the Good Guidance column. *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* is available from NAEYC.

**T**hink about the last time you tried to focus, but the situation around you was noisy and distracting. How did you respond? Could you pay attention? Were you able to remember what you wanted to do or say? If we find it difficult to stay focused, imagine what it might be like for the children we teach! In a world overloaded with information, children need the life skill of focus and self control to achieve their goals. This skill is foundational to all the other life skills and involves the following abilities.

## Focus

Focusing is more than just paying attention. True focus means being alert and engaged and knowing where to direct your attention in spite of distractions.

### Children use their ability to focus when they

- Play games that involve paying attention to details, like I Spy
- Put on their socks, shoes, or other clothing
- Use scissors, a paintbrush, or another tool in art experiences

## Working memory

Working memory involves holding information in your mind while also using the information to make connections between what you already know and new experiences or ideas.

### Children use their working memory when they

- Sing along to a familiar song
- Remember and follow the schedule of the day
- Make a prediction about what will happen next in a story

## Cognitive flexibility

When you switch your attention from one situation to another, follow a new set of rules, or adjust your priorities as things change, you are using cognitive flexibility.

### Children think flexibly when they

- Take on different characters and roles in dramatic play
- Adjust to transitions throughout the day
- Play games where they work on opposites, like dancing slowly to fast music and then dancing fast to slow music

## Inhibitory control

This means controlling your impulses and doing or saying what is appropriate in the situation.

### Children engage inhibitory control when they

- Wait for their turn to speak at circle time
- Are able to go back to building with blocks after their tower is knocked down
- Play games that involve *stop* and *go* directions, like Red Light, Green Light and Musical Chairs

## How can we promote the life skill of focus and self control in young children?

You don't need extra time or supplies to weave these skills into everyday classroom activities. Children learn these skills best not by sitting in chairs, but by being active, engaged,



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and having fun! Here are playful suggestions for promoting focus and self control.

### Promote the strategies that children use to bring themselves under control

Notice what children already do to manage their behavior, like moving to another space when there is too much noise. Encourage this strategy by creating special quiet spaces where children can calm down.

### Help children think of ideas for bringing themselves under control

Have a meeting or discussion with children, inviting them to think of strategies they can use when they are frustrated or angry to manage these feelings. Write the ideas down, and remind children about them at times when they need to use self control.

### Promote children's interests

Children are truly focused when they are interested in and care about a topic. Pay attention to what children talk about and how they play. Set up activities and choose books that build on and extend those interests.

### Play games that have rules

Simon Says is an excellent example of a game that requires children to focus, remember rules, think flexibly, and control their behavior to do what Simon says. To make this game

more challenging, play Simon Says Do the Opposite. For instance, when you say, “Touch your toes,” children should touch their heads.

### Play games that require children to pay attention

Examples include rhyming games, like “I am thinking of an animal with a name that sounds like *pat*,” or word games, like “I am a fruit, and I start with the letter A. What am I?” These games ask children to listen and focus, think flexibly, and use what they already know to come up with ideas.

### Supporting dual language learners

Dual language learners have to work harder than monolingual children to learn focus and self control because they are learning to listen, think, and communicate in more than one language. Many experts believe this extra effort strengthens the skills of focus and self control for bilingual people when they are supported early in life. Make sure the environment is not so noisy that DLLs have a hard time hearing and learning new speech sounds in English. Small groups, individual play with materials that respond to an individual child's interests, and a quiet area are all elements of an environment that supports DLLs as they focus on learning *and* on learning a new language.



“Use cleanup time to encourage children to focus, remember rules, and think flexibly.”



### Read stories in ways that encourage children to listen

When reading a familiar story or singing a favorite song, stop and ask children to finish the sentence or verse. Do they remember what comes next? Also try singing different words to a song, like “Row, row, row your chair” instead of “Row your boat.” Do the children notice? Do they correct you?

### Play sorting games with changing rules

Use cleanup time to encourage children to focus, remember rules, and think flexibly. Invite children to put away toys and supplies by type and return them to their proper homes. Try switching up the rules too—ask children to sort toys first by size or color, and then sort them back to where they belong.

### Have children set goals or make plans, follow those plans, and then discuss what they accomplished

At playtime, have children make “play plans.” What area of the room will they play in first, and what will they do there? Encourage them to draw a picture of their plan or write down words. Later, talk together about what worked, what didn’t work, and what to try next time.

### Help children find and use strategies to delay gratification

Being able to wait is an important ability directly connected to focus and self control. Children who have tools to help them manage their behavior while waiting—like singing a favorite song or thinking about fun things—are ultimately more successful in pursuing goals with less frustration and distraction.

### Conclusion

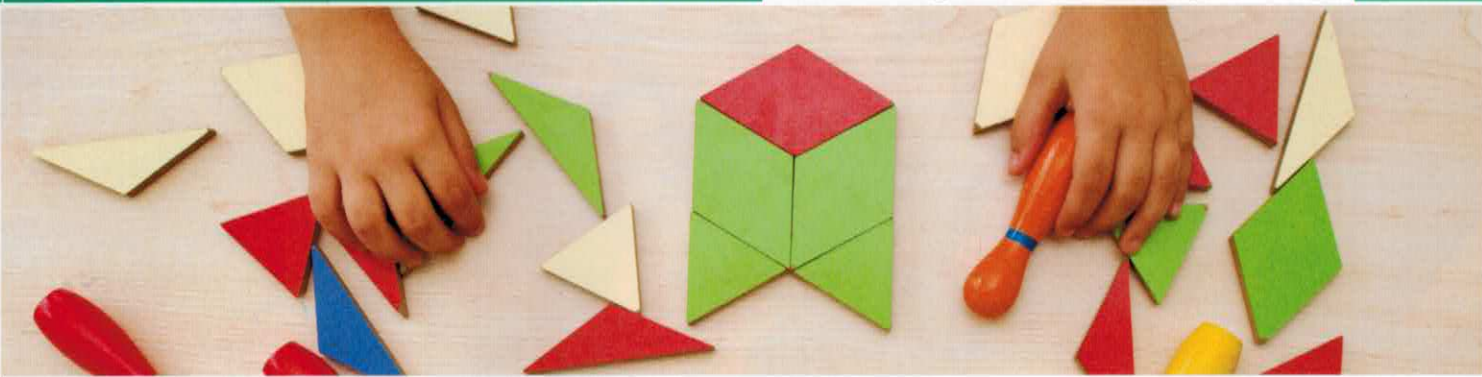
Research has shown that these essential life skills can be taught and improved with support and practice, even with young children. It is never too early—or too late—to promote them. Think of these abilities as muscles: the more we work on them, the stronger they become. And this is just as true for adults as it is for children.

What strategies can you use to practice and improve focus and self control? Take time to reflect on the role of this life skill in your own life, as well as on its importance in the lives of children.

In the next article in the series, we will look at the second life skill, perspective taking. **TYC**



This message is meant to be cut out, photocopied, and sent home with children as a resource for parents! It's also available online (in English and Spanish) at [naeyc.org/tyc](http://naeyc.org/tyc).



# Focus and Self-Control

Self-control and focus are both important skills for children to practice in order to succeed in school. Children play many fun games and activities in the classroom to help them learn these key life skills. Here are some that you and your child can do together at home.

**Swap in different words to favorite songs.** Have fun singing songs with a twist. For example, sing “The wheels on the train go round and round” instead of “The wheels on the bus go round and round.” Does your child notice when you use different words? This game can help children develop listening skills.

**Play games like Simon Says, I Spy, and “I’m thinking of something that starts with the letter . . .”** These games help children practice focusing, paying attention, and remembering rules—all while having fun.

**Play an opposite game.** To help your child think flexibly, try playing a game where you do the opposite of what you say; for example, say “Simon says, touch your feet” while you touch your head. Or say you will dance quickly to slow music, then put on fast music and dance slowly.

**Play sorting games while cleaning up.** Suggest picking up toys of a particular type, color, or shape. “Let’s pick up the blue crayons first, then the red crayons.” Even cleanup time can be fun and help children focus and think flexibly.

**Try singing a song while waiting in line or at a restaurant.** Children who have tools to help them manage their behavior while waiting—like singing a favorite song—are ultimately more successful in pursuing goals with less frustration and distraction.

**Choose books, games, and activities that reflect things your child finds interesting**—whether it’s trucks, flowers, or bugs! Children focus best when they care about a topic. What does your child talk about? What themes come up as she plays?

These activities are adapted from Ellen Galinsky’s article “Skill 1: Focus and Self Control,” the second in her series *The 7 Essential Life Skills*, in *TYC*, volume 9, number 3, page 10.

A message from your child’s teacher:

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