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# Attention Games

101 Fun, Easy Games That  
Help Kids Learn to Focus

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**BARBARA SHER**

ILLUSTRATIONS BY  
**RALPH BUTLER**

 **JOSSEY-BASS**  
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This book is dedicated to all the unique children I have had  
the joy and honor of working and playing with.

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teaching me that humans come in many flavors. And they are all good.

# Introduction

If you want to focus children's attention, you first have to capture their interest. In this book, I'll show you how to get children's attention with fun and interesting games and how to help them expand their powers of attention in ways that will benefit them throughout their lives.

Everyone is paying attention to something. What that something is and how long the attention is captured are the variables.

There are two forms of attention. One is open and global; you light on many different aspects of your surroundings for short periods of time. Open attention gives you an overall impression of your environment. Think of being at a party. You become aware of the general feel of the party by noticing people's body language as well as different sounds, smells, and sights. Your attention focuses on many things fleetingly to give you a holistic sense of what is happening. Or think of riding a bike. When you ride a bike, you can attend to steering, pedaling, and the traffic around you while also enjoying the feeling of the breeze blowing through your hair.

The second form of attention is more focused; you concentrate on one thing for long periods. Focused attention requires active filtering of excess information, and you notice details in sequences rather than all at once. Whereas global attention is like an overhead light, focused attention is like a flashlight with a narrow beam. This is the kind of attention required to do things like follow instructions, write an article, or do a crossword puzzle.

Everyone needs both of these types of attention. Open attention gives us a lot of information quickly and encourages creativity by causing us to notice connections and make new patterns. This creative trail helps us find new ways of seeing old things. At the same time, though, nothing can be accomplished without the absorbed, one-step-at-a-time perseverance of focused attention.

We do best when we are able to shift easily between an open state of awareness and a focused one.

Typical behavior for a child diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) is to notice everything and filter nothing. Whereas another child may focus on the teacher, the child with ADD may instead notice the buzzing fly in the room, the birds fluttering in the trees outside the window, the whispering in the back of the room, the holes in the ceiling tile, and how the air from the vent is making a child's hair ribbons ripple. As one mother pointed out, "One thing about my kid—she sure is observant. She notices things no one else would notice, and she sees relationships between stuff out there that no one else would ever think of."

There is often a similar pattern in not being able to filter out the surrounding sounds or to resist going on a finger safari to reach out and touch all there is to touch.

And yet as Thomas Armstrong points out in his book *Myth of the ADD Child*, there is substantial evidence to suggest that children labeled ADD do not show distractibility in specific situations. One mother of a child diagnosed with ADD said, "My child is capable of long periods of concentration when he is watching his favorite sci-fi video or examining the inner workings of a pin-tumbler lock." It is also known that a child with attention difficulties can frequently focus well in a one-to-one situation with a caring adult and an activity that is of interest to the child.

As Dr. Mel Levine points out in his book *A Mind at a Time*, there's more that's right than wrong with these kids. Levine has seen children who suffer with weak attention control when young turn into remarkable adults. He comments, "I believe these children are challenging types of human variation rather than deviation.... What a crime to assume simply that all of these kids are damaged goods. After many years working with these individuals, I am impressed with how many of them turn out to be extraordinary adults. We just have to get them there."

Most of us use our own unique combination of open and focused attention. All of us would benefit from learning how to be better at one type or the other. This book is geared toward the "wellness model," which assumes that no person is broken and that everyone can gain from appropriate experiences. Being able to shift fluidly between open attention and focused concentration is a useful skill that everyone can learn and improve on.

Ideally we teach our children the skills of open and focused attention as infants, when they undergo the most rapid brain development. During this period, the child's brain is becoming "hard-wired," and she is particularly receptive to experiences. There are many games here to help the infant and toddler develop good attention skills from the start.

There are many games for preschool children that will encourage them to notice details in life. The more we notice the different aspects of a situation, the longer we will attend. Think about experiences you have had. For example, if someone points out to you a variety of wildflower, you are much more likely to pay attention to those flowers and even look for them the next time you go for a walk in the woods. Knowing about details in life increases your attention span.

There are many games in this book for school-age children that are novel to their routine experiences. Novelty raises a person's arousal level and therefore increases attentiveness. In order to learn, we all have to have a certain level of arousal. Too low, and we feel too sleepy to pay attention; too high, and we are too fidgety. It is thought that hyperactive children are actually trying to raise their arousal level because they have low interest in routines. Novelty sharpens their interest and helps them focus; their need for novelty explains why they do best in a school that emphasizes action-oriented, hands-on, project-based participation.

Playing these games can also raise children's self-esteem by showing children who have been labeled as lacking attention skills that they too have focusing abilities within them. And overabsorbed children whose attention is narrowly focused can learn the delights of opening their awareness to all that is.

As adolescents continue to develop their attentive skills, there is the added factor of increased anxiety because of the social desire to fit in. Games for these teenagers are geared toward reducing anxiety levels so they can be comfortable and better able to focus on the present moment.

The games and activities in this book are organized into those that encourage open attention, those that encourage focused attention skills, and those that encourage fluidity in shifting from one type of attention to the other.

The more we do anything, the better we get. And because enjoyable ways always make learning easier, all the games have one single important element in common—fun!

After interviewing a large number of teachers, Sandra Rief noted in her book *How to Reach and Teach ADD/ADHD*

*Children*, “If these kids are happy and feel good about themselves, they will learn!”

Playing these games includes something else that is precious to children: *your* attention. Remember how it felt when you were a child and a loving adult took the time to play with you? It makes you feel that you matter. As an occupational therapist who has worked with all kinds of children for over thirty-five years, I see how children light up when they are given individual attention, and I know how good it feels to be the cause of that joy.

The games in this book benefit you both.



## **How to Contact the Author**

Barbara has done workshops worldwide where participants learn by playing games and making games. In some workshops, participants make developmentally appropriate learning toys from “trash.” In others, participants play games that use movement to teach academic skills or sensory-motor games to encourage integration. The emphasis is on fun games that children of different skill levels can play together.

And some workshops are done by participants playing a whole slew of games with their children with nothing fancier, for example, than newspapers.

She has taught teachers, therapists, parents, nurses, aides, students, and and other caregivers. Her workshops have been in orphanages, schools, hospitals, conferences and universities in Hong Kong, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Fiji, Roratonga, New Zealand, Hawaii, Nicaragua, Honduras, Palau, Phonepei, Chuck, Kosrae, Saipan, Tinian, Rota and the United States.

If you are interested in her services as a consultant or a workshop leader or just want to talk about any of the games, email her at:

momsense@asis.com.

To see a description of her books, visit her website:

[www.barbarashergames.com](http://www.barbarashergames.com).

## **OTHER BOOKS/TAPES BY BARBARA SHER**

*Self-Esteem Games*

*Spirit Games*

*Smart Play*

*Extraordinary Games with Ordinary Things*

*Popular Games for Positive Play*

*Moving Right Along*

*28 Instant Song Games (CD and tape)*

# **PART ONE**

## **Games for Infants**

The brain is not developed at birth. The heart has the same form from birth on, but the brain needs experiences to make pathways between the brain cells. We have one hundred billion brain cells at birth. The ones that aren't used die. We use them when we connect them, with synapses, to each other in meaningful ways.

By age three, one thousand billion connections have been created by repeating things over and over. Repetition creates patterns as one experience is connected to many similar experiences. In order to form these patterns, children need interaction.

The relationship between parent and child is crucial to brain development. Parents and caregivers have a marked affect on creating connections, because the pathways between brain cells are reinforced by what the infant sees, smells, hears, touches, and does during the first years of life. Children raised in deprived sensory environments where there is minimal touching, sounds, sights, and experience actually develop smaller brains. Experience literally grows brains. Even rats raised in cages full of toys have more brain mass than rats with no toys.

The games in this part of the book help form patterns by giving babies a rich sensory environment to attend to. There are many games that stimulate the infant's sensory systems of touch, sight, sound, and taste as well as games that give babies repeated experiences in mastering their motor skills. There are other games that encourage exploratory and

dramatic play to help babies see connections in their daily environment.

All the games work on the principle of developing sustained attention by providing interesting age-appropriate experiences. The whole continuum of attention is stimulated, from narrow focusing, such as in the Ice Cube on a Tray activity, to global focusing, such as in the What's out There? activity.

Of course, each game also produces the important pleasurable feelings that come from just having a good time, and all the games are easy to do, requiring nothing more than what you'd find around the house.

It's easy to tell when babies are paying attention: their eyes widen; their bodies get very still. If they have enjoyed the experience before, their arms and legs will flail with excitement. When they have had enough stimulation, they will turn their heads and look away, maybe even making fussing sounds. You'll soon learn how to read your baby's cues so that you'll know when to give him both fun times and rest.



## **Follow My Face**

*There is nothing more interesting to infants than a human face. They are just programmed that way, and for a very good reason: survival. Making eye contact with an adult human on whom your survival depends increases the possibility of being noticed and cared for. Whose heart isn't tugged by the purposeful gaze of a newborn?*

*This is also one of the first experiences in focused attention that your newborn will have. Her instinct is to look at you. You expand that and increase her attention span by having her find your eyes again and again. The delightful part is that her attention is lovingly focused on you!*

## **TYPE OF ATTENTION ENCOURAGED**

Focused

## **MATERIALS**

None

## **DIRECTIONS**

Place your face close and directly in front of your infant's face. Babies are a bit nearsighted at first and see best at about the distance from the crook of a mother's cradling arm to her smiling face. Clever nature. Infants don't yet know how to distinguish what is foreground and what is background. Getting up close ensures that your baby can see you and that she notices you. Research has shown that babies are the most attentive when looking at a human face, so it shouldn't be hard to get her attention. Once you see that her eyes have widened and focused on you, give her praise, such as by saying, "Good, you see me!"

Now, slowly move your face so that it is at the side of her face. Softly call out her name until she moves her eyes and finds you again. Praise her some more: "You found me. Good for you!"



Next, slowly move your head to the other side and repeat the activity and the praise. Sometimes, instead of side to side, move your head closer and then farther away (near and far) or diagonally.

Continue the game until your child is tired of playing. You'll know when she is done by paying attention to her signals. If your infant is very still, it means she is attending and is interested in the game. If she turns her head away and starts to squirm, it means she's done for now.

Don't worry; she will love to play this again later, and you'll be helping her learn how to control the six muscles that control each eye and to coordinate the movements of both eyes together.

## **VARIATIONS**

Here are some other ways to help your infant get a good eye workout and expand her ability to attend:

- Hang things above her bed that sway, such as wind chimes, scarves, and mobiles.
- Put a bird feeder outside her window.
- Reflect lights on the walls and ceiling of her darkened room.
- Place interesting designs or pictures on a nearby wall.

## **WHAT'S BEING LEARNED**

A major lesson being learned, in addition to focusing, is developing eye control. Learning to control the muscles of the eyes, like any other muscle in the body, happens through practice. It is this control that will enable infants to scan their surroundings, notice different details, and thereby increase their awareness and intelligence.

Small movements of the eye also help the brain learn about space—for example, what is far, what is near, and what is on the side.

Cognitively, babies are also learning to distinguish what is the main figure and what is background.



## **Stick Out Your Tongue**

*One of the first ways I play with any infant is to stick out my tongue. It may make some parents wonder about me, but it never fails to fascinate the little one. Think about it. The*

*tongue looks like some lively little snake coming out of your mouth.*

*I've done this game with infants as young as three months, and they always respond by thrusting out their own tongue in imitation, even if only the tip. Having control over the tongue's movement ensures that the infant will develop the ability to form different sounds and eventually words. Try it.*

## **TYPE OF ATTENTION ENCOURAGED**

Focused

## **MATERIALS**

None

## **DIRECTIONS**

Get your child's attention by softly calling to him and smiling. Once he notices you, stick out your tongue and waggle it a little. Tell him what you are doing: "It's my tongue." Tell him about his: "You have a tongue, too. Open your mouth. Let's see it," or words to that effect.

Keep wagging and maybe even add some soft sounds to keep his attention engaged. If you want, you can even gently touch his tongue to give him some sensory feedback on what part you are talking about.

Play the game as long as he is interested. Then do it another day, and once he gets it, add the variations.



## **VARIATIONS**

Start showing him how to move his tongue in different directions. Start with side to side. Once he's got that movement, go to up-and-down movements. If you can curl your tongue, add that to his repertoire.

I also teach older babies this variation: I push my nose in, and my tongue pops out. I push my nose to one side, and my tongue goes to that side. When I push my nose to the other side, my tongue follows. I push my nose in again, and my tongue goes back into my mouth. I find little ones will stay very attentive and enjoy trying to imitate this.



### **WHAT'S BEING LEARNED**

Babies are focusing their attention on a task that is within their motor ability. Because they are already nursing and suckling the breast or a bottle, they already tighten the muscles of their tongue to suck.