

LATE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

CHAPTER 3

# Strengthening Attention & Self-Awareness



## Overview

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In the first chapter of SEE Learning, “Creating a Compassionate Classroom,” students explored how we all share a natural inclination towards well-being and happiness, and that because of this, we all wish to be treated with kindness, compassion, and respect. It only makes sense that we learn about our minds and bodies so that we can practice kindness towards ourselves as well. One important aspect of this was explored in Chapter 2, “Building Resilience,” which focused on how to understand and regulate the autonomic nervous system. Self-care and kindness towards others go hand in hand, since if we experience dysregulation within ourselves, we may be more likely to cause difficulties for others and less likely to act kindly and attentively towards them. From our own personal experience, we can see how dysregulation can contribute to behaviors and choices that we later regret.

In addition to “body literacy” and awareness of the nervous system, self-compassion and compassion for others are supported by “emotional literacy” and an understanding of how our minds work. For this, we need to be able to observe our minds and our experiences carefully and with close attention. This is the topic of Chapter 3, “Strengthening Attention and Self-Awareness.”

Attention training has numerous other benefits for students as well. It facilitates concentration, learning, and the retention of information. It allows one to better control one’s impulses. It calms the body and mind in ways that promote physical and psychological health. Yet while often told to “Pay attention!”, students are rarely taught the methods by which they can train and cultivate stronger attention. In SEE Learning, attention is not cultivated through force of will, but by repeatedly and gently cultivating opportunities for practice, just like any other skill.

Students have no trouble paying close attention to things they find interesting. The problem is paying attention when things are less stimulating or when there are distractions that appear more worthy of attention. Therefore, this chapter takes a multi-pronged approach to attention training. First, it introduces the idea of attention training and its potential benefits. Second, it shows students that when we pay attention to things, we may find them more interesting than we initially thought. Third, it introduces attention exercises that are a bit more stimulating and therefore likely easier. Lastly, it introduces attention training with objects of attention that are more neutral and less stimulating, like the simple act of walking or paying attention to one’s breath. Throughout, students are invited to notice what happens to their minds when they are able to pay attention with calmness, stability and clarity.

In Learning Experience 1, “Exploring the Mind,” students use an activity called the “Mind Jar” to explore what is meant by “mind.” In SEE Learning, “mind” is a broad category that includes

subjective, first-person experience: thoughts, emotions, attitudes, memories, feelings, and so on. These processes naturally also involve the body, so mind and body are understood as interconnected. At a more advanced level, the mind also involves processes that are not always immediately obvious to us: associations, unconscious or automatic processes, and so on.

The purpose of exploring what we mean by mind is two-fold in SEE Learning: first, so that students can gradually develop a “map of the mind,” meaning an understanding of mental processes, including emotions, and second, so that students can understand what it means to pay attention to our minds and cultivate attention as a skill, particularly for gaining greater insight into mental processes.

Learning Experience 2, “Exploring Attention,” helps students investigate what attention means, and how it involves both the senses and the mind. By learning to pay attention to attention itself, students can discover that they can strengthen attention much like building a muscle or developing a skill. While it takes practice, it gets easier over time.

Learning Experiences 3 and 4, “Cultivating Attention in Activities Part 1” and “Part 2,” help students explore the various things to which we can pay attention, including actions, and also why we would strive to cultivate attention. One reason is that attention to our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors helps us catch emotional impulses before they become problematic: that is, we become better able at catching the spark before it becomes a forest fire.

This leads to the realization that attention training, while of great help in learning in general, is also especially important in supporting self-care. The learning experiences therefore introduce students to three facets of attention training that are especially important for self-care: (1) Awareness, (2) Heedfulness, and (3) Mindfulness.

In SEE Learning, “mindfulness” means retaining something in one’s mind and not forgetting it, getting distracted, or losing sight of it. If one wants to concentrate on studying for a test, but one becomes distracted by a song and starts to daydream, then one has lost mindfulness of what one set out to do. If one commits to doing something, but then forgets all about it, then one has lost mindfulness of that commitment. Mindfulness is therefore not only important with regard to attention, but with regard to one’s ethical values and commitments. In that sense it goes alongside compassion and supports it. The term “mindfulness” is defined specifically in SEE Learning and this may differ from how it is used in other programs, so a section below explains these differences. “Mindfulness” as used here means a precise focus or placement of the mind for the purpose of retention.

“Heedfulness” means being cautious and careful with regard to things that could cause problems for oneself or others. If one becomes aware that the stovetop becomes very hot while one is cooking, then one will take a stance to avoid getting burned and will be heedful of it. Similarly, if one gains a critical insight that one has a tendency to hurt others with sarcasm or ridicule, then one can become heedful of one’s speech.

Supporting both of these is “awareness”: being aware of what is going on in the mind, in the body, and in one’s surroundings in the present moment. Without being aware of what is going on in one’s mind, one cannot notice that one is about to react in a harmful way, and therefore one cannot retain mindfulness or practice heedfulness.

Learning Experience 5, “Cultivating Attention on an Object,” helps students explore how to focus their attention on a single object, such as the breath, and sustain awareness of it over time in order to build the muscle of attention. Because the breath is not a particularly stimulating object of attention, it can be very suitable for some students in the cultivation of attention. The objective here, if attention training is to support cognitive control, is to develop both clarity and stability. Here, stability means that one’s attention stays on the chosen object of focus and is sustained over time without being pulled away by distraction to something else. Clarity means that the mind is not dull, lax, or lethargic, but rather engages its object of attention with alertness and vividness. Hence, one can have stability of attention without clarity (like listening to a lecture but with a foggy or sleepy mind), and one can have clarity without stability (being very alert to what is happening but having one’s attention flitting from thing to thing due to distraction and an inability to focus).

As students cultivate their attention to a greater degree, these concepts become important to address. Otherwise, students can inadvertently start to cultivate a dull state of mind when they do their reflective practices, akin to taking a nap. This would be a lack of clarity. Or students could be daydreaming, which would not lead to stronger attention. This would be a lack of stability. Neither is conducive for learning or for cultivating emotional literacy.

For many students, mindful attention to activities and the breath can lead to relaxation. For some, however, the attempt to maintain focus on a single activity or object can feel unpleasant and can increase anxiety. It is therefore recommended that you wait to implement these learning experiences until after your students have developed a degree of familiarity with the practices covered in Chapter 2, “Building Resilience.” Those practices can lead to a greater relaxation in the body that then makes the cultivation of attention easier, and they also give students valuable tools for self-regulation should focused attention lead to anxiety. As noted in Chapter 2, the resiliency skills also

become part of students' toolkits to assist them when they are experiencing difficulties. Teachers are encouraged to always provide choice, so that students can disengage from specific practices if necessary or choose activities that are most helpful to them.

Learning Experience 6, "Self-Awareness," further explores the relationship between the cultivation of attention and an increase in self-awareness. Up to this point, previous learning experiences have covered attention to the senses, to sensations, to activities, and to a particular object, such as the breath. This final learning experience explores using attention to look at the mind itself. Just as students can learn to pay attention to external things, they can also learn to pay attention to their own thoughts, emotions, and feelings. This is called meta-awareness or meta-cognition.

This learning experience introduces the practice of paying attention to the mind itself non-judgmentally. It also starts students on the journey of developing a "map of the mind," whereby they create for themselves the categories of their experience and how they relate to each other: attention, awareness, sensations, emotions, thoughts, reactions, and behaviors.

Learning to observe one's thoughts and emotions without immediate judgment and reaction serves to help create a "gap" between stimulus and response. This is very important for impulse control. As Viktor Frankl, author of the classic work *Man's Search for Meaning*, writes, "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."

### **A Note on the Term "Mindfulness"**

The term "mindfulness" has become very popular over the past decade and is now applied to a variety of things and a variety of practices, many of them quite distinct from historical origins. One of the most popular definitions of mindfulness describes it as a type of non-judgmental awareness of the present moment. Many have argued over whether mindfulness is a spiritual practice, a secular one, or both; or whether it necessarily involves meditation or can be cultivated without meditation. Because of this ongoing debate, SEE Learning chooses to focus more specifically on attention, a faculty that everyone has, and that has been closely studied by psychology and neuroscience for decades. While some may question the universality of the term "mindfulness," there is no question about the universality of attention.

In some mindfulness programs, mindfulness is described as present-moment non-judgmental awareness. In SEE Learning, mindfulness refers to the ability to remain mindful of something of value, to keep it in mind, and to not forget it or be distracted from it. It is similar to the idea of retention.

For example, if I need to remember my keys, it is mindfulness that helps me do so; if I forget my keys, it is because I had a lapse of mindfulness. More importantly, students will later learn that one can also be mindful of one's values and commitments; indeed, this is vital to developing ethical literacy. Mindfulness is one of the key things that helps us stay true to our values and act accordingly, whereas "forgetting ourselves" is a common cause of acting out of alignment with our values.

SEE Learning also retains the term "mindfulness" in describing well-known practices such as "mindful listening," "mindful walking," etc., because they are common conventions. If your school prefers, however, you can substitute other terms such as "active or attentive listening," "attentive eating" or "attentive walking." Whichever term you find best for your situation, what is important is that students come to understand the value of cultivating attention and using that attention to develop discernment with regard to their internal and external situations.

### **Student Personal Practice**

Like any skill, attention training takes time and repeated practice. This practice can be informal, such as having an intention to pay attention to what one is doing in general, or they can be more formal. A number of reflective practices are included here as examples of formal practice, and you can focus on the ones that your students enjoy most. You can start with very short sessions of only a few minutes each and then gradually build up as appropriate for your class. It is likely that the more familiar your students are with the practices in Chapter 2, "Building Resilience," the easier it will be for them to engage in the attention training practices of this chapter. It is suggested that you begin your practices first with a grounding / resourcing activity and then move into an attention training activity. Remember that just as with the practices of Chapter 2, student preferences with regard to individual practices may differ. Be open to students choosing an attention training practice that best fits them.

Like any skill, attention can be cultivated but will take time. Although there are 7 learning experiences in this chapter, your students are unlikely to gain proficiency in the skills and practices in only 7 sessions. Repetition is essential, and patience is a virtue. Be on the lookout for students sharing their experiences of insights or gained proficiency that may come from the practices you are doing with them. For example, a student may share that they reacted differently to a tense situation or noticed something different in their emotions or thoughts. These are common experiences when one begins to cultivate attention and pay more attention to one's mind.

### **Teacher Personal Practice**

Your own personal practice of attention training and mindfulness will give you more confidence when leading your students, particularly when it comes to the reflective practices. There are a host of resources online for cultivating a personal mindfulness or focused attention practice, and the SEE Learning website will include recommendations of such resources.

### **Further Reading and Resources**

For further reading on neuroplasticity and attention training, we recommend Sharon Begley's book, *Train Your Mind Change Your Brain*.