

CORE SKILL: REGULATE

Focus and Attention



What You Need to Know

Infants do not develop the skills and coordination needed to track and follow people and objects until around 3 months of age. And once these basic skills are set in motion, babies are only able to sustain attention on a single thing for short periods of time. Younger infants, for example, cannot be expected to attend to something for more than a few seconds, and older infants for no more than 1-2 minutes! This short attention span reflects infants' growing curiosity and desire to explore the new sounds, sights, and experiences in the world around them. It is unlikely that an infant will stay interested and engaged in one interaction or activity for too long – and this is okay! In fact, the best ways to help infants build their capacity for focusing and sustaining attention are by fostering this exploration through engaging interactions, providing them with stimulating toys and materials, offering choices, and following their lead in play.

Things to Consider

- ◆ Follow infants' lead to foster their focus and attention by being attuned to and responsive to their level of engagement and interest. Look for infants' cues (e.g., turning or crawling away, or looking toward another object) and modify activities and materials where possible to follow *their* interests. Don't try to force an infant to continue playing with something that they are not interested in.
- ◆ Infants pay increased attention to things that are new and/or more complex. For example, infants will look at a complex drawing longer than one comprising just a single color. This continues to hold true as infants develop, so keep activities and materials interesting and introduce new activities help to children to stay engaged.

Development of Focus and Attention

Between birth and 9 months, infants may:	Between 8 and 18 months, infants may:
Develop some ability to filter out distracting sensory stimuli in order to focus on and attend to important people/objects in the environment with support.	Show increasing ability to attend to people, objects, and activities in order to extend or complete an activity, or to join others in a common focus.
Show increasing ability to continue interactions with familiar adults or toys for more than just a brief time.	Show willingness to repeat attempts to communicate or to repeat actions to solve a problem even when encountering difficulties.

Setting the Stage

Infants will show increased focus and attention if they find an activity or task interesting and engaging. Examples of ways to make activities engaging:

- ◆ Provide materials that are developmentally appropriate and stimulating – include objects that naturally draw infants' sense of sight, sound, and touch (e.g., toys that play music or make sounds, light up, are colorful or high contrast, and are interactive).
- ◆ Capitalize on infants' innate curiosity in the world around them by providing variety (e.g., go outside, rotate through toys, and allow them to explore freely).
- ◆ Include/follow infants' interests.
- ◆ Engage with infants by playing interactive games (e.g., peek-a-boo, or pat-a-cake).



Intentional Teaching Practices to Support Focus and Attention

Monday OBSERVE	OBSERVE Carefully observe what each infant finds interesting, as well as what they find challenging to attend to. What sparks and sustains their interest? Increased engagement can be obvious (e.g., flapping arms, bouncing, or smiling) or it can be subtle (e.g., repeatedly looking toward a toy or person). Also, think about which infants naturally attend to social interactions or pay attention to what others are doing on their own, versus those that need more direct prompting. Use this information to inform how you interact with each infant!
Tuesday FOCUS	Explain Objectives or What Will Happen Engage infants' by drawing their attention to activities and materials using gestures and words. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Use exaggerated gestures, expressions, and movements to draw attention.◆ While holding up and modeling how a toy works, say, "Oooh! I wonder what this does?"◆ "I wonder what you will play with next... this rattle (<i>shake rattle</i>)? Or this ball (<i>roll ball</i>)?"
Wednesday SCAFFOLD I	Promote Child Autonomy Infants show increased focus and attention when activities are connected to their interests. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Offer choice: Provide access to a variety of materials and tune into infants' interests to help them engage and play with the things that most interest them. Avoid placing or directing an infant to a specific "station" or area of play.◆ Build on interests: Use what you know about infants' interests or previous play behavior to purposefully select certain materials or toys that you predict they will enjoy.◆ Be flexible: Infants' attention spans are short, so be prepared to move around from activity to activity in order to keep them engaged. Also keep in mind that infants love repetition, which may mean playing with or doing the same thing over and over.
Thursday SCAFFOLD II	Promote Active Engagement Gently push infants to engage in or try new things using exaggerated gestures, comments, or questions. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Narrate actions: While making eye contact and with a smile, "Wow! You love that toy, don't you!"◆ Join in their play: "You're pushing the train. Choo! Choo!"◆ Ask questions: With a puzzled look on your face and exaggerated gasp, "Uh-oh, where did it go?"◆ Pose problems: "Oh no, the truck is stuck (<i>while pointing to the truck</i>)! What can we do to help?" Monitor engagement level so you can provide support to re-engage infants. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ If you notice an infant looking away or toward something else, move closer to the object of interest and ask, "Do you want to play with these instead?"◆ If an infant is sitting and staring at a toy, move closer and model/encourage play. If they are still uninterested, try another activity.
Friday KEEP IT GOING	Consider what you learned from observing infants on Monday as well as their reaction to your Focus and Scaffolds. Find ways to build the activities in the Setting the Stage into your regular routines.