Activities to Support Inhibition and Impulse Control Development

In order for child to learn a new skill, he or she must be calm and engaged. Here are some suggestions of ways to teach children and provide practice, through fun activities!

-Balloon volleyball. The goal is to take turns hitting the balloon to keep it off the ground. The team can keep track of how many times they can hit the balloon without it touching the ground.

How this helps: Each person playing has to hit the balloon gently or it will be difficult for the partner to hit it and keep it off the ground. Taking turns helps with waiting and inhibition. Playing a game together helps give turn taking a positive spin.

-Freeze Dance. Play a song that has dancing and movement paired with freezing, such as Walking walking on the CD Songs for Wiggle worms. Songs where the motions change, such as Sounds go high, sounds go low from Language Play and Listening Fun for Everyone requires children to listen to the words and match their movements in the song. A regular song can also work for a freeze dance. The teacher stops the music at random times and the children have to listen for the pause in the music to freeze. The teacher (or children) can call out a shape or movement to make when freezing, for added fun.

How this helps: Children have to listen while being actively engaged in an action. This can be a challenging activity in the beginning. Children may need the pause of the music to be paired with a sound or visual from the teacher. The teacher can also provide modeling of dancing and freezing for children to copy or check their own bodies.

-Cooking. Providing opportunities for children to help cook supports building inhibition. Instant pudding is an easy recipe that can be made without a stove or refrigerator. It is quick and easy, and requires the children to wait a few minutes before eating it. More complicated recipes can be used as the child’s abilities to follow directions and wait increase.

How this helps: Children must wait for the instructions, add the ingredients in order according to the recipe and often wait for the food to cook or cool. Waiting (for short amounts of time) can help build impulse control.

-Hide-and-seek. One person is “it” and covers their eyes. They count to a specific number (usually between 20 and 50) while the rest of the group hides. This can be done in a group or
with just one other person. With younger children, an adult can help with counting/finding and with hiding. Or, if you’d rather not hide, you can always ask the child to hide an object in another room or a sneaky spot of his/her choice.

**How this helps:** Being “it” requires the inhibition control to not peek to see where everyone is hiding. When kids are hiding, they have to remain relatively quiet and still.

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**-Parachute.** This game is best with more than two people. Spread out a large sheet or a parachute. Everyone playing holds an edge tightly in both hands. Working together, the group can slowly raise the parachute overhead and say “Up, up, up!” then lower it saying, “Down, down, down!” When you call “Under, under, under!” everyone can let go of the parachute and hurry under. Alternatively, you can get under the parachute while still holding onto the corners. To make the game more challenging, change the cue to go under the parachute to something silly like ‘banana’. This helps the kids listen and inhibit running under the parachute. You can also change the pace of shaking the parachute from fast to slow. Adding some soft balls on top of the parachute while shaking it can be fun as well.

**How this helps:** Children have to listen to the directions and inhibit their desire to move the parachute how they want to. This is especially hard when instructed to shake at different tempos or listen for the silly word to go under the parachute.

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**-One for you, one for me.** Provide a pile of objects (toys, buttons, raisins, etc.) and help the child distribute the items between two people. While handing them out say “One for you, one for me.”

**How it helps:** Not only does this game teach sharing and perspective taking, it also gives the inhibition muscle a chance to flex. The child has to refrain from grabbing all the objects for himself and not sharing.

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**-Feely bag.** Put familiar toys or objects in a cloth bag (such as plastic toy animals) and have a child stick his hand in the bag and try to guess to what object he is holding just from how it feels. Variation: The child feels the objects from the outside of the bag.

**How it helps:** Feely bag requires working memory too, but it also requires children to connect sensory information (in this case the shape and texture of the object) with their internal picture of what the animal looks like. Children also have to inhibit their desire to just pull the object out of the bag.

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**-Simon Says.** One person is Simon and the rest of the group follows the directions of Simon, but only when they first hear the phrase, “Simon says……” For example, if Simon tells the group to
‘touch your nose’ no one should move. The group members only follow the direction if Simon
tells the group ‘Simon says, touch your nose’. If the group becomes good at this version, the
directions can be more complex by instructing the group to do the opposite of what Simon says.
For example, ‘Simon says, touch your toes’ would cause the group to touch their heads instead.

**How it helps:** Children will have to use their inhibition skills to fight the urge to follow the
directions immediately. They will have to think and consider if the directions are stated
correctly. This builds on a child’s ability to listen, comprehend, inhibit and act upon verbal
directions.

- **Using a timer.** A timer is a physical way to for a child to better understand the concept that time
is passing. This can help increase a child’s ability to wait and inhibit their behavior.

**How it helps:** Any type of timer can be useful: digital, sand, kitchen timers can all provide a
child with visual feedback on the passage of time. This can help a child inhibit behaviors
(waiting for a turn or waiting for an activity to begin) by helping them understand that time is
passing and helps the child learn and practice how to plan and pace themselves.

- **Obstacle course.** Set up an obstacle course where the child has to go under, over, up, down,
around and through various objects. These can be simple like using chairs and tables or more
complex using slides, tunnels and stairs. Changing the course or increasing its complexity will
help keep the child challenged, engaged and learning.

**How it helps:** Children have to have motor planning to change the direction and the way they
use their bodies. They have to inhibit their behavior by following the obstacle course and not
just going to the areas they like the most. They have to work their coordination and figure out
how to do multi-step physical actions, which is good for a variety of executive functioning areas.

- **Pretend or dramatic play.** Providing children with the opportunity to explore a variety of
everyday roles, helps develop several different executive functions (important mental skills that
are key to learning). This can be as simple as children pretending to drive a bus while sitting in
a box to more elaborate set ups of pretending to be an archeologist and uncovering dinosaur
bones. The purpose is to help the child get into and explore a role that is outside of their daily
life.

**How it helps:** Children have to hold the different roles in their minds (working memory) and
stay in character (inhibitory control). They also may have to adjust to the changes in a plot line
when playing with others, which helps with their mental flexibility.
-Red light/Green light. One person is “it”. They stand away from the other players, who are in a line facing “it”. “It” says, “Green Light!” and everyone in the lines starts moving towards them. When “it” says, “Red Light!” everyone in the line freezes. The goal is to be the first one to touch “it” without moving during the red light. Variations: “It” can hold a green card and a red card to provide visual feedback along with the verbal directions. This game can be played with several people or one-on-one. To make the game more challenging, if someone moves during “Red light”, they have to move back to the starting line. The group can also be instructed to move in specific ways (like a crab, hop like a bunny, etc.) during “Green light” time.

How it helps: By playing a game that includes impulse control, adults are supporting the child in learning, while being engaged. In order for learning to take place, a child has to be interested and engaged in an activity. Instruction and practice for a new skill take place best during calm and engaging moments.

The more practice and opportunities children have to work on their inhibition and impulse control, the better they will become at these skills. Keep it fun!