

Concentration workouts

If children can't focus on their learning, how will they progress? **Jeffrey Pflaum** presents three workouts to develop the fundamental skill of concentration and help distracted young minds get back on track.



'Pay attention, please!' Ah, the magic words we hurl at our students out of frustration. As an inner-city elementary school teacher in New York City, I did not want to get kids on task from my exhortations, but from theirs – and from the inside. To this end, I motivated concentration, a fundamental prerequisite skill for learning and learning how to learn, through creative, absurd, challenging and fun activities I called 'workouts'.

The importance of developing concentration

When discussing key skills needed by students in the 21st century, Donald Leu, co-director of the New Literacies Research Lab of the



University of Connecticut, described the 'C's of change as: 'creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, communication, self-control, and comprehension'.¹ Where is my 'C' for concentration, the foundation and precondition for all these skills?

Concentration is defined as the action or power of focusing all of one's attention. As teachers, it can be easy to assume that children have already developed this skill. I try not to assume any sort of ability, especially in today's

technological age of distractions and the rise of fragmented attention spans, as well as ADHD in children and adults alike. Instead, I devote entire sessions to improving my pupils' concentration skills.

My lessons in concentration soon became a required subject, giving children the fundamental skills to tackle unfamiliar and demanding tasks. Practising concentration brought children into the present moment; they were focused and engaged in lessons, ready to learn.

Developing concentration

To begin, it's usually a good idea to explore with the kids what 'concentration' actually means, what happens when it works, and what happens when it doesn't work. Then you can move on to how to fix it if it's not working, and also how to improve and expand it when it does.

Different activities, games, meditations and physical exercises focus children's attention on developing concentration. In a typical concentration development lesson, pupils will:

- perform a given task in concentration
- write about their external and internal experiences
- read their work orally to classmates and teachers
- respond to teacher questions probing the workout.

My sessions focus on the two types of concentration – inner and outer. Outer concentration means focusing on a particular object, place, person or scene in the external world without getting distracted. Inner concentration involves focusing on one area of the 'inside world' – for example, thoughts,

feelings, mind-pictures or experiences. These two types of concentration are interlinked – for example, a child looking up at the clouds in the sky (outer concentration) and making pictures in his or her mind (inner). Combining the two allows children to create opportunities for deeper learning.

When I teach concentration as a vital skill for learning, I start out with the external world, and then work my way internally to integrate both worlds. For obvious practical reasons, I look at outer concentration so pupils can focus on lessons without my constantly reminding them to pay attention.

Workout 1: The staring game

The staring game is a game I played as a child to stave off boredom. It was very simple – we just sat and stared at each other. The first person that laughed or lost concentration 'lost' the game. This activity illustrates exactly how easy it is to get distracted by either your friend (external) or your own thoughts and feelings (internal) and lose focus. It's a very useful way to introduce the idea that concentration is something that doesn't necessarily come naturally, but can be improved with practice.

Begin by pairing children with compatible



partners and move chairs so they face each other. Tell them you are going to test their concentration skills. They must keep eye contact with their friend for ten minutes and keep their focus. If they lose concentration or laugh, that's OK; they should take a moment to relax and then begin staring again.

Once the ten minutes are up, ask the children to write 100 words about their experience. What happened on the outside? What happened on the inside? Give the pupils about 15 minutes to write, then collect them in. Review writings overnight and choose a few to read to the rest of the class. Prepare a few questions to prompt discussion about the extract. You can begin by addressing the writer or the class in general. The aim is to trigger deeper discussion about what is involved in concentration, what happens when it breaks down and how to fix it if it's lost.

To illustrate, here is an example extract written by a nine-year-old pupil about her experiences during the staring game.

She wrote: 'I saw Veronica and it seemed like she was a very nice person. I saw my reflection in her eyes. I felt funny, as if I didn't know what I was doing. I saw black, red, and blue spots in the air. Her colour was reddish. It was difficult to keep looking at her. Then, in my mind, I saw Veronica with a big pitchfork and her hair was standing up. She looked like a witch and hit everybody with the pitchfork. I imagined this big, round, skinny face in my mind. I watched Veronica moving in circles in my head. I really thought I was going crazy. I started thinking mean things about her, things that weren't true. This way I wouldn't start laughing again and could look at her.'

After reading this extract, I would perhaps ask a pupil to summarise the writer's staring experience, before asking a few questions specific to the reading. For example:

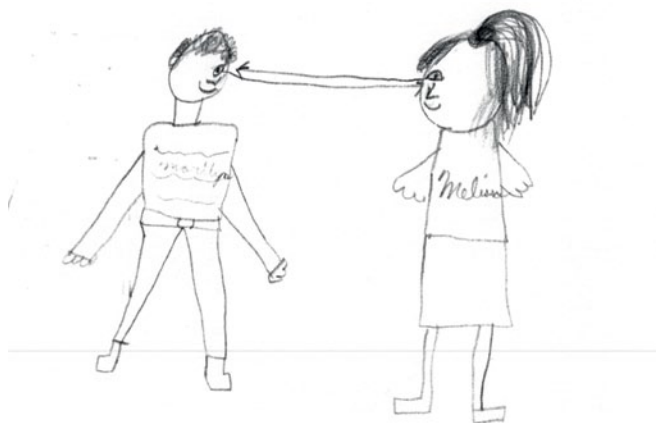
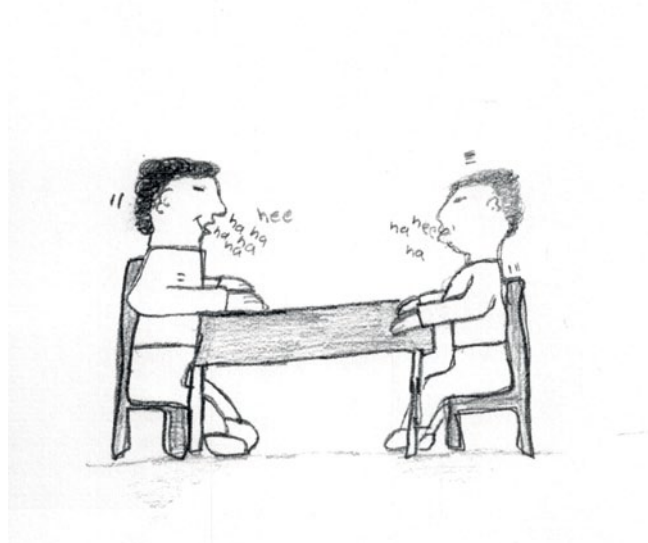
- Did the writer lose concentration? If so, when?
- What 'side-journeys' did the writer take in her mind?
- Why do you think it was difficult for the writer to keep focused on her friend's eyes?
- Why did the writer think she was going crazy?
- How did she prevent herself from losing focus?

It's then possible to talk more generally about pupils' experiences during the task, which will hopefully lead to a discussion on the nature

and importance of good concentration. For example:

- If you lost focus, how did you get it back?
- Did you imagine things while you were staring? What did you imagine?
- Was it easy or hard to play the staring game? Why? Why not?
- Brainstorm five activities in and out of school where concentration is important.
- Draw a picture to show what concentration is.

Emphasise that pupils can become distracted by things going on around them, but also things going on inside them. Likely, they will struggle to focus this first time. You should get an idea of how the children view concentration from their responses to the final few questions above. Remember to emphasise that good concentration comes with practice.





Workout 2: The burning candle

This workout began as a bit of an experiment. I put a candle on top of a desk at the front of the room, lit it, and asked the children to focus on it and nothing else. This activity is the very definition of concentration: to keep one's attention, focus and awareness pointed in one direction, on one thing – in this case, the burning candle.

Have the pupils focus on the candle for ten minutes. Tell them, if their mind wanders, to gently bring it back to the candle. When the time is up, pupils recall and reflect on what they experienced, writing it up in around 100 words. Again, prepare some questions beforehand to prompt discussion. You should create these by looking for images, thoughts, emotions and experiences written about in the text.

Let's look at another example writing, this time from a ten-year-old pupil: 'When I looked at the candle, the first thing I thought of was trying to pay attention. It was hard, but I did. First, I saw a flash all around the burning candle and it was beautiful. Then it seemed like I was getting deeper into the candle, but

it got me dizzier and dizzier. That's when my concentration started to fly away, but I didn't let it go, it was like I grabbed it. When I got it back, I saw pretty colours again. My eyes got watery and it was as if I started seeing things. I imagined when I looked at the candle that I was in space and sitting right in front of the sun. It was marvellous. My feelings jumped when I felt like I was in a burning house and flames touched me. Then I started to think and went right back to the sun. My imagination took over, but then I returned to the candle. It was like I went back to the beginning and the candle was on. I saw the flashing lights again and I was in the classroom.'

Questions to follow the reading of this extract might include:

- Did you focus on the burning candle the entire time?
- If your concentration broke down, what got you distracted?
- How did you get yourself to re-focus on the candle?
- What happened that hurt the writer's concentration?
- Has your concentration ever flown away? How did you 'grab' it back like the writer did?
- Describe one example of the writer's outer and inner concentration.
- How is outer and inner concentration alike and unlike?
- Was the writer focusing on the candle at the end?

In this example, the child lost her outer concentration and went inside, where she visualised mind-pictures that heightened her emotions and conjured up unrelated thoughts. It's important that the children understand that this can happen quite often when you are trying to focus on something external. I like to tell them to follow the advice of tennis great Martina Navratilova when she loses her concentration during a match: 'I concentrate on concentrating'.

Workout 3: The body scan

Previous workouts tested outer concentration skills; this activity's purpose is to find out about children's ability to focus internally, which is key for all school subjects, especially creative writing, reading and art, as well as intrapersonal communication. The body scan takes pupils on a voyage around their entire body, asking them to focus their awareness on different body parts and soothe tightness, stress, or pain.

Many sample narratives and video presentations of the body scan meditation can be found on the Internet, some of which have been written with children in mind^{2,3}. There is a growing body of research that this sort of activity helps children to pay attention and be more focused, improves working memory, reduces stress levels, enables children to better manage their behaviour, and enhances planning, problem solving and reasoning skills.⁴

Your body scan script may go something like this:

1. 'In this workout, I would like you to take a trip around your body, focusing your awareness on different areas. See if you can find any tightness, stress or pain, and try to soothe it. When I say a body part, pretend your concentration is a spotlight shining it. If you feel tense, silently tell yourself to 'relax' or 'chill' to see if it loosens up, then move on to the next body part.'

2. 'Please cross your hands on your desk and close your eyes. If anything distracts you, that's OK – just return your spotlight to the area we were up to and continue. Any questions?'

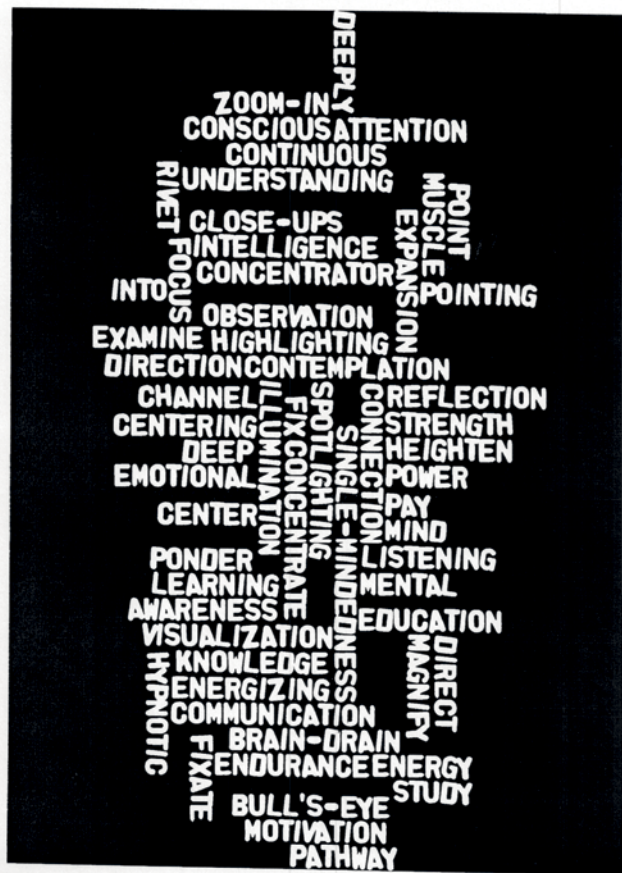
3. Start with the head, then move down the neck, arms, chest, heart, lungs, stomach, back, legs, feet and toes. If you have time, you can focus on more specific areas such as the ears, eyes, mouth, tongue and teeth.

4. Use the same instructions for all areas: 'Shine your awareness spotlight on your (body part). How does it feel? If you're tense, say to yourself 'relax' or 'chill' to soothe it.'

Follow the same procedure after this as the other workouts, with pupils writing around 100 words about their experience, followed by a class discussion.

Here is a rather interesting example. This ten-year-old pupil started well, but his mind then began to wander. He wrote: 'My head was relaxed. It felt warm. My ears were hot.'





The bone on my nose felt cold on the outside and hot on the inside. My lips were cold. The bones of my neck hurt. They felt cold, too. The spine in my back was hurting. My arms were still and felt relaxed. My hands were cold. My legs were shaking. My feet felt very hot. My toes hurt. My brain was hot. My knee itched. My ankle felt stiff and it was also hurting. I almost fell asleep but I woke myself up. Then I thought about lunch. I felt like I was in my grandmother's house. It was really quiet. The radio sounded very low. I could hear my mother talking to my grandmother.'

There were two areas to pick up on here. First, the physical sensations the writer experiences. Second, the drop off in concentration at the end.

Questions along those lines may include:

- What physical sensations did the writer experience?
- Did the writer soothe his stressed areas or not?
- Were there areas in your body that felt stressed? Were you able to relieve it?
- Did you feel better or worse after completing the meditation? Why?
- Is the writer's concentration strong or weak? Why? Why not?

- What happened to the writer's concentration at the end? Where did he go? Why might that have happened?
- On a scale from one to ten, one being the lowest and ten the highest, what score would you give this writer's concentration? What score would you give your own concentration?
- Define what perfect concentration is for you.

At the end of the body scan, the writer's concentration drifted away from the present and into the past (his grandmother's house) and the future (lunch). At one point, he felt so relaxed he almost fell asleep, but woke himself up. Focus will fluctuate during meditations – it's normal – but my question to the pupils would be: 'How did you retrieve it if you lost it?'. Together, we created simple 'self-command' triggers such as 'focus!' and 'wake up!'. We characterised these as buttons the children could press when they needed to snap to attention and leave distractions behind.

The final two questions from the list above gave the children a chance to measure their own concentration levels and verbalise a goal. Putting a score on their concentration encouraged them to want to improve it next time.

Of course, not all pupils will focus on the activity. A few of mine wrote about anything but the body scan! I read these writings out anonymously and we discussed the admittedly imaginative detours as a class.

Extending the workouts

It is a good idea to pick up on concentration development throughout the entire school year. Asking the children follow-up self-evaluation questions will help measure their understanding of concentration and their capacity to concentrate.

For example:

- When do you know you have strong outer and inner concentration?
- 'Concentration is the secret of strength' - Ralph Waldo Emerson. How does concentration give you strength? Give an example from your life.
- Finish the sentence: 'Concentration needs energy because...'
- Finish the sentence: 'Fear and anger make concentration [worse/better] because...'
- Does playing basketball/reading a book/listening to others need outer or inner concentration, or both? Explain.

Perhaps the best assessment of students' understanding of concentration was their ability to come up with their own ideas for concentration workouts, which we carried out together in class with writing and discussion afterwards. Check out these abbreviated samples:

- Concentrate on the clouds for 15 minutes.
- Create a picture of a giant apple in your imagination. Focus on it for two minutes.
- Concentrate on your family by looking at family photos for five minutes.
- Students form a big circle and everyone holds hands with eyes closed. Focus on holding each other's hands for five minutes.
- Stare at or concentrate on a pair of old tattered shoes for five minutes.
- Concentrate on your feelings and draw them as abstract designs on your paper.

The glue between worlds

Famous 19th century psychologist William James wrote: 'The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgement, character and will... An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence.'⁵ The results of our workouts seemed to validate this, as the children's attentions wandered, but after much practice, always seemed to come back.

In my mind, concentration is connection. Without focus, there is no glue between the outside and inside worlds. Our class concentration activities increased the children's ability to stay connected to learning, and it was wonderful to see them applying their insights to other learning situations in school. With more focused minds, our lessons were more effective and the learning environment enriched. I always told them: 'If more of you are with me, if more of you are concentrating and present, the lesson's going to be better. We are all going to learn more and discover a lot about ourselves, others and the world.'

In summary:

Teachers can improve pupils' focus by:

- Practising it as a 'fundamental prerequisite learning skill'.
- Modelling how it works and how to fix it if it breaks down.
- Writing about, discussing and measuring it.
- Creating self-commands for kids to re-focus, such as 'focus!' and 'wake up!'.
- Emphasising the benefits of concentration inside and outside school.

Jeffrey Pflaum is a writer and former teacher with 34 years of experience teaching inner-city elementary school children in New York City. He is a blogger on The BAM Radio Network's blog, ED Words. He has also recorded two podcasts about his concentration workouts for their new show, PULSE: The Creative Imagination parts 1 and 2.

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2. Vigder Brause, C. (2012) Children's body scan meditation. 2bpresent [blog] 8 November. Available at: 2bpresent.com/2012/11/childrens-body-scan-meditation [Accessed 19 October 2015].
3. Zemirah (2012) Stress Bot: Do the body scan. Kids Relaxation [blog] 26 March. Available at: kidsrelaxation.com/uncategorized/stress-bot-do-the-body-scan [Accessed 19 October 2015].
4. Weare, K. (2012) Evidence for the impact of mindfulness on children and young people. [online] The Mindfulness in Schools Project. University of Exeter. Available at: mindfulnessinschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/MiSP-Research-Summary-2012.pdf [Accessed 16 October 2015].
5. James, W. (1890) The Principles of Psychology. New York: Henry Holt and Company. p463

Knowledge trails

1. **Take a deep breath** – Deep thinking requires clarity and relaxation. These can be hard to come by in a bustling, boisterous classroom, but Joanna Haynes has a solution in meditation. library.teachingtimes.com/articles/deep-breath-ttc2
2. **Still minds** – Robert Fisher argues that meditation is an ideal preparation for thinking and creativity. library.teachingtimes.com/articles/still-minds