



THE **MINDUP** CURRICULUM

Grades Pre-K-2

Brain-Focused Strategies for Learning—and Living

Focused Classrooms • Mindful Learning • Resilient Children

 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?

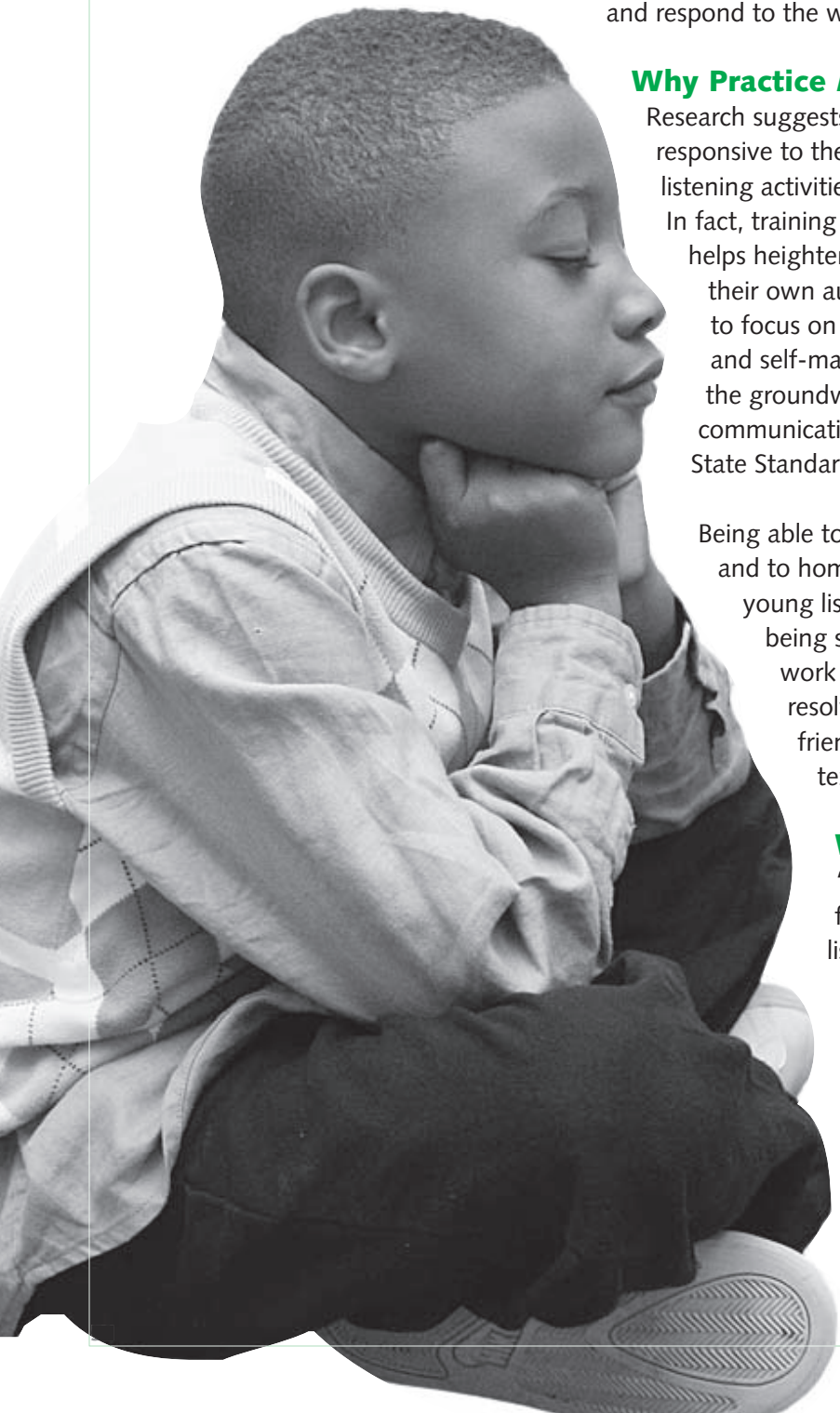
Research suggests that children become more focused and responsive to their environment by participating in mindful listening activities, such as Guess That Sound in this lesson. In fact, training our brains to concentrate on specific sounds helps heighten our sensory awareness. As children monitor their 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 what others say and to home in on important words and phrases give a young listener more context for understanding what's being said and a better idea for how to respond. This work helps prepare children for following directions, resolving conflicts through discussion, building friendships, and listening for important details in texts read aloud.

What Can You Expect to Observe?

“Children love making a game of identifying familiar sounds. They are eager to practice their listening skills because right away they see an improvement in their ability to isolate and identify sounds. This supports our phonemic awareness work: the class is more interested in—and now has more skills in—breaking apart sounds in words.”

—Kindergarten teacher



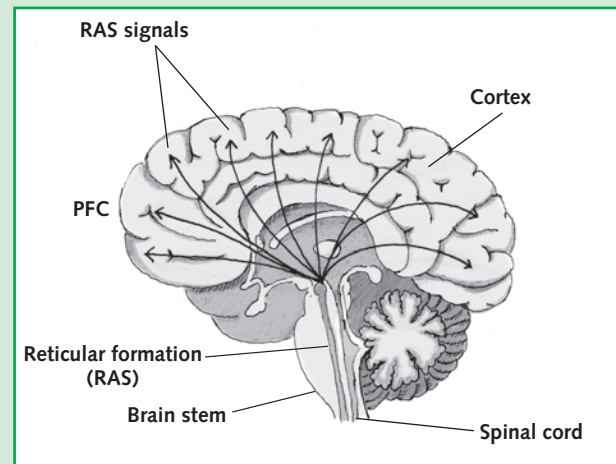
Linking to Brain Research

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 the millions of bits of sensory information coming in at once! A child sitting in a classroom likely has competing sensory experiences, such as the voice of her teacher, a wiggly loose tooth, the sight of rain spattering the windowsill, 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 lunchtime 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, children can train their RAS to be more effective. Such practice is especially important for children 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 children 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 lentils or split peas. Demonstrate how a strainer works. Much like the RAS, it filters input, allowing only some things to pass through. Explain that the RAS lets important sights, sounds, feelings, tastes, and smells pass on to the brain, just as the filter lets sugar pass through. But it blocks unwanted material, just as the strainer blocks the lentils.

Discuss: What are some situations, places, or times of day when it's hard for you to pay attention? When that happens, what do you think is happening in your brain?

Getting Ready



What's that sound?
Children guess what hidden object their teacher is using to make a sound.

GOALS

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

MATERIALS

- various common objects for creating sounds
- bag for holding the objects
- Sounds & Scents activity sheet (p. 154)

Sounds & Scents	
What I Heard	My Guess

CREATING THE OPTIMISTIC CLASSROOM

Classroom Management Once a week at circle time, invite pairs of children to use puppets to role-play a simple conversation that targets a communication skill they need practice with (for example, asking a peer to share a book, tool, or toy). Suggest a scenario and have children act it out first in an unmindful, unfriendly way and then in a mindful, friendly way. Ask the class to discuss the differences between the two conversations (e.g., the way words were used and the tone—polite, angry, frustrated, and so on). Guide children to understand that choosing their words carefully with a friendly intention can positively affect how they get along with others.

**Aha!**

A student guesses correctly and reveals a retractable “clicking” pen.

MINDUP Warm-Up

Mindful Listening Practice

Choose a song with parts that are easy to identify, such as vocals, drums, harmonica, cymbals, or violin, and have children gather in a circle on the rug to experience the music. Tell them that you are going to play them a song with special sounds and ask them to listen very carefully to the music so that they can enjoy all the different parts. As they listen to the song the first time, have them put their thumb up each time they hear a new sound or part. Afterward, list on the board the sounds they heard.

Before you play the song a second time, organize children into groups that will each listen for the sound of a specific instrument or part. Invite the groups to stand or do a special movement each time they hear their special sound and sit when they no longer hear the sound. (For younger children, start with two groups and two different sounds or simply focus on a single recurring sound that the whole group listens for.)

Discuss: How did this kind of listening help you enjoy the music? Let’s pretend each sound was the voice of someone we know. Whose voices do you listen carefully for at home? in school?

Leading the Lesson

Guess That Sound

Engage

What to Do

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

- Let's think about why careful, mindful listening is so important: Can you think of a time when you paid attention with your ears and heard an important sound that warned you about danger?
- What do you do when there's a lot of noise around you to help you pay attention to just one sound, such as a friend's voice on the playground?

Explain that together, the class will participate in a guessing game that will help them practice mindful listening.

Explore

Ask children to close their eyes and sit comfortably on the carpet or at their desks. Place in a bag the first object you've gathered that can be used to produce a recognizable sound.

- Listen as mindfully as you can to the sound I make and focus on it until you no longer hear it. If you think you know what it is, keep it a secret and raise your hand.

One at a time, make a sound with each object, then place the object in the bag. Possible sound-producing actions include:

- crumple a piece of paper
- shake coins in a jar
- tap a pencil
- shuffle a deck of cards

Call on several children to share what the sound reminded them of and to make a prediction about what the object and action might have been. For each sound, let a child who's made a prediction pick the object out of the bag and reveal it to the class.

You may want to have older children record their answers on the Sounds & Scents activity sheet. Encourage them to include specific descriptions of each sound and note what each sound made them think about. Reveal the identity of the sound-makers after children have shared their observations.

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 pay attention: it screens the sounds our ears pick up and brings to our attention only the ones that are important. The sound filter in our brain is called the Reticular Activating System, or RAS. Listening mindfully can help the RAS do a better job.

By paying close attention to specific sounds, you can train your RAS to listen very carefully. That helps the information reach the PFC easily—so you can get the information you're listening for right away.

You are more in control of how you think and how you behave when you pay attention to what you see, hear, taste, touch, and smell.

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 children understand that they were using brain energy to identify each sound.

- How is this listening game different from the way we usually listen to sounds?
- If you had trouble concentrating on the sounds, explain what you think distracted you or got in the way.
- How was trying to figure out the different 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 mindfully decide what to say or what to do.

**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 children how this and other careers depend on mindful listening. Examples include 911 operators, teachers, and veterinarians.

Once a Day

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

Connecting to the Curriculum

Journal Writing

Encourage children 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:

- Divide your journal page into two columns. At the top of one, write "Quiet." In that column, draw or write places or events that are quiet (the library, clouds passing by, a sleeping kitten). At the top of the other column, write "Noisy" and list or draw places or events that are noisy (a firecracker, a crying baby, an airplane).
- Draw a picture of yourself by a lake, in a forest, or on a beach. List or write about the sounds you would hear if you were mindfully listening in that setting.
- What everyday sounds tell your brain everything is okay? Write down two or three sounds or events. Draw a happy face alongside. Then, list or draw sounds that tell your brain things aren't so fine. Draw a sad face next to those.
- **Pre-K & Kindergarten:** Have children find and cut out pictures of things that make sounds. As a group, sort the pictures into "Loud" and "Soft" sounds. Allow each child to select a picture, glue it into their journal, and dictate words that describe the sound of that object.



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

MATH

Multiplication's a Song

What to Do

Practice rhythmic skip counting to introduce children to patterns of repeated addition. Make up your own rhythm or song for each multiple (e.g., set each group of multiples to familiar tunes, such as singing the multiples of six to "The Itsy Bitsy Spider") or find ideas online by searching for "skip-counting songs." Show children how to raise a finger each time they sing a multiple so that they can see how many times they've added or "skipped."

What to Say

I know a way we can add really quickly! When we add the same number again and again, like 2 plus 2 plus 2, we can skip over that number of spaces on the number line and land on the right answers, just as if we did it the long way—on our fingers or by adding each time Let's first practice skipping or jumping on the number line by twos and then we'll try singing the numbers we land on when we keep adding 2.

Why It's Important

When you attach new information, such as math facts, to a pattern children know, you create an enjoyable, easy-to-learn mnemonic device—you are building on an existing neural network. Once memorized, the familiar tune will help them retrieve the new information.

LANGUAGE ARTS

Stories Full of Sound

What to Do

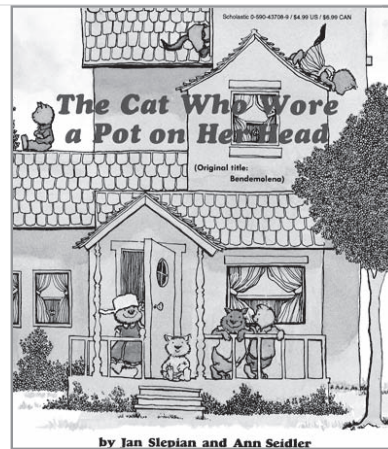
Choose a favorite story and have children brainstorm several sounds they can make when they hear recurring words or phrases, such as a character's name, a repeated line of dialogue, or an action that's repeated, such as walking through the woods. Have them make the appropriate sound every time they hear a word or phrase on your list.

What to Say

Let's imagine we can hear everything that happens in this story. What kinds of sounds would we hear? Let's try to make each sound on our list. ...When you hear me say the name of each sound, you make that sound.

Why It's Important

Listening for specific sound cues in a narrative not only sharpens focusing skills, it also connects children more closely to the text, because they are providing sensory context for the words. This enhances their comprehension of the story.



SCIENCE

Matching Sounds

What to Do

Create sound canisters using ten to twelve clean yogurt containers or similar containers. Select materials that will make different noises when shaken in the containers, such as sand, paper clips, cotton balls, coins, eraser caps, and so forth. Make five or six pairs of sound canisters by filling pairs of containers with the same amount of one of the materials. Tape all lids securely shut. Ask children to shake the canisters gently and match the ones that make the same sounds. For easy and immediate feedback, label the bottoms of matching canisters with identical stamps, symbols, or numbers.

What to Say

Each of these sound canisters is filled with something that makes noise when you shake it. If you shake each one and listen carefully, you'll hear a sound that is different from most of the others, but the same as one of the others. Can you find the ones that go together?

Why It's Important

Matching the distinct sounds builds auditory discrimination skills which in turn support phonemic awareness.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Who Said That?

What to Do

Help children use word choice and tone in dialogue to identify characters and feelings. Select several phrases of dialogue from a book you've read aloud. Ask children to listen to the words, then name the speaker and explain why they think he or she would say these words. For more advanced learners, repeat the phrase with a different tone of voice and invite them to reinterpret the words and feelings.

What to Say

Listen closely to the words I say. You've already heard them from one of our story characters. Be ready to tell me who you think the speaker is and why you think he or she is saying this. How do you think the character is feeling? Now I'll read it differently. How does the message of the words change?

Why It's Important

When children can distinguish different voices in their reading, they are not only able to access and enjoy texts at a more sophisticated level, they are building skills for understanding nuances of interaction among characters and, by extension, among people in real life.

Literature Link

The Cat Who Wore a Pot on Her Head

by Jan Slepian and Ann Seidler
(1980). New York: Scholastic.

Little cat Bendomelina, in an attempt to drown out family noise, wears a pot on her head. A hilarious set of misadventures ensues as a result of Bendomelina's unfocused listening.

Connect this book to mindful listening and being aware of how our environment can help or hinder our ability to focus.

More Books to Share

Grimes, Nikki. (2000). *Shoe Magic*. New York: Scholastic

Showers, Paul. (1993). *The Listening Walk*. New York: HarperCollins

Wise, Margaret Brown. (1993). *Bunny's Noisy Book*. New York: HarperCollins.

