Educate to Empower

Attention, Class lesson pack



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Foreword

If you have ever tried to teach with a fly buzzing around the room, you already know the main idea in these two lessons. A fly is not important, and it is not interesting. It is still almost impossible to ignore.

We tend to think of concentration as a kind of mental muscle: something that comes down to effort and motivation. So when a student is not concentrating, we assume that they are not trying, or that we are not interesting enough. The fly tells us something different. Attention is a constant push and pull, between the things in the world that grab us and our own capacity to say “not that — this”. It also depends on the body as much as on the mind, which is why it goes wrong in two opposite ways. One student cannot sit still. Another sits perfectly still and takes in nothing.

The world our students are growing up in is faster, denser and less predictable than the one most of us grew up in, and a good deal of it has been designed to hold their attention. I see this in the research institute I run in East London, and I see it at home with my own three children. Their brains are not broken. They are doing what brains do, which is to adapt to the world they find themselves in.

So these lessons do not tell students to try harder, and they do not tell them to put their phones away. They give students an accurate picture of how their own attention works, the words to describe it, and one specific thing to try. Being told how something works is more interesting than being told off, and it is a good deal more useful.

Everything you need on the day is in the slides and the presenter notes. If you have fifteen minutes more, read the teacher background notes. They are written for you rather than for your students: they set out the research behind each section, and most of it applies to how we teach, and to our own concentration, as much as to theirs.

I hope you enjoy teaching them.



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Educate to Empower

Lesson plan

Concentration: how to take action on distraction

Two 45-minute lessons

Ages 11–18

Health and wellbeing, personal development, class-teacher time or study skills

At a glance

Subject area	Health and wellbeing, personal development or citizenship lessons; class-teacher (form or homeroom) time; study skills; or a science or psychology enrichment slot. The curriculum mapping document shows where the lessons fit in each country.
Age range	11–18. The same PowerPoint runs across lower and upper secondary. The success criteria and the optional extended question in the assessment show how the emphasis shifts for older students.
Duration	Two lessons of 45 minutes, taught in order and ideally within one or two weeks of each other. Five short activities, and a five-minute recap at the start of Lesson 2.
Class size	Any. Works with a full class. Four activities are done in pairs, so an odd number needs one group of three.

Prior knowledge	None assumed for Lesson 1. Lesson 2 opens with a recap of Lesson 1.
PowerPoint	56 slides in one file, in five sections. Lesson 1 is slides 1–28 (sections 1 and 2). Lesson 2 is slides 29–56 (recap, then sections 3, 4 and 5). Nothing is optional — each lesson is timed to fill 45 minutes exactly.
Preparation	Allow 30–45 minutes before Lesson 1, and about five minutes before Lesson 2. See “Before you teach” below.
Background notes	Supplied separately. Not required reading, but the most useful resource in the pack after the slides: the research behind each section, written for your own practice as well as for these lessons.
Assessment	Activity 5, at the end of Lesson 2, is the exit ticket. A short comprehension quiz is supplied separately.

Learning objectives

By the end of the two lessons, students will be able to:

LO1 Explain what attention is; distinguish between attention capture (automatic and involuntary) and attention control (effortful and chosen); and describe what mind-wandering costs them.

LO2 Describe the two opposite ways concentration goes wrong — being too switched-on and being too switched-off — and recognise which one they tend towards.

LO3 Analyse how digital platforms are designed to engage both attention capture and attention control, and evaluate what that means for their own choices.

LO4 Explain why concentration varies across the day, the week and the school year, including the effectsof body clocks, time of day and stress.

LO5 Select one self-regulation strategy and commit to it as a specific plan (“when X, I will do Y”).

Lesson 1 covers LO1 and LO2. Lesson 2 covers LO3, LO4 and LO5.

Success criteria

Written as student-facing "I can" statements. The three columns are a guide to expected outcome, not three separate tasks — every student attempts the same activities.

	Developing	Secure	Extending
LO1	I can name two different kinds of attention and give an example of each.	I can explain the difference between attention capture and attention control, and why one is effortful and the other is not.	I can explain why attention capture cannot be switched-off, and why that was useful for our ancestors.
LO2	I can describe what being too switched-on and too switched-off feel like.	I can explain why the two states need opposite fixes and identify which one I tend towards.	I can use the inverted-U relationship and explain why more effort sometimes makes concentration worse.
LO3	I can name three features of an app that are designed to grab my attention.	I can explain how an app engages attention capture and attention control differently, using both terms.	I can explain why "just put it down" is poor advice and propose something better.

	Developing	Secure	Extending
LO4	I can say that concentration changes across the day.	I can explain how time of day, body clocks and stress affect concentration, and identify my own best hours.	I can explain why the reversibility of stress effects matters, and plan around a period of high pressure.
LO5	I can name one thing I will try.	I can write a specific plan that says what I will do and when I will do it.	I can justify why the strategy I chose suits the way my own concentration goes wrong.

Key vocabulary

Definitions are written to be read out as they stand. The last column gives the slide where the idea first appears; two terms are for teachers only and are flagged as such.

Term	Student-facing definition	When it first appears
Attention	Choosing one thing to take in and leaving out everything else.	Slide 8
Attention capture	When something grabs your attention without you choosing — movement, a sudden noise, a red dot.	Slides 8 and 13
Attention control	When you choose what to attend to and hold it there. It takes effort and can become tiring.	Slides 8 and 16
Mind-wandering	When your thoughts drift away from what you are supposed to be doing, usually without you noticing.	Slide 17
Switched-on / switched-off	How alert your body is. The lessons use these instead of the technical term “arousal”, which students misread.	Slides 20–26 (Lesson 1), then 47 and 50 (Lesson 2)
Fight-or-flight	The body’s alarm response. Heart rate up, muscles ready, thinking narrowed.	Slide 20

Term	Student-facing definition	When it first appears
The Goldilocks zone	The middle of the range — alert but not wired — where you do your best work.	Slide 26
Signal-to-noise ratio	The gap between the thing you are meant to be doing (the 'signal') and everything else arriving at your eyes and ears (the 'noise').	Slide 52
Body clock	The internal 24-hour rhythm that makes some hours easier to concentrate in than others.	Slide 44
Algorithm	The system that works out what to show you next, based on what you have done before.	Teacher term. The idea is taught on slide 37 without the word
Implementation intention	A plan in the form "when X happens, I will do Y".	Teacher term. The format is used on slide 55 without the word

Resources needed

Essential

- Projector or screen with sound. Slide 14 (Lesson 1) uses a short online video.
- A board you can write on. Slides 13 and 16 (Lesson 1) ask you to write the two key terms up, and the Section 3 shout-out on slide 34 (Lesson 2) works best taken as two columns — the pull you choose, and the pull you do not.
- Paper and a pen for every student. Four of the five activities need writing, and so does the recap at the start of Lesson 2.
- A visible timer or stopwatch. Activity 1 must be timed to a full 60 seconds.
- Pupil activity sheets, one set per student (supplied separately, 7 pages). Pages 1–2 are used in Lesson 1 and pages 5–7 in Lesson 2. Print the whole set once and collect it in at the end of Lesson 1, or print the two halves separately.

Optional

- A second copy of page 7 of the activity sheets, if you want to keep the exit tickets and give students their own copy back.
- A document camera (visualiser), or a spare copy of the activity sheet on screen, if you want to model Activity 5 rather than write examples on the board.

Before you teach: allow 30–45 minutes

If you are running over, shorten the shout-outs (slides 11, 24, 34 and 42) rather than Activity 2 or Activity 5. Those two carry the lesson.

- **Go through the deck with the presenter notes open (15–20 minutes).** Use Slide Show or Presenter view. The notes give the timing, what to do and what to say for every slide. The deck contains animated GIFs: they loop automatically in Slide Show view, but not in Reading view.
- **Play the slide 14 video and check the sound in the room you are teaching in (5 minutes).** The video is here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJG698U2Mvo. What it demonstrates is inattentional blindness — see the teacher background notes, section 1b. If you cannot play video, describe what the clip shows and move straight on. Nothing later depends on it.
- **Print the activity sheets, one set per student (5–10 minutes).** Seven pages, single-sided, so that each activity can be collected separately.
- **Read sections 1 to 3 of the teacher background notes (10 minutes).** Optional, but recommended. See the box on the following page.
- **Before Lesson 2 (5 minutes).** Re-read the presenter notes for slides 29–32, and have the activity sheets from Lesson 1 ready to hand back.

The teacher background notes are for you

You can teach both lessons from the slides and the presenter notes alone. The background notes are not required reading. But they are the most useful resource in this pack after the slides, and they are written for teachers, not only as a source of answers to students' questions.

They set out, in plain language and with sources, the research behind each section: the two kinds of attention, how often minds wander in lessons, why being too switched-on and too switched-off need opposite responses, what stress and body clocks do to concentration, how platforms are designed, and why background noise matters. Much of it applies to how any lesson is taught — what is on the walls and on the screen, how noisy the room is, when in the day demanding work is set — and to your own concentration as much as to your students'.

Sections 1 to 3 support Lesson 1. Sections 4 to 9 support Lesson 2. The table of common misconceptions near the end is worth two minutes before either lesson.

If you are short of time, or have longer lessons

Each lesson fills 45 minutes when every discussion slot is taken at the length given in the presenter notes.

Lesson 1. If you are running over, shorten the shout-outs on slides 11 and 24 and take fewer answers. Do not shorten Activity 2 (slide 27): Lesson 2 builds on it.

Lesson 2. The recap slides in Section 5 (49 and 54) can go without breaking the argument — say "four things" instead of five if you drop slide 54. If you are running over, shorten the shout-outs on slides 34 and 42 rather than Activity 5.

Longer lessons (50 to 60 minutes). Let the pair discussions run on. That is where extra time is best spent.

A double period. The two lessons can be taught back to back. Take a short break at slide 28, skip the noticing task on that slide, and keep the rapid-fire recap on slides 30–31 as a check before Section 3.

The two lessons

Timings are cumulative within each lesson and assume every slide is used. The CLOCK figure in each presenter note is the elapsed time at which you should be arriving at that slide. It starts again at 00:00 on slide 29, at the beginning of Lesson 2.

Lesson 1: what concentration is, and how it goes wrong

Slides 1–28 · 45 minutes · LO1 and LO2 · Activity sheets pages 1–2

Time	Slides	Phase	Activities
0:00–4:20	1–6	Opening: two hands-up questions, then the plan	—
4:20–26:30	7–18	Section 1: what concentration is — capture and control	Activity 1
26:30–43:40	19–27	Section 2: how it goes wrong — too switched-on, too switched-off, the Goldilocks zone	Activity 2
43:40–45:00	28	Close: one thing to notice before next lesson	—

About 22 of the 45 minutes are discussion, pair work or activity (slides 11, 14, 15, 20, 24 and 27). Activity 2 on slide 27 is the one to protect: it is where students work out which way their own concentration tends to go wrong, and Lesson 2 comes back to it.

Between the two lessons

- Slide 28 sets one small task: catch yourself once when you cannot concentrate, and ask whether you are too switched-on or too switched-off. The question is printed in the box at the bottom of page 3 of the activity sheets, with a line for what they noticed. Nothing has to be handed in.
- Collect the activity sheets in, or ask students to bring them back. Pages 5–7 are used in Lesson 2. If you collect them in, ask students to copy the question from slide 28 into their notebooks.
- If the gap between the lessons is longer than two weeks, give the recap on slides 30–31 a few more minutes and take fewer answers on slide 42.

Lesson 2: what makes it harder, and what helps

Slides 29–56 · 45 minutes · LO3, LO4 and LO5 · Activity sheets pages 5–7

Time	Slides	Phase	Activities
0:00–6:00	29–32	Recap: five rapid-fire questions, then today's plan	Rapid-fire recap
6:00–22:55	33–40	Section 3: how platforms are designed around this	Activities 3 and 4
22:55–29:35	41–45	Section 4: why concentration comes and goes	—
29:35–38:00	46–54	Section 5: five things that actually work	—
38:00–45:00	55–56	Activity 5 (the exit ticket) and the close	Activity 5

About 27 of the 45 minutes are discussion, pair work or activity (slides 30–31, 34, 35, 38, 40, 42 and 55). The shout-outs are where time goes: if you are running late by Section 4, take fewer answers on slide 42 rather than cutting Activity 5.

As an alternative, the presenter note suggests repeating the candle test from slide 15 for thirty seconds.

After the lessons

Immediately after Lesson 2

- Collect the exit tickets from Activity 5, or have students keep them in their notebooks where they will see them again.
- Read them. They tell you a great deal about which students recognise themselves as "too switched-on" and which as "too switched-off" — and the second group is the one you usually cannot see in class.
- Link to science: the autonomic nervous system, the fight-or-flight response, and circadian rhythms all sit directly under these lessons.
- Link to a whole-school conversation about phone policy. The lessons give students the vocabulary to take part in it rather than just be subject to it.

About two weeks later

- Spend five minutes revisiting the exit tickets. Ask: did you do it? Did it work? Would you change it?
- This revisit is the single thing that most affects whether the lessons change any behaviour. A plan that is never revisited is a plan that quietly expires.
- Use the short comprehension quiz (supplied separately) here if you want a written check rather than a discussion.

Follow-up options

- Ask students to run a one-week experiment on their own signal-to-noise ratio: change one thing about where they work, and record whether it helped.
- Set the Section 3 content as a longer piece of work: choose one app, describe its capture features, and write a short argument about whether the design is defensible.

Student welfare and tone

These lessons ask students to reflect on their own concentration, stress and sleep. A small number will disclose something more serious in the process — most often during Activity 2, or during the shout-out on what pushes us into fight-or-flight (both in Lesson 1).

Acknowledge it briefly, do not pursue it in front of the class, move the lesson on, and follow it up afterwards through your school's child-protection or student-welfare procedures.

Avoid framing any part of these lessons as a diagnosis. "Too switched-on" and "too switched-off" describe states, not people, and the deck is written to keep them that way.