



Engaging Strategies

Attention Signal



Time: With practice, a few seconds. When using for the first time, allow 2-3 minutes for the debrief.

Overview:

To bring the group's attention back to the facilitator after an engaging activity done in pairs or small groups.

When and Why:

A well-practiced and consistently implemented attention signal is essential in group-learning situations. Whether adults or students, any gathering of engaged participants is going to be deeply immersed in meaningful, task-oriented conversations during which you will need to get their attention.

This signal works well because it engages participants in a multi-sensory experience. There will be kinesthetic engagement (raising their own hands) and visual (seeing others raise their hands) and auditory (hearing the noise level drop) cues.



SEL Focus: This attention signal reinforces all five elements of the CASEL framework:

- **Self-Awareness:** Participants become aware of their own behavior.
- **Self-Management:** Participants decide when to shift their attention.
- **Relationships:** Participants respectfully close their conversations.
- **Social Awareness:** Participants respect the group's gradual silence.
- **Responsible Decision-Making:** Participants make a series of small decisions for the good of the group and their own learning.

Steps:

While there are many versions of attention signals (flashing the lights, clapping, raising or lowering your voice), one that has been most consistently effective is to:

1. Raise your hand in the air.
2. Wait for everyone else in the room to raise their own hand and be silent before you proceed with directions or information.

Guiding language

"There will be many times when you are working together and talking to one another, and I'll need to be able to get your attention. If we help each other by following these two steps, we'll soon be able to get in and out of lively conversations seamlessly and quickly. When you see me raise my hand, you'll have two jobs. One is to raise your hand too. That gives others around you a visual cue that they should quietly look my way. The other is to bring your conversation to a close. That will help the room quickly become silent so you can hear the next direction or announcement."



As we get used to using this attention signal, you'll notice that you're building on all the SEL skills.

- *Self-awareness as you start to notice your own behavior.*
- *Self-management, as you take ownership of those two jobs of raising your hand and finishing your conversation.*
- *Relationships as you respectfully engage in conversations with others.*
- *You are drawing on your social awareness as you cue in on what others around you are doing.*
- *This series of responsible decisions contributes to the good of the group and to our own learning.*

Facilitator tips

- Cultivate patience, realizing that it's a positive signal of deep engagement for participants to be so caught up in their academic dialogue that they are reluctant to stop or don't immediately notice your silently raised hand.
- Hold an inner and outer attitude of goodwill as the group settles into complete silence before you begin talking. If you consistently wait for complete silence, the group learns your expectation and will become quiet more quickly over time. If you begin to talk while some participants are still talking, they will believe that it's okay for some people to continue conversing and are much less likely to meet your stated expectation for the attention signal. (It's not necessary that every hand goes up, but it is necessary that all are quiet.)
- Refrain from restating your expectations or from singling out participants with requests that they become quiet. Let your silent raised hand be the only signal they have to attend to, and soon it will become the only signal they need!



Debrief:

- After the first time you use this attention signal with a group, ask them what they noticed about the process. Any surprises? Any insights?

Modifications and Variations:

When you initially introduce this strategy, you might choose to hold one fist up in the air and as you name each SEL competency and the associated action used in the attentional signal. You will finish with a raised hand.



Engaging Strategies

Card Sorts

Adapted from Engaging Schools



Time: 10-30 minutes

Overview:

Participants collaborate to sort, match, or sequence cards with content/information.

When and Why:

Card sorts help keep small groups focused as they narrow large brainstorming down into key concept categories.



SEL Focus: This activity emphasizes **Responsible Decision-Making** skills (**Problem-Identification**, **Problem-Solving**) and **Social Awareness** (**Perspective-Taking**) as participants work together to solve the task.

Steps:

1. Provide a topic or question for participants to respond to, (e.g., “What are some ways students in our class can support each other’s learning?” “How do you build relationships with your students?”). Participants legibly write one idea per index card or sticky note.
2. Allow enough time for each participant to write three to seven cards.
3. Ask participants to form small groups and lay their cards out together on a table so that all group members can see them. Let them know they’ll be working as a team to group the ideas by listening respectfully to each person’s contributions.
4. Groups read all the cards and then decide together how they want to sort them into categories that emerge from their conversation.
5. Remind the groups to work toward equity of voice and take turns moving the cards into a variety of categories. The goal is to hear and understand a variety of ideas; there are no “wrong answers.”



Debrief by asking one or two of these questions:

- “How does discussing with others impact your learning?”
- “What patterns and meaningful categories did you find?”
- “What was beneficial to your learning or enjoyable about working with your small group and why?”
- “What was challenging about the process and what strategies did you use to accomplish the task anyway?”

Modifications and Variations:

- Vary the group size and/or the number of cards each individual may contribute.
- If the groups are struggling to determine categories, the facilitator can provide some categories and let the groups decide which cards should go into which category.



Engaging Strategies

Clock Partners

Adapted from Reading Quest



Time: 3-5 minutes

Overview:

In this pairing activity, each person has their own copy of a “Clock Buddies” handout and gets the name of a fellow participant on each of the corresponding slots. These will become partners for various activities throughout the week/engagement.

When and Why:

“Clock Buddies” is a quick and easy way to create pairs for future partnered activities that offers a break from continually turning to an elbow partner.



SEL Focus: Interacting with Clock Buddies strengthens **Relationship Skills** (*Recognizing and Using Supports*) as participants partner with various peers for mutual learning.

Steps:

1. Make copies of a [Clock Buddy handout](#).
2. Distribute a handout to each participant and ask them to write their own name at the top of their paper.
3. Instruct participants to stand up with their papers and a pencil and move quietly around the room until you use your attention signal, at which point they should stop and find a partner.
4. When everyone has a partner, ask them to sign each other’s paper on the 3 o’clock line. It is very important that they all start on the same line.
5. Give the signals to mix, stop, and find a new partner. Check to be sure everyone has a new partner before you ask participants to sign each other’s papers on the 6 o’clock line.
6. To complete the activity, have partners mingle and pair up two more times. They’ll sign next on the 9 o’clock line and finally on the 12 o’clock line.
7. After all lines are signed, invite participants to return to their seats.
8. Each time you need participants to form pairs during the engagement, have them take out their appointment clocks and announce one of the times to designate their partner for this activity. For example, “Now meet up with the person who is your 9 o’clock appointment to reflect and discuss...”

Modifications and Variations:

- After students / participants become confident with this process, you can expand beyond the 12, 3, 6 and 9 o’clock slots during the sign-up period.
- [Vary the images](#) used when you have people partner up, to keep it fresh!



Engaging Strategies

Engaging with Data

Adapted from ATLAS Data Protocol



Time: 45 minutes

Overview:

This protocol offers a structured way to engage with data, with a focus on reflecting on implications and developing next steps.

When and Why:

The purpose of this activity is to help participants make meaning out of data. It is useful when you want to use a data set to drive change.



SEL Focus: This activity emphasizes developing skills of **Responsible Decision-Making (Problem-Solving)**, **Relationship Skills (Resolving Conflicts)** and **Social Awareness (Respect for Others)**.

Steps:

1. **Predictions:** Explain which data you have in hand and ask participants to predict what they think the data will say. Chart the responses.
2. **Descriptions:** Distribute the data and ask participants to work in pairs to describe what they see while avoiding judgments or jumping to interpretations. What trends do they notice? Chart the trends.
3. **Interpretations:** Ask pairs to discuss what the data suggests. Encourage participants to come up with as many interpretations as possible, ask each other questions, and base their responses on evidence from the data set. Chart the interpretations.
4. **Implications:** In pairs, invite participants to recommend next steps, develop strategies that may be effective in addressing the evidence found in the data, and suggest additional data that might be helpful to look at. Chart the discussion.



Debrief: Ask participants to write or discuss with a partner any or all of the following questions. Invite share-outs.

- “What did you learn from listening to others that was interesting or surprising?”
- “What new perspectives did others provide?”
- “How well did the process work?”
- “What could be improved?”

Modifications and Variations:

This can be done in small groups instead of in pairs, and groups can be responsible for charting and sharing out their responses between steps.



Engaging Strategies

Fishbowl



Time: 30 minutes

Overview:

In this activity, participants are divided into two groups that are seated in concentric circles, all facing the center. The outside circle listens while the inside group has a discussion about a topic. Then the groups switch places so the listeners become the speakers, and vice versa.

When and Why:

This activity strengthens listening skills and encourages everyone to participate in turn in a discussion. It can be used during a session to discuss content, or at the end of an engagement to give airtime to everyone about what they learned or found useful.



SEL Focus:

While the main emphasis of this activity is on the **Social Awareness** skills (*Perspective-Taking, Empathy, Appreciating Diversity* and *Respect for Others*) needed to participate in constructive dialogue, the activity also strengthens **Self-Awareness** (*Accurate Self-Perception*) and **Self-Management** (*Self-Discipline*) as participants work to communicate effectively.

Steps:

1. Set up two concentric circles of chairs, all facing the center of the circle, and have everyone take a seat.
2. Provide the question prompt or discussion topic and set a timer for 10 minutes. Only the inside group members may speak during this time. Instruct the outside group to quietly listen and notice their own ideas that surface during the discussion. Note-taking on a graphic organizer may be helpful.
3. When the time is up, ask the groups to trade places so that the outside group is sitting on the inner circle chairs and vice versa. Set the timer again and let the new inside group discuss the topic.



Debrief with one of these activities:

- Ask participants to write down a response to one comment they heard and explain why they agree/disagree.
- Turn to a partner and discuss how it felt, both being a "listener" and a "discusser."
- Share one word or a short phrase with the whole group that was important about the discussion to them.

**Modifications and Variations:**

- You can assign the groups opposing views in an argument. This works especially well when you have read an article or watched a video prior to the discussion that shows opposing views.
- With adults, or students who are skillful and experienced with the Fishbowl strategy, place an empty chair in the inner circle, and invite a participant join in to ask a question or have a speaker clarify a thought.
- If groundwork has been laid for the “inner/outer circle, support partner” mentioned in Step 2 above, provide debrief time after each discussion circle during which the observing partner provides feedback on specific areas the group has already agreed on (e.g., impactful idea or statement, eye contact, voice volume, connection to another speaker’s point).



Engaging Strategies

Gallery Walk



Time: 20 minutes or longer if schedule permits

Overview:

Like viewers at a gallery, small groups of participants rotate from poster to poster, stopping to view, discuss, and add ideas at each station.

When and Why:

This brainstorming activity allows small groups to discuss a variety of topics and learn from one another in a short amount of time.



SEL Focus: During this activity, participants will be drawing on **Responsible Decision-Making** skills as they **Problem-solve** with their group and **Relationship Skills** (*Working Cooperatively, Recognizing and Using Supports, Social Engagement*).

Steps:

1. Share an overarching question with the group, such as, "How can we make our school environment safer for students?"
2. Hang posters with headings that relate to the overarching question around the room. For example, for the question "How can we make our school environment safer for students?", the headings might be "Between Classes," "At Dismissal," "During Lunch," etc.
3. Divide participants into small groups, give each group a marker, and direct each group to one of the posters. Explain the overarching question, and what each of the poster topics is.
4. Allow groups to stand at each poster for three to five minutes to share, discuss, and write down their responses to the category.
5. When time is up, ask the groups to rotate clockwise so each group is in front of a new poster to continue the activity. Each group now reads the offerings of the previous authors, using sticky notes to add clarifying questions or comments/compliments. Rotate every three to five minutes, until every group has visited every poster.
6. Next, allow time for individuals to silently walk around the room and read the completed posters, noting ideas that they agree with or that seem like something they'd like to try.
7. Original group revisits their feedback and can add to their poster.



Debrief:

Ask participants from each group to respond to one of the questions or comments they received and share out their favorite idea, an insight, or a proposed next step.

Modifications and Variations:

If space is limited, the "posters" can be sheets of paper that are passed from table to table.



Engaging Strategies

Give One, Get One, Move On (Go, Go, Mo)



Time: 5-10 minutes

Overview:

Through this activity, participants share and pass along new ideas.

When and Why:

This activity enables participants to spread good ideas and share what they know or have learned with each other in a way that maximizes equitable “airtime.”



SEL Focus: “Go, Go, Mo” promotes **Self-Management (Self-discipline)** as participants practice active listening to learn from their peers, and **Relationship Skills**, providing an opportunity for participants to practice clear and effective **Communication** as they teach each other. The debrief could be structured to highlight examples of **Self-Awareness (Recognizing Strengths)** and **Social Awareness (Respect for Others)**.

Steps:

1. Ask participants to write down three to five key learnings or important ideas about the topic at hand. Each idea or key learning should be written down on a separate index card or sticky note.
2. Explain the activity, reinforce your attention signal, and then invite the group to get up and mingle until you let them know it’s time to pair up and exchange their ideas.
3. After 30 seconds, bring the room to silence and call out, “GIVE ONE to a partner!”
4. Participants form pairs and each “gives” (hands) one of their key learnings or important ideas about the topic to their partner while explaining what they wrote, so that each person “gives one” and “gets one.”
5. Give your signal and when the room is quiet, tell them to “Move on!” and mingle again.
6. Repeat the sharing process. This time, participants can share their own card or the new idea they received from a previous partner.



Debrief:

- Invite a few participants to share a valuable new learning that was shared with them.

Modifications and Variations:

Instead of random mingling, have people gather in clusters, such as by birth month, by designated categories of shared interests, by role, etc.



Engaging Strategies

Jigsaw



Time: 20-40 minutes

Overview:

Small groups each discuss a different excerpt of an article or topic. Groups then reorganize so that each new group contains one member from each of the original groups. The members of the new group now "teach" their excerpt to the members of their new group.

When and Why:

Teaching others is a highly effective strategy that enables individuals to deeply learn and synthesize information.



SEL Focus: This activity supports skill development in **Responsible Decision-Making** (*Ethical Responsibility*), **Social Awareness** (*Respect for Others*), and **Self-Awareness** (*Self-Efficacy*) as participants are challenged to teach what they have learned to peers.

Steps:

1. Select an appropriate text and divide it into numbered sections so that each group gets a piece that's readable during the amount of time you'll be providing. Preplan for students who will need a particularly accessible section, or who will benefit from receiving their reading ahead of time.
2. Divide participants into same-sized small groups, and assign one section of the article to the members of each group.
3. Allow groups to discuss their section or topic for 5 to 10 minutes, with everyone in the group supporting one another to fully understand their piece.
4. Number off within each group, counting up to the number of new small groups you are forming. Then ask all the "1s," "2s," "3s," etc., to find each other and form new groups.
5. The new group members then take turns teaching their piece to their new group in the sequenced order of the article. Designate a "timer" within each group who ensures that each person has equal time to do their teaching, answer questions from the group, etc.



Debrief by asking participants to return to their original groups and:

- Share one new thing they learned.
- Offer an appreciation for "a teaching strategy that really helped me understand, because..."
- Write a silent reflection to self-assess on areas they thought they were particularly effective in when they taught their piece, and what they might try to do differently next time.



Engaging Strategies

Maître d'



Time: 5-10 minutes

Overview:

Acting as a maître d', the facilitator calls participants to form "tables" where they "dine" (exchange ideas) with a variety of tablemates.

When and Why:

This activity helps participants develop a sense of connectedness when sharing ideas, encourages listening to a wide range of ideas, and incorporates movement and fluid groupings.



SEL Focus: Participants will practice the **Relationship Skills** of *Communication and Social Engagement* as they participate in multiple social interactions.

Steps:

1. Prepare engaging prompts (questions, quotes, or images) that are aligned to the gathering's content or SEL goal.
2. Explain that when you, the maître d', call a "table," (e.g., "Table for three!"), participants must move quickly to arrange themselves into groups of that number and then begin discussing the prompt.
3. Let them know that to keep things moving and encourage mingling, they will only have a few minutes to talk with each at their "tables."
4. Share the first prompt and call out, "Table for ____!"
5. Use your attention signal to bring the room to silence when time is up.
6. Repeat several times, each time offering a different prompt for discussion.



Debrief by asking one or more of these questions:

- "What is something you heard about _____ that stood out to you?"
- "What is something about _____ that you are now wondering about?"
- "In what ways did your understanding of _____ deepen or change?"
- "What was a benefit or challenge of doing this activity?"

Reminder: Speakers should always share from their own perspective, not share someone else's contribution.

Modifications and Variations:

Play music as groups are formed. Keep the same prompt each time and ask the tables to carry on the conversation from their previous table group. This activity is also very useful as a strategy for building and sharing knowledge in a content area.



Engaging Strategies

Pass It On



Time: 5-10 minutes

Overview:

In this activity, participants silently share their ideas with each other.

When and Why:

This activity enables participants to share ideas with each other in a quiet, focused way. It is particularly useful after a round of active engagement, and is especially appreciated by more introverted people.



SEL Focus: This activity helps to develop the **Self-Awareness** skill of **Self-Efficacy**, **Relationship Skills** (*Building Working Relationships*, *Social Engagement*), and **Responsible Decision-Making** (*Reflection*).

Steps:

1. Provide a sheet of paper to each participant and instruct them to fold it so that the creases form six boxes and put their name in the upper-left box.
2. Ask participants to think of an important idea they have learned or that has recently been reinforced during the engagement.
3. Give participants one to three minutes to write it down in Box 1 (the box they wrote their name in).
4. Instruct participants to pass their sheet to another participant (e.g., the person next to them at the table), who will silently read what was written in the first box.
5. That person will add an idea in Box 2 (upper-right box). Explain that participants should not repeat ideas that are already listed, but rather should generate new ideas.
6. Ask participants to continue passing the papers and adding ideas until all of the boxes are filled with ideas.
7. When the papers are filled in, instruct participants to return the sheets to their original owners.



Debrief by asking, “What did you learn from reading your paper when it was filled in? Did anyone have similar ideas? Or ideas that pushed your own thinking?”

Modifications and Variations:

Fold the papers into quarters if time is short. Invite participants to share out one new idea on their completed paper that they particularly like or agree with. This can be also done as a partner activity, trading papers with one other person. You may wish to give conversation time after the writing sections to discuss areas of disagreement and to clarify for accuracy and meaning.



Engaging Strategies

Save the Last Word

Adapted from [National School Reform Faculty](#)



Time: 15 minutes

Overview:

Working in small groups, participants follow an established protocol to share and discuss their responses to a text or video clip.

When and Why:

By creating a clear structure for discussion, this strategy encourages everyone to be both an active speaker and an active listener, and supports equity of voice by ensuring that frequent speakers give space for others to share.



SEL Focus: This activity enhances skills in **Self-Management** (*Impulse Control, Self-Discipline*) and **Social Awareness** (*Appreciating Diversity*) as participants take turns being both speaker and listener as they share insights from various points of view.

Steps:

1. Identify a reading or video excerpt that will serve as the catalyst for this activity.
2. Have participants read/view the selected text/video and highlight three sentences or make note of three ideas that particularly stand out for them.
3. Ask participants to write each sentence/idea on the front of an index card. On the back of the card, ask them to write a few sentences explaining why they chose that quote (what it meant to them, reminded them of, how it connects to their own experience, etc.).
4. Divide the participants into groups of three, identifying one person as A, one person as B, and one person as C.
5. Invite the A participants to read one of their chosen quotations or ideas to their group. Then persons B and C discuss the offering while person A listens. (For example, What do they think it means? Why do they think these words/idea might be important? To whom?)
6. After several minutes, ask Participant A to read the back of their card (or to explain why they picked the quotation or idea), thus having “the last word.”
7. This process repeats with B sharing and others reflecting before B gets “the last word,” then is repeated again with C sharing.



Debrief by asking one or two of these questions:

- What was a benefit of listening to others respond to your passage before you spoke?
- To what degree was it challenging to hold back your own thoughts while others spoke?



Engaging Strategies

Brain Break: Meet in the Middle

Source: CATCH Grades 6-8 Activity Box: Card #32



Time: 5-7 minutes

Overview:

Students are paired with a partner. Partners stand on opposite sides of the classroom (or hallway) facing each other, one on one, and follow directions to “meet in the middle” and do a specified activity.

When and Why:

This works well when your group needs a quick pick-me-up to bring up the energy. Get the blood flowing, move around, have a laugh—ready to learn again!



SEL Focus: This activity emphasizes **Responsible Decision-Making** skills (*Problem Identification, Problem-Solving*) and **Social Awareness** (*Perspective-Taking*) as participants work together to solve the task.

Steps:

1. Call out an activity to do. Students walk to the center and meet their partner. After completing the activity, students turn and walk back to their original places.
2. Add one activity each time. For example:
 - i. 1st time—meet partner in the middle and do a right-handed high-five.
 - ii. 2nd time—right-handed high-five, add left-handed high-five.
 - iii. 3rd time—right-handed high-five, left-handed high-five, call out a favorite physical activity they like to do.
3. Depending on time, add more activities: left-handed low-five, over the top (back to back), tap right shoe sole, tap left shoe sole, etc.



Debrief by asking one or two of these questions:

- Which partners can recall the sequence of activities they did?
- How’s your energy right now?

Modifications and Variations:

- Let students create a list of physical actions to do the next time you use this brain break.
- Let students take turns leading the brain break, calling out the actions for the group.



Engaging Strategies

Brain Break: Mindful Minute



Time: 1-3 minutes

Overview:

Oftentimes our bodies can be present but our minds are elsewhere. Asking participants to focus on a simple action helps everyone become fully present.

When and Why:

This activity works well both to start a meeting—to help participants focus—and as a classroom “brain break”—to allow participants to decompress and refocus so they’re ready to re-engage with learning.



SEL Focus: This activity promotes both **Self-Awareness** (*Identifying Emotions*), and the **Self-Management** skills of **Stress Management** and **Self-Discipline** as participants practice ownership of regulating themselves.

Steps:

1. Explain that our breath can be used to calm our bodies and steady our minds.
2. Ask participants to bring awareness to their breathing when you sound a tone. It may be helpful for participants to place their hands on their bellies and notice the gentle rising and falling of their breath.
3. Invite them to either close their eyes or to rest them by looking at a spot they choose across the room. Remind them there is no need to try to breathe in any special way, but to just notice how their own breathing is happening right then.
4. Gently sound a triangle or bell or verbally signify the end.



Debrief the experience by asking participants to share how the activity felt to them and when they might use this in their lives, and/or to share similar ideas like this that help them stay present and focused.

Modifications and Variations:

For an energizing mindfulness activity, choose something that involves concentration. For example, ask participants to pat their heads while they alternately tap opposite shoulders.



Engaging Strategies

Brain Break: Team Quiz Hustle

Source: CATCH Grades 6-8 Activity Box: Card #78



Time: 10 minutes

Overview:

This activity is a prime example of a brain break that both provides physical activity and reinforces content. Students combine reviewing academic material with movement and teamwork. As always, modify as needed for individuals in your group.

When and Why:

This activity provides a chance for movement, cooperation, and reinforcement of academic content. There may also be cheering for one's team and laughter—always a plus!



SEL Focus: This activity promotes **Self-Awareness** (*Sense of Self Confidence*), the **Self-Management** skills of **Stress Management** and **Self-Discipline** as participants practice ownership of regulating themselves, and **Relationship Skills** (*Communication, Social Engagement, Building Relationships, Working Cooperatively*).

Steps:

1. Designate at least four stations in the classroom (just a sign—no equipment is needed).
2. Create quiz/physical activity cards (one per station). Write a quiz question on one side of the card and a physical activity on the other side of the card (e.g., 20 jumping jacks, jog in place for 30 seconds, imaginary jump rope for 25 seconds).
3. Place a quiz question/physical activity card at each numbered station. The card should be placed with the quiz question face down and the physical activity face up. Write the answers to the questions on separate pieces of paper that are numbered according to the station and taped to the chalkboard face down.
4. Divide the class into even teams of three or four; each team starts at a different exercise station.
5. On signal, the team performs the physical activity and then turns the card over to read the question. As a team, they decide on the answer, and one person walks to the chalkboard to determine if the group has the correct answer. If correct, they proceed to the next station.
6. If their answer is incorrect, they go back to the station and repeat the activity. They then move to the next station and repeat the sequence.
7. Play until one team has successfully completed all of the stations, or until time runs out.



Debrief the experience by asking participants to share how the activity felt to them, when they might use this in their lives, and/or to share similar ideas like this that help them stay present and focused.

Modifications and Variations:

- Create math, science, health, language arts, or social studies questions for other rounds.
- Invite students to create questions related to a particular area of current content, and to put their own idea for a physical action on the other side.
- Invite students to lead the brain break once the routine and rules are well established.