

# Focus

*Move Together. Think Together. Be Together.*



## Why Focus on Focus?

We have many competing distractions, and yes **STRESS**, in our lives that can make it difficult to focus. Focus is not something that only adults struggle with, but children do too. When we are better able to focus, or concentrate, life can feel less overwhelming. It's not always easy, is it? Making the effort to bring focus to our family team is important. Children can better tackle schoolwork, chores, and even the important art of play. Many say play is the “work” of children, but it is really the work of all of us. Do it together as a family team! You can move together, think together and be together to gain focus! Go team!

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## Move Together to Bring Focus to Your Family Team!

Believe it or not, simple [breathing exercises](#), [physical activities](#) and [physical exercise](#) can bring great focus to our brains! It can bring calm to our bodies and minds. It can make us feel more happiness! Think about what movement is needed at the time. Maybe just a simple stretch break, maybe a quick physical activity (a game of catch), or just getting outside to get the “ants out of our pants”. Maybe getting a good 30-60 minutes of exercise is what we need to really bring our brains into focus and our bodies into calm. Doing these activities to bring focus to our lives as a family team can be FUN for you and your children.

## Think Together to Practice Focus as a Team

Thinking together can help you and your children focus. Sometimes [problem-solving together](#) can help your child get through an academic hurdle. We can think about nutrition together. Nutrition is so important for our brains to feel focused. Meal planning and prepping together is a great activity to do together. Don't forget to have them help you with clean up. Play games together to help with focus. It could be a physical game or exercising, a board or a card game, or just discussing what we are grateful for that day. Another great way to focus is doing mindfulness exercises together. Practicing focus is a great skill for the whole family, and a great way to think together!

## Be Together and Improve Focus for Your Family Team!

Whenever possible, just being together can help us relax and regain focus. Cooking together, cleaning together, playing together, or doing any of the ideas above can help us regain focus. Finding ways to be together that focus on our family team can reduce stress. It is one of the best ways to regain and increase our ability to focus. It is good for you and your children! Enjoy being together and practicing focus...and please don't forget to play!

## “Why Can My Kids Focus Playing Video Games or On Social Media, But Not Other Things?”

It can be extremely easy for children, adolescents, and adults to “focus” on video games and social media. But is it really focus? Is it the same as when we need to focus on a busy family calendar, focus on sifting through mail and paying bills, focus to get a report done on time, or focus on a homework assignment? Is it the same as focusing on our own well-being? The appearance of focus that video games and social media present can actually cause long term problems to truly focus on other life tasks.



All visual media (screen time) can give us an escape, and sometimes a needed one if it is something that brings us joy. *In moderation of course.* The danger is that video games and social media can release a great deal of dopamine in our body. The endorphins released when we “level-up” in a game or get a “like” on a picture release dopamine to our pleasure receptors in the brain. While children can play non-violent video games in small doses, the challenge happens when the brain craves more and more dopamine. It can cause a type of addiction. Once the need for more and more dopamine occurs, if the brain goes without that boost, you may notice struggles with mood and focus. We also know that social media is “gamified” like video games. That is why people look for “likes” or other reactions, or comments on our social platforms. Social media platforms are built to give us endorphins to keep us engaged and scrolling.

We can all try to give up screen time more. Be aware that some children and adults experience a kind of “detox” when this happens. For a couple days, or even weeks, people may be irritable or anxious. Then something miraculous happens. Most people feel happier and more able to FOCUS.



**Need guidance on screen time for kids at different ages?** Check out Common Sense Media [here](#).

To learn more about the **effects of social media on all of us**, there is a great documentary streamed on Netflix called “The Social Dilemma”. Check out their website [here](#).

**⚠️ An important note:** Violent visual media (video games, television, movies) has the risk of possible serious effects on

child and adolescent brain development and behavior and is one of the most addictive forms of visual media for many. If you want to learn more, here is a great article from the American Pediatric Association [here](#).

Three important take-aways from the linked article on violent visual media above, and how it can affect focus:

- Children may become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others. (It may be hard for them to focus on understanding others and their own emotions).
- Children may be more fearful of the world around them. (If a child is afraid, they cannot properly focus).
- Children may be more likely to behave in aggressive or harmful ways toward others. (Not being able to regulate our own behaviors can make it extremely hard to gain focus).

## Our Brains Are Not Built to Multi-Task; Sabotaging Our Focus



Many of us do something called “*multi-tasking*”. Research has proven that what we are *really* doing is “*task-switching*”. This means our brain is quickly reorienting to another task, and then back and forth repeatedly. This takes a huge amount of mental energy and eliminates our ability to truly focus. It gives us the illusion of productivity, while making us less productive and “brain fried”. It can be hard to focus with all the distractions and demands on us - children and adults.

Whenever we can, we need to focus on a task without distraction for a given amount of time, take breaks that rejuvenate our bodies and brains, and come back to what needs to be done focused. You can model and guide your children on how to avoid “multi-tasking”, or more accurately avoid task-switching.

### Tips to Avoid Multi-Tasking (task-switching) and Increase Focus

- **Create quiet** - When you decide to work on a task, turn off your phone ringer and notifications, close all social media and email...unless you are working on an email or checking emails as your task.
- **Create space** - Find an area that is most likely to be undisturbed. Close the door if possible. Ask not to be interrupted for the set time you would like to work on the task.
- **Be strategic** - Prioritize tasks and check things off the list as you go.
- **Create time** - Schedule a block of time you will be working on the task and protect it. Equally, you can schedule a block of time to check social media, texts, and email. Consider blocking time for physical activity and family time! When we block off time for tasks, we can focus better and check them off the list.
- **Take Breaks** - Take *meaningful breaks* that refuel you. For example, “I am taking a 20-minute mindful walk at lunch”.
  - *A meaningful break means getting up or even removing yourself from that space. Try stretching, breathing exercises, a walk and talk with a friend, co-worker or your child, or getting some water and a healthy snack. Come back focused and recharged.*

**Important note:** Children learn to focus on tasks longer as they get older. It is important to understand developmentally how much time to expect them to focus on a task. And obviously, tasks we are interested in will be easier to focus on. There can also be other factors that affect focus. This article [here](#) has helpful information around this topic.



## 5 Quick Activities to Increase Focus

- **20 Minutes of Brisk Walking** - The picture below shows brain scans. On the left is the brain after sitting quietly for 20 minutes. On the right is the brain after 20 minutes of walking. Cooler colors mean less activity. Notice the brain to the right has warmer colors and a lot of activity. Imagine how much FOCUS the brain on the right can have.



Research/scan compliments of Dr. Chuck Hillman, University of Illinois

- **Meditation for Focus** - Multi-tasking is one of the most common ways we can lose our attention and focus. Meditation for just 10 minutes can increase your ability to re-engage and re-focus. You and your children can both benefit. Check out this 8-minute InPACTatHome meditation video by Heather Lewis [here](#).
- **Chair Yoga or Chair Stretches** - Check out this 6-minute video with guided stretches for younger children [here](#). For adolescents and adults, check out this quick article with a 2-minute video modeling some simple stretches you can do in a chair or sitting at your desk [here](#).
- **Mindful Walking** - Check out this quick article from “Mindful” with audio for a 10-minute mindful walk [here](#).
- **Create a Break Basket** - Try this [worksheet](#) from Sanford Health for you and your children to visualize what you want in your basket. It could be a basket, bucket, or bag. Make sure you have it at the ready when you or they need to take a break. Some ideas to fill your basket: art supplies, cards, books, a device to play music, a small jigsaw puzzle, word game puzzles, or fidgets (squish ball, silly puddy, stress ball). Many of these items you can get at “dollar” or thrift stores, or you already have them in your home. 😊

## Adolescents Can Achieve Wellbeing though Focus!

Dan Siegal, M.D., created a great video on the Adolescent Brain (adolescence is typically defined as ages 10-19). The video can be helpful to understand the adolescent brain, how it works, and how to use *mindsight* with attention and focus to achieve well-being. Take a moment to watch [here](#).

- In the video we learned about using focus and attention to help shape the brain using mindsight exercises. Mindsight includes practicing insight into yourself, empathy (the ability to understand and share the feelings of another), and integration of the brain. Some good ways to achieve mindsight are practicing presence in “the here and now” and mindfulness exercises.
- For a simple start, try this “10 Minute Mindful Movement for Focus” with your child [here](#). While meditation can be hard for some at first, give it a try, you might be surprised!

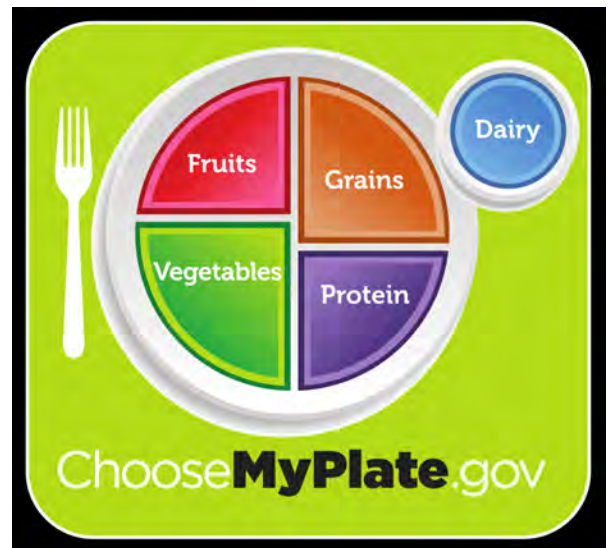


## Focus with Food

One of the best resources for children and adults to learn about nutrition and what should be on our plates is [www.choosemyplate.org](http://www.choosemyplate.org). What we put in our bodies has a definite effect on our ability to focus, and our overall physical and mental well-being. For more information about Nutrition, also see the Nutrition Module in the InPACTatHome Family resources.

### Ideas to do with your kiddos!

- **Young Children** - At the store or in the kitchen, ask your child to show you where something is. If you are in the produce section, ask things like, “Where are the oranges? Where is the lettuce? What color is it? I wonder how much it weighs, let’s weigh it.” When they are old enough, ask them to do things like “Can you get 4 potatoes? Let’s count them and put them in this bag.” For children who can read, have them look at aisle signs and ask, “What aisle do you think the cereal is in?”, or similar questions. This helps them learn and keeps them interested and focused while you are trying to shop.
- **Young adolescent** - At the store or in the kitchen, let them help prepare food. Ask them to get things for you, to stir the bowl, or to wash the produce. Ask them to help you plan meals. Ask them what a good meal would be that you could make with an ingredient(s) (i.e. green beans or chicken). Try to focus on healthy choices. Try making a list with this “Grocery Store Game Plan” [here](#).
- **Teen adolescent** - Give them a budget, have them make the shopping list, and put them in charge of a meal a week. As a challenge, ask them to shop for, or only use what is already in the house, and create a meal that meets the My Plate guidelines.



### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



**Lisa Jo Gagliardi, BA, MPA**, is the founder of *LJ Gagliardi, LLC: Building a Whole Child Toolbox*. She is a consultant, facilitator, and coach for whole child health, with a focus on adult and student social emotional health. After starting her career serving people with disabilities, she transitioned to work in education for 15 years, serving children’s physical, nutritional, medical, social emotional and mental health needs. She worked at the local school district level, and then at the regional level serving thirteen counties. She is past President of the Michigan School Health Coordinators’ Association and served on many

local and State-level committees and boards, most recently the Michigan Department of Education’s SEL and Mental Health Network. Lisa Jo is also a certified Emotional Intelligence Practitioner and Emotional Intelligence Assessor and Coach through the international Six Seconds Emotional Intelligence Network. Lisa Jo is dedicated to the health of families in Michigan.