

THE MINDUP CURRICULUM

Grades 3–5

Brain-Focused Strategies for Learning—and Living



Focused Classrooms • Mindful Learning • Resilient Students

 SCHOLASTIC



Mindful Listening

What Is Mindful Listening?

From the buzz of a cell phone to the wail of a siren, sounds are all around us. Mindful listening helps us choose which sounds to focus our attention on and helps us to be thoughtful in the way we hear and respond to the words of others.

Why Practice Mindful Listening?

Research suggests that students become more focused and responsive to their environment by participating in mindful listening activities, such as Mystery Sounds in this lesson. In fact, training our brains to concentrate on specific sounds helps heighten our sensory awareness. As students monitor their own auditory experience—noting what they choose to focus on and/or respond to—they build self-awareness and self-management skills.

Mindful listening also lays the groundwork for social awareness and effective communication—an important part of the Common Core State Standards. Being able to listen in a focused way to state what others say and to home in on details such as tone and inflection give a listener a clearer notion about the meaning of the words and a better idea for how to respond. This work helps prepare students for following directions, resolving conflicts through discussion, building friendships, and listening critically to news, ads, and other media messages.

What Can You Expect to Observe?

“Students are able to relate mindful listening to times when they listened with care and also to times when they didn’t fully pay attention. They’re much more aware now of when their peers are paying attention to them and when they’re not. *We can get things done more efficiently and with less resistance and conflict.*”

—Fourth-grade teacher

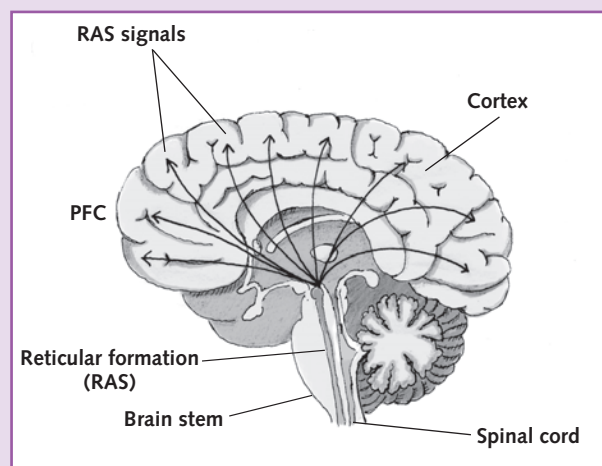
Linking to Brain Research

What Is the RAS?

An intricate network of long nerve pathways lies within the core of the brain stem. This reticular formation, also called the reticular activating system (RAS), helps regulate many basic body functions and connects the brain stem to the prefrontal cortex (PFC) and other parts of the brain. The RAS is a mechanism for keeping the brain awake and alert and is the brain's attention-focusing center. Sensory stimuli (visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, taste) continually arrive via the spinal cord and are sorted and screened by the RAS. The sensory input deemed relevant by the RAS is routed on to its appropriate destination in the conscious brain. What's irrelevant is blocked.

The RAS is critically important because the brain cannot process all the millions of bits of sensory information coming in at once! A student sitting in a classroom likely has competing sensory experiences, such as the voice of her teacher, a chilly blast from the ventilation system, the sight of a bird outside the window, and the aroma of food from the cafeteria. A mindful, focused student is able to redirect her attention to the task at hand, reassuring herself that lunch period will come after math.

Athletes, musicians, scholars, and other "focused" people have "trained" their RAS to choose the most pertinent sensory stimuli. With practice focusing on specific details, students can train their RAS to be more effective. Such practice is especially important for students who have trouble focusing their attention on their work, instructions, or social cues. Sensory awareness activities in this lesson and the others in this unit provide your students with repeated RAS-strengthening practice.



The RAS serves as an "executive personal secretary" to the PFC, forwarding on only what's immediately relevant.

Clarify for the Class

Make a model of the RAS using a kitchen strainer, sugar, and gravel. Demonstrate how a strainer works. Much like the RAS, it filters input, allowing only some things to pass through. Explain that the RAS holds back unimportant sensory experiences (the gravel) but lets important sensory information (sugar) pass on to the PFC.

Discuss: What information from your senses is your RAS allowing through right now? at lunch? during P.E. class?

Getting Ready



Listen Up!

Teacher and students sit on the floor to get started with the listening activity.

GOALS

- Students train their attention on specific sounds and try to identify those sounds.
- Students learn how mindful listening skills can help them communicate more successfully.

MATERIALS

- various common objects for creating sounds
- chart paper
- Mystery Sounds/Scents activity sheet (p. 154)



CREATING THE OPTIMISTIC CLASSROOM

Classroom Management “I know I’m listening if I can repeat what you said exactly.” When students need to resolve conflicts, encourage them to use mindful listening to help them stay focused on what their classmates are saying or feeling. Training students to repeat verbatim what the other person is saying before they respond helps them to concentrate on what that person is saying. This practice gives the listener a chance to calm down and to reflect on the situation. It supports all students, especially those who tend to react too quickly.

**Did You Hear That?**

This girl is listening as others demonstrate volume control with their voices.

MINDUP Warm-Up

Mindful Listening Practice

Build background for this lesson with an auditory exercise students will enjoy and relate to: practicing volume control with their voices. Have volunteers demonstrate how loud or soft their voices are for several different scenarios you give them, such as independent work/library time, group work time, stage performance, or outdoor recess. Emphasize that we can hear subtle differences among the voices for each setting because our ears are sensitive to very soft sounds, such as pins dropping, loud ones, such as jackhammers, and everything in between.

Now play the part of a conductor; close your hands together to indicate the softest sound students can sing and open them progressively wider to indicate that students should get louder, until your arms are fully extended. This should be the loudest they can get indoors. Have students test this range, singing “Ah” as you move your hands farther apart and closer together. If they have trouble modulating their volume, stop and have a few volunteers model successfully. Then try it again with the whole class. This should reinforce students’ sensitivity to sounds and their ability to self-regulate.

Discuss: How might learning to self-regulate your voice be a useful strategy for getting along *and* doing well at school?

Leading the Lesson

Mystery Sounds

Engage

What to Do

Review mindfulness and the parts of the brain from Unit 1, as needed. Initiate a discussion about listening.

- Let's consider why listening is important—for school, for friendships & family, for pleasure (music) and for safety.
- Do you think listening is a skill or a talent? What might be the difference?
- When there's lots of noise around you, how do you pay attention to just one sound, like a friend's voice in the cafeteria? What are some times when you are able to eliminate distractions and focus on a single important sound?

Explain that together, the class will participate in an inquiry experience that will help students develop mindful listening.

Explore

Ask kids to close their eyes and sit comfortably at their desks while you, or a chosen student, stand out of sight with several objects that can be used to produce recognizable sounds.

- Listen as mindfully as you can to the sound I make—and focus on it. If you think you know what it is, keep it to yourself. Record your answer on the Mystery Sound Activity Sheet.

One at a time, make each sound. Possible actions include:

tap a pencil	shuffle cards
crumple paper	tear newsprint
shake coins in a jar	

Give students time to record their answers for each sound, using the Mystery Sound activity sheet. They may include specific descriptions of each sound and/or say what it made them think about.

Finally, reveal the identity of the sound-makers. (Students might enjoy the addition of a drum roll for effect!)

Why It's Important

There are many sounds surrounding us most of the time. Usually we aren't mindful of every sound, because our brain helps us focus our attention by screening the sounds our ears pick up and bringing to our attention only the ones that are important. That filter in our brain is the Reticular Activating System (RAS). Listening mindfully can help us reinforce the work of the RAS.

By concentrating on specific sounds, you can train your RAS to listen very carefully. That strengthens the pathways to the prefrontal cortex.

You are more in control of your own thought processes if you are more aware of the constant sensory input that your brain experiences.

From the Research

Novelty, humor, and surprise in lessons expedite students' attention focus, and the use of these strategies results in more successful encoding of data into the memory circuits. (Willis, 2008)

Reflect

Initiate a class discussion. Make sure students understand that they were using brain energy to concentrate on each individual sound as they listened.

- In what ways is this experience different from the way we typically listen to sounds? If you lost your focus on the sounds, explain what you think got in the way.
- How might this kind of listening affect your brain? What areas of your brain did a lot of work during this exercise?

Record student responses on chart paper.

When you're really listening well, you get the information you need without being distracted. Then you can decide how best to respond.



mindful listening

connect
to
learning

MINDUP In the Real World

Career Connection

Is mindful listening ever a matter of life and death? Sometimes YES! Every day, doctors practice mindful listening on the job. Not only do they need to listen carefully to their patients' bodies—hearts, lungs, and abdomens—but also to the patients themselves. What brings the patient to the doctor? What symptoms is he or she experiencing? Doctors work hard to learn the skill of active listening. Once the patient's medical history is recorded, the doctor can ask informed questions and order the right tests that will lead to the correct diagnosis and effective treatment. In the hospital, mindful listening saves people's lives.

Discuss with students how this and other careers depend on mindful listening. Examples include 911 operators, customer service representatives, and guidance counselors.

Once a Day

Resist the urge to immediately answer a question from a student or colleague. Savor the time to reflect and develop a thoughtful response.

Connecting to the Curriculum

Mindful listening supports students' connection to their own learning process and to the content areas and literature.

Journal Writing

Encourage your kids to reflect on what they've learned about mindful listening and to record questions they may want to explore at another time. In addition, they may enjoy responding to these prompts:

- Make a list of ways you stay focused on listening in school and the strategies you use to put aside other thoughts you have on your mind.
- Choose a sound that you enjoy hearing. Write about or sketch the sound to express how you feel when you hear it.
- Compare and contrast sounds that you find relaxing with those you find unsettling. Then write about the difference between the kinds of sounds; a T-chart might be a useful tool.
- Think of a time when listening carefully to someone helped you avoid an accident or solve a problem. Consider illustrating the cause and effect of mindful listening.



SCIENCE

Experimenting With Sound

What to Do

Organize your students into small groups—or set up this activity as a center learning experience. Each group should line up eight empty glass bottles or glasses and fill them with different amounts of water, increasing the amount of water slightly with each successive vessel. Have students take turns lightly tapping the bottles with a chopstick and then blowing across the bottles.

What to Say

Let's take turns, one at a time, lightly tapping the bottles with our chopsticks. What do you notice when we move from left to right? We can also blow across the bottles and create new sounds. How are the two series of sounds different? (Teacher note: Students should hear low to high notes by blowing and the reverse by tapping.)

Why It's Important

The sounds are made by vibrations that move through the air. Our ears pick them up and our brain understands them as sound. Tapping a bottle causes the glass and water to vibrate. Less water means the vibrations are faster and the pitch higher; more water causes slower vibrations and a lower note. Invite volunteers to experiment with tapping, blowing, and listening to the various sounds.

ARTS

Mood Music

What to Do

Play instrumental music selections (classical, jazz, or Celtic work well) and invite students to listen mindfully and describe what they hear.

What to Say

Close your eyes and let's listen mindfully to these musical selections. Raise your hands when you detect a mood change in the music. Feel free to open your eyes to record your thoughts and impressions in your journal. What words—happy, sad, fierce, gentle—might you use to describe what you're hearing?

Why It's Important

Music helps us focus and practice mindful listening. Invite your students to select "happy music" and play it at times when the class needs a mood booster.

LANGUAGE ARTS

Listening Walk**What to Do**

Take students on a mini-field trip on the school grounds. Then, while they either walk or sit quietly, encourage them to take detailed notes of the sounds they hear and record them in their journals. Return to class and invite volunteers to share their journal entries. Encourage them to think about how their work observing and recording might help them in their writing.

What to Say

Either walk quietly or find a cozy spot to sit comfortably. Close your eyes, and focus your attention on the sounds around you. What do you hear? What do you think might be making that sound? Open your eyes long enough to record each new sound you hear.

Why It's Important

Mindful listening helps us focus our attention and become aware of important things going on around us. Recording and sharing our mindful observations can give us rich and original material for writing.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Whisper Words**What to Do**

Have small groups of students try a version of the game Telephone. A short phrase is passed from one student to the next; the last person must say aloud the phrase he or she hears. Does it match the original?

What to Say

Arrange yourselves in a circle. I am going to whisper a short phrase to one student in each group. That person whispers the phrase to the student on his or her right. Keep going in this way, whispering exactly what you have heard. The last person finally says the phrase out loud. Does it match the phrase you started with? If not, why do you think this happened?

Why It's Important

Every brain hears things differently. Help students understand that careful communication often calls for repetition or other ways of expressing the same idea—and that calls for tolerance and creativity.



Literature Link

The Talking Earth

by Jean Craighead George
(1983). New York: Scholastic.

Billy Wind is a Seminole girl who refuses to listen to her elders. She is sent into the Everglades, where she learns to listen and observe nature in order not only to survive danger but also to understand her heritage. If possible, read this book aloud to the class.

Connect this book to attentiveness, relating to friends, and understanding what another person is trying to communicate.

More Books to Share

Beech, Linda. (1995). *The Magic School Bus in the Haunted Museum: A Book About Sound*. New York: Scholastic.

Stafford, William. (1992). *The Animal That Drank Up Sound*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.

Katz, Bobbi. (2001). *Rumpus of Rhymes: A Noisy Book of Poems*. New York: Dutton Children's Books.

