

THE MINDUP CURRICULUM



Grades 6–8

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 Audio Alert 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 Standards.

Being able to listen in a focused way to what others say and to home in on details such as tone and inflection gives 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 really make an effort to tune in to details of the sounds they hear and point out the nuances of sounds that make them distinct. They’ll apply mindful listening to observing the way people speak to one another—in particular, identifying the tone of someone’s voice and monitoring their own.”

—Eighth-grade teacher



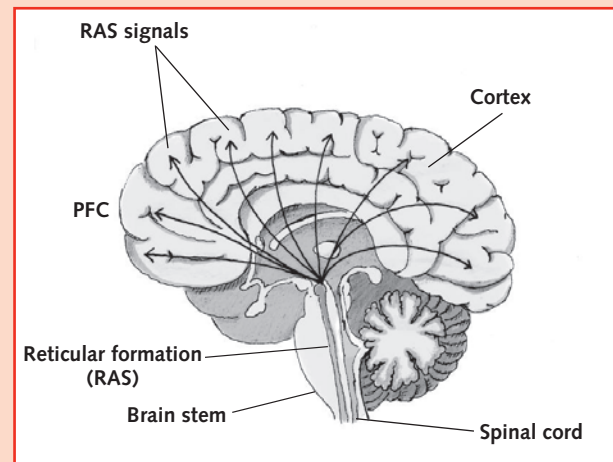
Linking to Brain Research

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 helps keep 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 the millions of bits of sensory information coming in at once! A student sitting in a classroom likely has competing sensory experiences—the voice of her teacher, the vibration of a cell phone, the sight of a friend walking by the classroom, the aroma of food from the cafeteria. It's easy to imagine how these stimuli might cause her to shift her attention from the classroom to what she hopes to eat for lunch. A mindful, focused student is able to reassure herself that lunch period will come after math and to redirect her attention to the task at hand.

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, fine sand, and gravel. Demonstrate how a strainer allows only some things to pass through. Similarly, the RAS holds back unimportant sensory input, but lets relevant information pass on to the PFC.

Discuss: What kinds of sensory input do you think are filtered out by the RAS? (background noise, feeling clothes on body, smell of your own home, etc.) Give examples of situations where you noticed these things. What did you think was happening in your brain at those times?

Getting Ready



Listen Up!

Students record descriptions of sounds they heard during the Audio Alert lesson.

GOALS

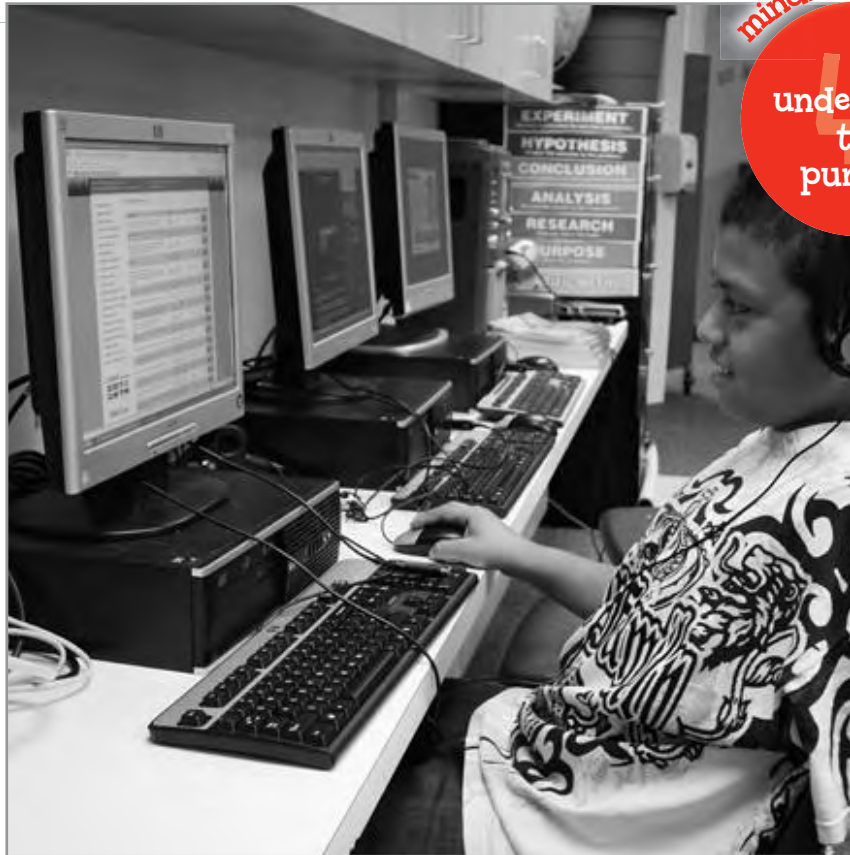
- Students train their attention on specific sounds and try to identify those sounds.
- Students learn how mindful listening skills can help them communicate more successfully.

MATERIALS

- various common objects for creating sounds or a set of sound effects downloaded from the Internet (search for “free sound effects”)
- Audio Alert/Present Scent activity sheet (p. 154)

CREATING THE OPTIMISTIC CLASSROOM

Classroom Management Tell students, “The tone of your voice can say as much as the words you speak.” Ask students if they can detect the mood of a friend, family member, or teacher by carefully listening to the tone of that person’s voice. Help them understand that the tone we use gives our words an emotional charge that can strengthen or hurt our relationships. Encourage students to be mindful of the way they communicate their feelings through speech. Pair up students and have them practice modulating their tone in three different ways using the phrase “I can’t talk right now” and then discuss the feelings each tone conveyed.



Tuned in to Learning

Having students create a file of free online sound effects is a great way to incorporate technology into this mindful listening lesson.

MINDUP Warm-Up

Mindful Listening Practice

Build background for this lesson with an auditory-kinesthetic rhythm exercise. Give students a rhythmic clapping and snapping pattern to follow (e.g., clap, clap, snap, clap, snap, clap). Call on students to create their own easy rhythms (three to five beats), then ask them to try increasingly challenging patterns (six to eight beats).

When students are able to come up with unique patterns and repeat the patterns of their peers, organize the class in groups of six to ten and have them play a rhythmic listening game, seated in a circle. Give each group a basic pattern or have the group come up with its own. One at a time, students present a variation on the basic pattern and repeat their new version, cuing the group to repeat their pattern the third time.

Suggestions:

- Limit the variations to six or eight beats to avoid too much complexity.
- Model how to make the variation rhythmically interesting by dividing or omitting beats, for example.
- In between turns, encourage the group to return to the original pattern, so it remains fresh in students' minds.

Discuss: What did you have to do in order to keep track of the pattern? How is this kind of listening similar to or different from the kind of listening you do in class? in conversations with friends?

Leading the Lesson

Audio Alert

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, what do you do to help you pay attention to just one sound, like a friend's voice on a cell-phone call? 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 students to close their eyes and sit comfortably while you, or a chosen student, either stand out of sight with objects or cue up sound effects you've downloaded.

- Listen as mindfully as you can to the sound I make—and focus on it. If you think you know what it is, record your answer on the Audio Alert Activity Sheet.

One at a time, make each sound. Possible actions:
–drop a hardcover book on a counter top.
–shuffle a deck of cards
–set off a vibrating cell phone ring tone
(Sound effects online may include a skateboard coasting, a waterfall, or the rattle of a roller coaster.)

Give students time to record their answers on the Audio Alert activity sheet. Encourage them to include specific descriptions of each sound—noting that each sound may include more than one distinct sound.

When the listening exercise is complete, allow students to share their descriptions and predictions. Then reveal the identity of the sound-makers.

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—so you can get the information you're listening for more efficiently.

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' attentive focus, and the use of these strategies results in more successful encoding of data into the memory circuits. (Koutstaal et al., 1997)

Reflect

Initiate a class discussion. Make sure students understand that they were using brain energy to identify each sound and to concentrate on the distinct parts of each sound.

- 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?
- How was trying to identify sounds good practice for mindful listening?

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.

**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, attentive 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' observation of their own learning processes and promotes awareness in the content areas and in literature.

Journal Writing

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

- Use a T-chart to show the differences between mindful listening and everyday listening.
- Pick a word or a phrase and mindfully listen for the word or phrase during lunch. Explain why you think you did or did not hear the word or phrase during lunch with your friends.
- Select a class or an activity during which you have difficulty concentrating. Determine to listen mindfully for one class period or during one activity. What did you do to stay focused? Describe your experience.
- Tell about a time when being a mindful listener helped you or someone else in a difficult or dangerous situation.



SCIENCE & HEALTH

Protect Your Hearing!

What to Do

If your school owns or can borrow a decibel meter, have students take decibel measures and create a chart of school sounds, such as slamming lockers in the hall between classes, cafeteria or gym noise, and so on. If you are unable to locate a decibel meter, have students create a “meter” of their own. The fire alarm bell could represent the loudest sound, while the closing of a paperback book could be the softest. Have students chart school sounds between these two extremes. Check out excellent graphics and a video at www.dangerousdecibels.org/hearingloss.cfm.

What to Say

As we've been learning, we're surrounded by sounds and some of these can really hurt our ears—permanently. Damage to the sensitive hair cells in our ears can be done by the loudness or pressure of something we hear. For example, a typical conversation is 60 dB—not enough to cause damage. But listening to music on your earbuds at a high volume (100 dB) for even 15 minutes a day can cause permanent damage in a short period of time.

Why It's Important

Doing an activity to heighten students' awareness of the dangers of noise will encourage them to value and protect their hearing.

LANGUAGE ARTS

What Sounds Similar in These Expressions?

What to Do

Have students share a common phrase in several different languages and listen closely to compare the versions. Encourage students to use the second language they are studying or a home language other than English. You may also want to have students write the phrases and compare the written versions. You may be able to identify similar word roots.

What to Say

How do you say “Good morning” in the second language you're studying or in a language you know other than English? . . . Let's listen to the sounds of each and notice if there are any similarities among these expressions. What's unique about each one? Let's take a closer look at the phrases by writing them on the board.

Why It's Important

Comparing common phrases in several languages helps broaden students' understanding of language structure, knowledge of the world, and awareness of cultural similarities and uniqueness.



LANGUAGE ARTS

Sounds Remembered

What to Do

Ask students to copy the following list and write the sounds they associate with each word. Allow students to add to the list.

calm	anger	excite
comfort	agitate	entertain

Model how to use the sounds with the words to write a 5-line poem focused on mood and sound. For example, for “anger,” students may suggest *cry, shout, yell, scream, slam*.

What to Say

What sounds come to mind when you feel calm? How about angry? Are they sounds from a certain experience you’ve had in a specific place? . . . Let’s gather some more sound details. Close your eyes and imagine yourself in the scene you pictured for one of the words on the list. What are you hearing? Make a list or word web to record the sound words and descriptions. . . . Now let’s put those ideas together in a powerful way in five short descriptive lines.

Why It’s Important

Sounds are often linked to strong emotions, and in writing, well-used sound words can give immediacy to emotions. Using mindful listening as a tool for elaboration can help create moments of emotional intensity in descriptive and narrative writing.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

To Interview Is to Listen Well

What to Do

Have students prepare to interview an important adult in their lives, such as a grandparent or coach. Have them write out three or four questions about that person’s life (e.g., What was your most challenging decision as a teenager? What is your favorite childhood memory?). Review pointers about how to listen well. Set a time for students to share what they learned by paraphrasing the most interesting part of the interview. Then have them write down the key idea or event and tell why that resonated most.

What to Say

Important people in our lives can often tell us stories about the life experiences that helped shape who they are. Let’s discuss how to ask questions that will help you get interesting and informative answers—and how to be an excellent listener.

Why It’s Important

A thoughtful question is a tool to help us listen mindfully. Listening and reflecting on others’ life experiences can help us decide how to act mindfully in similar situations.

Literature Link

The Raven and Other Poems

by Edgar Allan Poe
(2000). New York: Scholastic.

Edgar Allan Poe, a classic wordsmith, used rhythm and other sound elements to elicit emotion. Invite students to read aloud these classic poems and listen to the way the word choice and rhythm create a spooky, chilling mood. These poems can serve as a counterpoint to other poems students have read that elicit very different moods and emotions.

Connect this book to attentiveness, auditory discrimination skills, creative expression through writing, and understanding what another person is trying to communicate.

More Books to Share

Adoff, Jaime. (2002). *Song Shoots Out of My Mouth: A Celebration of Music*. New York: Dutton Juvenile.

Creech, Sharon. (2001). *Love That Dog*. New York: HarperCollins.

Miller, Sarah. (2007). *Miss Spitfire: Reaching Helen Keller*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

