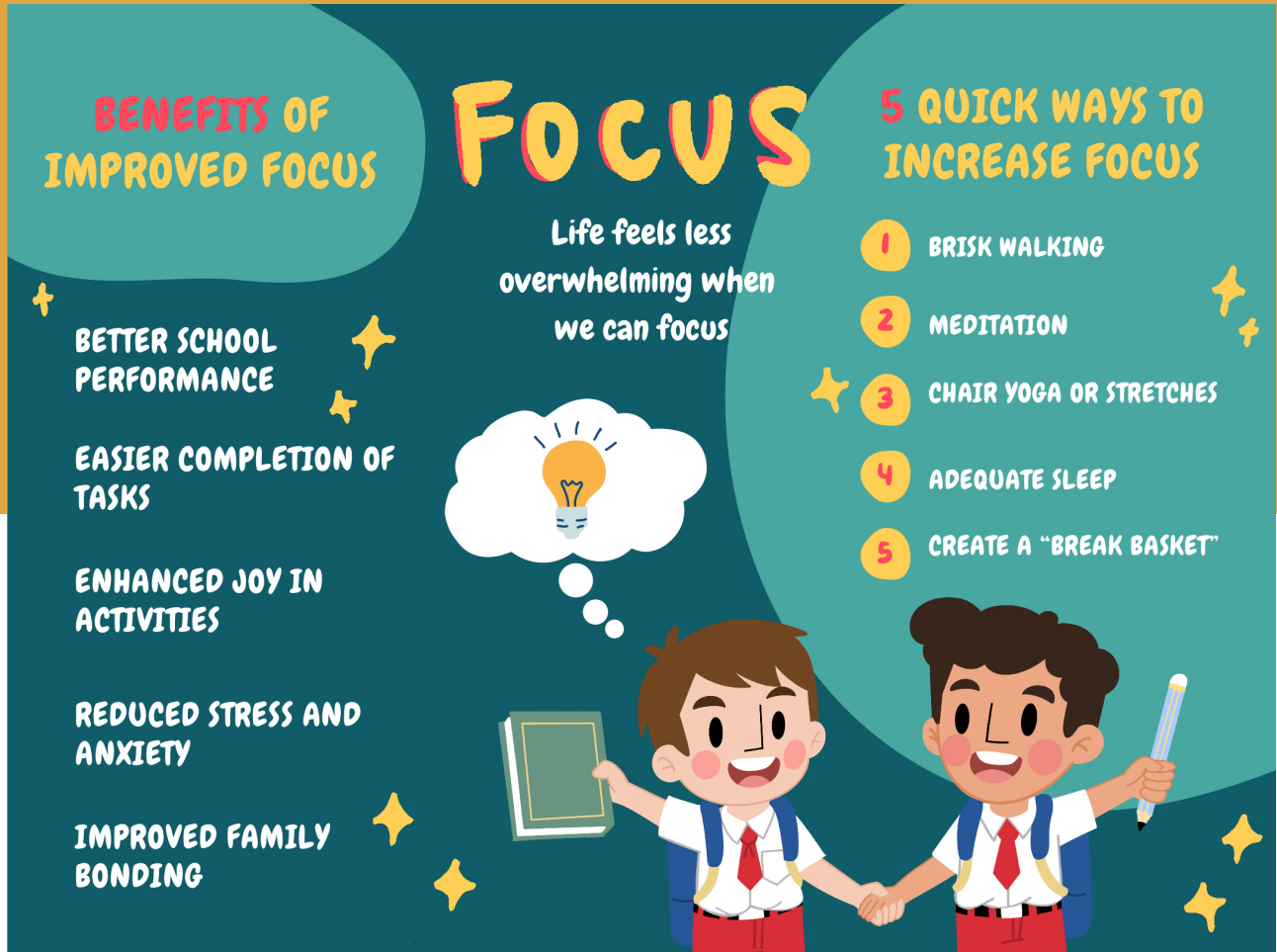


## SELF-ESTEEM NEEDS

# Focus

Focusing our Energy to Bring Positive Changes



Artwork by Hailey Choi

### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

**Lisa Jo Gagliardi, MPA**, is a child and adolescent health consultant, facilitator, and coach with 17 years of experience working with health in education. She is also a parent and loves working on family empowerment programs such as InPACT at Home. She is the founder of LJ Gagliardi, LLC, where her work revolves around children's health, social-emotional wellness, and family empowerment.

#### What's Lisa Jo's favorite physical activity?

*In the summer, I love swimming; in the spring and fall, I like to hike in the woods; and in the winter, I like to snowshoe and go sledding.*

## Why focus on focus?

Life can be distracting and stressful. This pressure can take our attention away from important activities and make it hard to focus. Focus is something both children and adults can struggle with. Life feels less overwhelming when we can focus, or concentrate, more easily. That can be tough, but it's important to be deliberate about bringing focus into the family; children can better tackle school-work, chores, games, and physical activity. You can practice improving focus as a family! Moving together, thinking together, and being together will help.

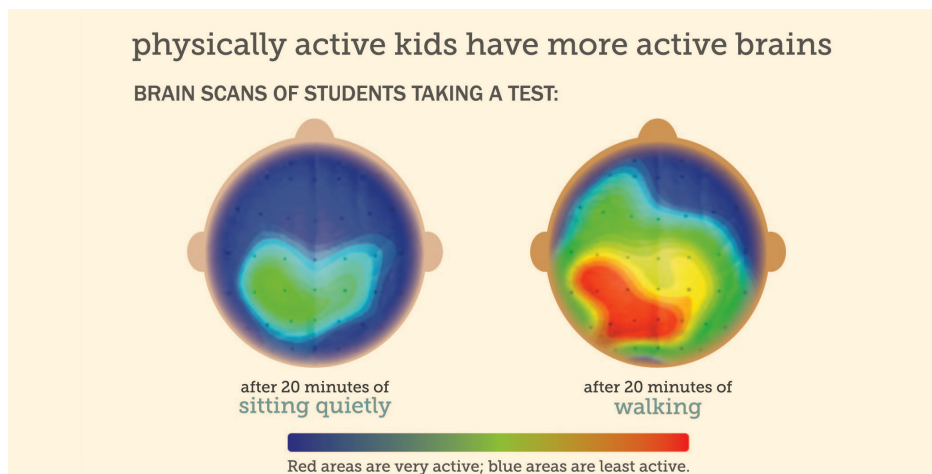
The next three sections of this module give you and your family tips to enhance your child's focus that include moving together, thinking together, and being together!

## MOVE

Believe it or not, simple [breathing exercises](#) or [physical activities](#) can help the brain to focus. These tasks calm both the body and the mind and help us concentrate. They can even make us happier! When you want to improve focus, think about what movement is needed at the time; it could be a simple stretch break, a quick physical activity (like jumping jacks), or heading outside for a brisk 30-minute walk. Doing physical activities as a family can be fun for you and your child and can increase the ability to focus.

### Five quick activities to increase focus

1. **Twenty minutes of brisk walking:** This picture below shows brain scans. The brain on the left was scanned after the person had been sitting quietly for 20 minutes. On the right, we see the brain after 20 minutes of walking. Cooler colors like blue and green indicate less brain activity. Notice the brain to the right; it shows a lot more brain activity and warmer colors such as red and orange. Imagine how well focused that person is.



Adapted from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation "Active kids learn better"

2. **Meditation for focus:** Mindful meditation can increase our focus and attention. As a family, try this [InPACT at Home 8-minute mindful meditation video](#).
3. **Chair yoga or chair stretches:** Try this [6-minute video](#) with guided stretches for young children. For older children and adults, [read this article](#) with a 2-minute video showing simple stretches to do in a chair or while sitting at a desk.
4. **Mindful walking:** [Read this quick article](#) with audio for a 10-minute mindful walk.
5. **Create a "break basket":** Use this [worksheet](#) from Sanford Health to help you and your child visualize what should go in your basket. It could be a basket, bucket, or bag. This tool is great when children need a break, such as while working on a large homework assignment. Here are some ideas for filling your basket: art supplies; a small jigsaw puzzle; word game puzzles; or fidgets (squish ball, silly putty, stress ball). Consider setting a block of time for your child to work and a block of time for their break.

## THINK

Thinking together can help you and your child with focus and attention.

Some ways your family might think together to improve focus include:

- [Problem solving together](#) can help your child get over an academic hurdle.
- Planning meals and snacks is a great activity to do together. Keeping our bodies fueled with food can influence our ability to focus.
- Playing games together. You could try a dance contest, a board game, or the [alphabet gratitude game](#).
- Doing mindfulness exercises together, which are known to help with focus.
- Ensuring your family gets enough sleep. When our bodies do not get enough sleep it is harder for our brains to focus.

Practicing ways to focus is a useful skill for the whole family, especially in a world with so many distractions.





### **“Why can my kids focus when playing video games or browsing social media but not at other times?”**

All visual media (screen time) gives us an escape – sometimes a needed one if we’re watching something that brings us joy. Yet moderation is key. Video games, social media, and other forms of on-screen entertainment can cause a rush of dopamine and other feel-good chemicals from the brain into the body. These substances are released when we do things like “level up” in a game, receive “likes” on a picture on social media, or binge watch a show on an app such as Netflix. Although it’s certainly OK to use screens in small doses, the longer we stay engaged on our devices, the more the brain craves these feel-good chemicals. And we gradually need more and more of them. Without that boost, we might start to struggle with mood and focus. Spending extended time on these platforms can lead to long-term problems when people need to focus on other life tasks.

We can try to give up some screen time, but realize that children and adults can experience a kind of “detox.” For a couple days, or even weeks, you or your child might feel irritable or anxious. The great news is that physical activity can create feel-good chemicals in the brain, too! Instead of relying on screen time, try replacing that with physical activity: shoot some hoops, go for a long hike, or do other forms of movement your family enjoys.

If you need guidance on screen time for children at different ages, check out [Common Sense Media](#).



An important note: violent visual media (whether in video games, on television, or in movies) can potentially negatively affect children's and adolescents' behavior. Here's an [article](#) from the American Psychological Association if you'd like to learn more. A few takeaways on violent visual media and its impacts on children's focus are summarized below:

- Children may become less sensitive to others' pain and suffering. It may be hard for kids to focus on understanding others and their own emotions.
- Children may be more fearful of the world around them. Kids cannot focus properly when they are afraid.
- Children may be more likely to behave in aggressive or harmful ways towards others. Being unable to regulate their own actions can make it extremely hard to focus.

### The brain is not built to multitask, which interrupts focus

The distractions and demands we face every day can make it difficult to focus. Many of us do something we call "multitasking." Research has shown that what we're really doing is goal switching. In other words, our brain is quickly switching from one activity to another, back and forth repeatedly. That takes a huge amount of mental energy and makes it tough to focus. Goal switching might make us feel as though we're being more productive, but we're actually being less productive. We can even end up feeling like our brain is "fried."

It can be helpful to try to focus on a task or activity without distraction. We can do things like block off the amount of time needed to complete a task and take breaks to refresh our bodies and brains. You can model and guide your child on ways to avoid multitasking.



**Important note: Children learn to focus on tasks longer as they get older. The average attention span by age is:**

- 2 years old: 4 to 6 minutes
- 4 years old: 8 to 12 minutes
- 6 years old: 12 to 18 minutes
- 8 years old: 16 to 24 minutes
- 10 years old: 20 to 30 minutes
- 12 years old: 24 to 36 minutes
- 14 years old: 28 to 42 minutes
- 16 years old: 32 to 48 minutes

## Tips to help you and your child avoid multitasking and increase focus

- **Create quiet:** When you or your child decide to work on a task, remove all noise and distractions (you might need to silence your phone and close all social media).
- **Create space:** Find an area that is less likely to be disturbed. Close the door if possible. Ask not to be interrupted for the amount of time you'd like to focus on a task.
- **Be strategic:** Prioritize tasks and check things off the list as you go.
- **Create time:** Schedule a block of time for when you'll be working on the task – and protect it. You can schedule separate time blocks to check social media, texts, and email. Be sure to block off time for physical activity and family conversations, too! When we reserve time for specific tasks, we can focus better and check them off the list.
- **Take breaks:** Take meaningful breaks that refuel you, such as taking a 10-minute mindful walk at lunch.
  - A meaningful break means getting up or even removing yourself from the space where you're working. Try stretching, doing breathing exercises, taking a walk with a friend, or getting some water and a snack. Then you can return to your task feeling recharged. As for your child, keep in mind their school's rules about when they can get up and move around and where they can go.

It is important to understand developmentally how much time to expect them to focus on a task. And obviously, tasks they are interested in will be easier to focus on. There can also be other factors that affect focus. This [article](#) has helpful information around this topic.

## The adolescent brain and focus

Take a moment to [watch this video](#) on the adolescent brain created by Dan Siegal, M.D. (adolescence covers ages 10–19). This video is meant to help you better understand the adolescent brain and how youth can use mindsight with focus to improve their well-being. Mindsight is the ability to understand the link between our body and mind. Practices like meditation, which help us focus on our heartbeat and breathing, are examples of mindsight techniques.

- The video discusses how to use focus and attention to shape the brain through mindsight exercises. Practicing mindfulness is another good way to use mindsight. For a simple start, [try this “10 Minute Mindful Movement for Focus” with your child.](#)
- The video also talks about how our body produces “myelin.” Myelin helps the brain work. [Did you know exercise can help our brains create myelin?](#) The more engaging the activity, the better. Try out some [InPACT at Home videos](#) and see which ones you and your child find the most engaging. Have fun moving together and improving your brain health!



## BE

As a family, you can do things together to help everyone concentrate better. Try being active, cooking meals, solving puzzles, and playing games as a team. This not only helps everyone focus more but also makes everyone feel happier and less stressed. Enjoy the time together while sharpening your concentration skills.

### Come together as a family to focus on food and mealtime

Food is really important in families. It helps our bodies stay strong and our minds stay focused. We love to cook recipes that our grandparents and parents taught us. Some foods remind us of our family's background. We also cook special foods for big celebrations. The best times are when we eat together, tell stories, and laugh. It's fun when kids help pick out food at the store or help cook at home. This makes families closer and helps everyone work together.

Here are some ways to include kids and help them concentrate while shopping for groceries:

- **Young children:** At the store, ask your child to show you where something is. If you're in the produce section, try questions like, "Where are the oranges?", "Where is the lettuce?", and "What color is this?" You can also share your curiosity: "I wonder how much this weighs. Let's weigh it!" Once your



child is old enough, ask things like “Can you get four 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?” and similar questions. These prompts help them learn while keeping them interested and focused as you shop.

- **Ages 9–12:** At the store or in the kitchen, have your child help you choose meals. Ask what kind of meal you might make with an ingredient such as green beans or chicken. Try to focus on healthy choices. If you’re going to the store, consider making a list using this “[Grocery Store Game Plan](#).”
- **Ages 13–18:** Give your child a budget, have them make a shopping list, and put them in charge of planning one meal per week. As a challenge, ask them to create a meal that meets [MyPlate](#) recommendations. The dish should include lean protein, vegetables or fruit, and whole grains. Remember to make half of your plate fruits and vegetables whenever possible. The form doesn’t really matter – produce can be fresh, frozen, canned, 100% juice, or even dried.

Now it’s time to practice the skills that you’ve learned in this module. To get started, take the 20-day InPACT Focus Challenge.





## 20-day InPACT Focus Challenge

The 20-day challenge aims to enhance your family's focus skills. Studies suggest that it takes 21 days to form a habit and over 90 days to establish a lasting lifestyle change. Our hope is that by completing the 20-day Focus challenge, your family will continue practicing the most effective activities until they become a lasting and positive habit.

	Day 1 Monitor Screen Time	Day 2 Take Breaks Together	Day 2 Get Active	Day 4 Be Mindful	Day 5 Focus with Food
<b>Week 1</b> Your family can use these activity ideas each week to practice Focus. Each week has 5 days of activities to try.  You can do activities in any order that works for you and your family.	Think about the screen time your family uses. Discuss how much time is allowed for the week for non-school or work-related screen time.	Make a "Break Basket" to use when breaks are needed during tasks like homework. Use <a href="#">this worksheet</a> shared in the module to plan what to put in it.	Get physically active! Pick a physical activity to do as a family! Maybe a <a href="#">dance-party</a> , going for a walk, or shooting hoops?	Do one of the mindfulness activities shared in the module. For example, this <a href="#">8-minute mindfulness video</a> .	Create a shopping list as a family using the <a href="#">Grocery Store Game Plan</a> .
<b>Week 2</b> <b>Bonus Challenge!</b> Every day each person lists 5 things they are grateful for!  Or you could play the <a href="#">Alphabet Gratitude Game</a> .	Plan a screen time budget for the family this week. Decide how much, when, and for what purpose. If you need guidance, check out <a href="#">Common Sense Media</a> .	Game night (or any time of day)! Pick a family board game or card game to play or <a href="#">make your own</a> .	Go for a brisk 30-minute walk as a family! You could also run, or ride bikes. If weather is bad, do three <a href="#">InPACT at Home videos</a> instead.	Read a book to your children. For older children, take turns reading chapters instead. Or you could download an audio book and listen together.	Plan meals and make a shopping trip, if necessary. Use some of the ideas from the "Focus on Food" section of the module.
<b>Week 3</b> <b>Bonus Challenge!</b> Every day each person lists 5 things they are grateful for!  Or you could play the <a href="#">Alphabet Gratitude Game</a> .	Plan a screen time budget for the family this week. Decide how much, when, and for what purpose. If you need guidance, check out <a href="#">Common Sense Media</a> .	Make a goal to take three meaningful breaks today. Here are <a href="#">some ideas for kids</a> , but be sure to take meaningful breaks too.	Do this <a href="#">Yoga and Stretching</a> video, or this <a href="#">Energizing Mindful Movement</a> video from InPACT at Home.	Try to do mindful meditation for at least 10 minutes, 3 times today. For example, try <a href="#">10-Minute Mindful Meditation for Focus</a> .	Cook a meal together, eat together, and clean-up together. This is a great chance to share your daily gratitude as part of the <b>Bonus Challenge!</b>
<b>Week 4</b> <b>Bonus Challenge!</b> Every day each person lists 5 things they are grateful for!  Or you could play the <a href="#">Alphabet Gratitude Game</a> .	Plan a screen time budget for the family this week. Decide how much, when, and for what purpose. If you need guidance, check out <a href="#">Common Sense Media</a> .	What breaks have worked best for you and your family so far? Practice your favorite breaks today!	Get 30 minutes or more of moderate physical activity as a family today! If weather is bad, have a 30-minute dance party or do three <a href="#">InPACT at Home</a> videos.	Family coloring time! Grab your favorite coloring book or draw pictures. If your family prefers other art projects or crafts, do those instead.	Make half your plate at each meal fruits and/or veggies. Canned, fresh, frozen, and 100% juice all work! If you need easy recipe ideas using fruits and vegetables, InPACT at Home has many <a href="#">recipe videos</a> .