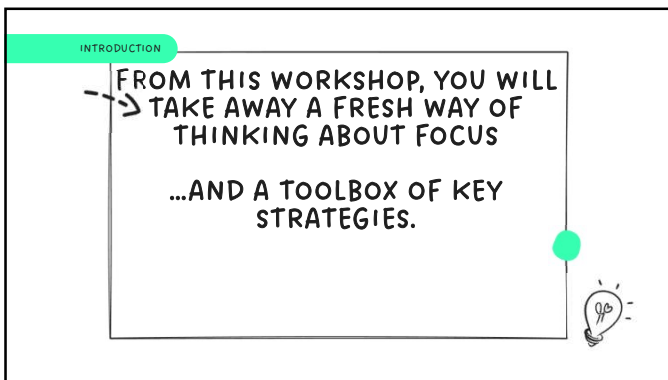
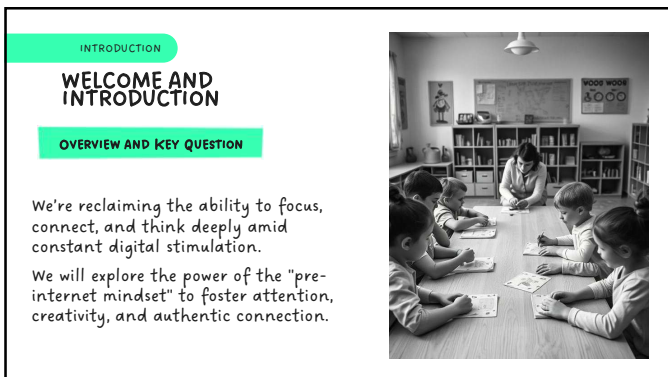




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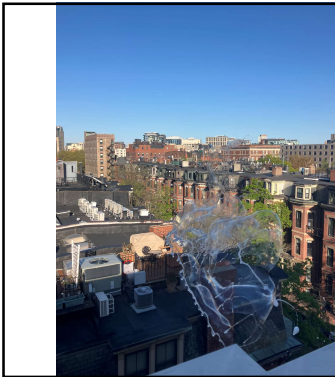


3

OUR "FOCUS" TODAY:

- The science of attention and focus in our digital world
- Conversation as cognitive and social-emotional training
- The power of deep presence and connection
- Beyond "screen time" rules: How to design environments (home/classroom) that sustain deep engagement.

4



STARTING WITH A REFLECTION:

WHAT'S THE LAST TIME YOU'VE SEEN A CHILD IN FULL FOCUS? WHAT WAS HAPPENING?

5

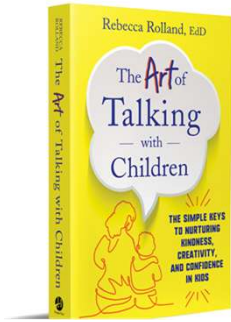
INTRODUCTION: ABOUT ME

**HARVARD LECTURER, SPEECH
PATHOLOGIST, AUTHOR, AND
CREATIVE WRITING COACH—AND
MOM OF TWO.**

6

THE ART OF TALKING WITH CHILDREN

- A combined memoir and guidebook
- Using portraiture, anecdote, + research
- Takeaways that are actionable + engaging



7

MINDSET

THE POWER OF THE PRE-INTERNET MINDSET

Core Principles:

- ◆ **Deep Focus** - Sustained attention without fragmentation
- ◆ **Single-Tasking** - Full engagement with one activity
- ◆ **Embodied Connection** - Learning through physical and social interaction
- ◆ **Productive Boredom** - Space for creativity and problem-solving



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FOUNDATIONS

**TECH IS A TOOL — ENGAGEMENT
QUALITY DEFINES ITS VALUE.**

—
This isn't "anti-tech" or "nostalgia."
It's about reclaiming skills, not rejecting progress.

9

POLL: WHEN DO YOU FEEL MOST PRESENT WITH CHILDREN?

- A) Outside play time
- B) Storytime
- C) Mealtime
- D) Inside play time—choice or center time
- E) Other?



10

WHAT DOES THE SCIENCE SAY?

Outdoor play can boost learning
• Shared reading builds "joint attention"

"Focus flourishes when children
feel autonomous and immersed, not when adults demand it."

Try noticing: ☁ ☀ 🍃 🌳 🍷

(Hassinger-Das et al., 2020; Ulset, 2017)

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ATTENTION

DEEP FOCUS TRAINS THE BRAIN FOR EXTENDED CONCENTRATION, AND PATIENCE, AND RESTORES AUTHENTIC COMMUNICATION.

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QUICK CHECK:

Give a thumb's up if you've said this year: 'Pay attention!'



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INTRODUCTION

OVERWHELMED BY SPLIT FOCUS? YOU'RE NOT ALONE.



Let's unpack how to rebuild "focus muscles"—for children and for us!

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FOUNDATIONS

ATTENTION AND FOCUS: FOUNDATIONS FOR LEARNING

WHAT IS ATTENTION?



- Selective concentration on one aspect of the environment
- Noticing and responding while filtering distractions
- Naturally fluctuates
- Essential for:
 - Learning
 - Social interaction
 - Emotional regulation

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FOUNDATION

**ATTENTION IS THE SPOTLIGHT—
FOCUS IS KEEPING IT STEADY.**

Focus is sustained attention over time. It requires self-regulation and resistance to distractions,


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IMPORTANCE

WHY ATTENTION AND FOCUS MATTER FOR PRESCHOOLERS

** Superpowers of Focus:
Cognitive Growth
Emotional Skills
Social Bonds*


** The seeds of kindergarten readiness are planted in today's focus moments. **



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WHAT IS EXECUTIVE FUNCTION?

From country roads ...



To highways



www.kkofabs.com

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A TALE OF TWO PRESCHOOLERS...



- Aiden and Jason.
- **Aiden:** Strong pre-literacy and math skills (already starting to read)
 - But has a lot of trouble sitting still, often calls out, and only listens to stories "if he has to"
- **Jason:** Weaker pre-literacy and math skills (a bit behind grade level)
 - But loves to hear stories and is very attentive to the teacher and friends

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POLL: LET'S CONSIDER:

--Which of these two children is likely to have stronger achievement scores (literacy and math) in elementary school?

- A)Aiden
- B)Jason
- C)Neither
- D)No way to know
- E)Other

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Why is Executive Function important?




- Children with stronger **working memory, inhibition and attentional skills** have been found to make larger gains on tests of early math, language and literacy
- Working memory and attention skills for low SES children at beginning of preschool predicts achievement more than math and reading ability (Welsh, Nix, Blair, Bierman, and Nelson (2010)
 - Center for the Developing Child, Harvard University

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CHALLENGE

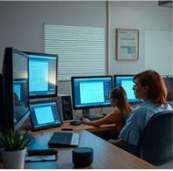
● RECLAIMING ATTENTION IN A DIGITAL WORLD



DIGITAL OVERSTIMULATION STEALS:

- **X** **Depth** - 47-second attention shifts (UC Irvine)
- **X** **Joy** - 60% less creative play with screens present (AAP 2023)
- **X** **Connection** - 4x fewer adult-child interactions during tech use

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WE ARE CONSTANTLY CONNECTED.. TO OUR DOWNFALL

"Parents of young children check their phones 70 times a day" (Common Sense Media, 2023).

"48% of teachers say students' attention spans are significantly shorter than pre-pandemic" (EdWeek, 2024).

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THE ROLE OF IN-PERSON, EMBODIED TALK

-  Five senses engaged
-  "Social glue" needed for bonding present
-  Responsiveness made easier
-  Ability to check in and repair

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WHY DOESN'T THIS TEND TO WORK?



- HAVING ALL THE STUDENTS SIT THROUGH AN HOUR-LONG PRESENTATION WITHOUT BREAKS
- TELLING THE STUDENTS TEN TIMES, "JUST LISTEN!"
- DOING HARDER ACADEMICS, FOR MORE TIME, TO HELP FOCUS
- CUTTING RECESS AND PHYSICAL TIME

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TRENDS

RISE IN ADHD DIAGNOSES—FOR KIDS AND ADULTS

As of 2022, over 7 million (11.4%) U.S. children aged 3-17 years were diagnosed with ADHD, 1 million more than in 2016. 8.7 million U.S. adults also diagnosed. Range of reasons cited: increased awareness, screentime use, pace of modern life... So what to do?



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MISCONCEPTIONS

DEBUNKING COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

MYTH: KIDS SHOULD FOCUS LIKE ADULTS

MYTH: KIDS DON'T NEED SUPPORT TO FOCUS

MYTH: FOCUS IS ONLY ACADEMIC

MYTH: MINDFULNESS ALONE SOLVES FOCUS ISSUES

MYTH: CHILDREN'S FOCUS IS INDEPENDENT OF ADULT BEHAVIOR

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MINDSET

ATTENTION AND FOCUS CAN BE ENGAGED AND JOYFUL!

When we reframe our mindset, paying attention becomes a source of energy and fulfillment.



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BREAKING MISCONCEPTIONS

ATTENTION AND FOCUS: THE REALITY


<p>KIDS NEED ATTENTION TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS</p> <p>"WHAT DID BOBBY TELL ME?"</p>	<p>ENVIRONMENT SHAPES FOCUS</p> <p>"THAT BEE POSTER REMINDS ME OF OUR STORY!"</p>	<p>STRONG BONDS HELP KIDS ENGAGE</p> <p>"I WANT MY TEACHER TO KNOW I'M LISTENING!"</p>
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CASE STUDY

EXAMPLE: THE BUBBLE EXPERIMENT

OBSERVING ATTENTION AND ENGAGEMENT




DISTRACTION VS. INQUIRY



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THE CHILD VS. THE ADULT "SANDWICH"



The child "sandwich"

Child: "Where are those birds going?"
 Adult: "Maybe Florida? What do you think?"
 Child: "Maybe somewhere warm. I went to Florida once with my family."

The adult "sandwich"

Adult: "What color is that book?"
 Child: "Green."
 Adult: "And what about how many books?"
 Child: "Two."
 Adult: "Good job."


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TRY IT OUT

WHAT IF WE WAITED 10 SECONDS BEFORE ANSWERING CHILDREN'S QUESTIONS?


What if we asked children: "Come up with TWO or THREE questions you have—and ask a friend!"

Taking a pause and encouraging peer questioning can promote deeper thinking and collaboration in the classroom.



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WE'VE BEEN IGNORING "NATURE AS MEDICINE"



Study of 562 Norwegian preschools found: link between time outdoors and stronger EF skills (attention, short-term memory).

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0272494417300737>

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PHILOSOPHY


"MANY OF THE PROBLEMS I WAS WORKING WITH WERE IN FACT PROBLEMS OF THE ENVIRONMENT RATHER THAN THE CHILDREN."

— LIA GRIPPO, FOUNDER OF WILD ROOTS FOREST SCHOOL IN SANTA BARBARA

Nature offers: multiple vantage points, feast for the senses, bridge for the physical and mental, and natural challenges.

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BUT IT'S EQUALLY ABOUT OUR CONVERSATIONS!



Child: "Do you think there are more flowers or trees in the world?"

Adult:

A: "I don't know. Let's go back inside."


B: "Flowers, I guess."

C: "Let's google it."

D: "What do you think?" or "How might we figure this out?"

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WE NEED THE ABCS TO HELP




Conversations that are:

- A: Adaptive
- B: Back and forth
- C: Child-driven

....Creates "talk success"--and more focus and attention

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HOW DOES EF LOOK IN PRESCHOOL?


Jaden:

- "I had an idea, and I waited till it was my turn"
- "I listened to what my friend had to say before jumping in"
- "I changed centers without too much trouble"

But--We need to meet kids where they are!

- Reasonable wait times
- Physical and mental breaks
- Attention *through* physical activity


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COGNITION  WHY IT MATTERS

EXECUTIVE FUNCTION (EF) AND FOCUS

Strong EF =

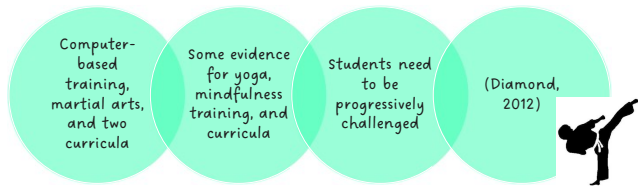
- ✓ Follows multi-step directions
- ✓ Recalls instructions while working
- ✓ Waits turn without outbursts



Without strong 'banks', the flood of distractions takes over.

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THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO BUILD EF SKILLS



Computer-based training, martial arts, and two curricula

Some evidence for yoga, mindfulness training, and curricula

Students need to be progressively challenged

(Diamond, 2012)

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RESEARCH ON INTERVENTIONS SHOWS:

- EF skills suffer when children are under stress, upset, or not physically fit
 - When children's social, emotional, and physical needs are met, they are better able to show strong EF skills and think creatively
 - Interventions can work through targeting these areas
- (Diamond, 2012)



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WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT EF INTERVENTIONS

- Several curricula have shown promising effects
 - Tools of the Mind: teaching "to organize and manage instruction so that children build self-regulation skills through purposeful interactions with classmates"
 - Uses fairy tales, chapter books, and intentional pretend play
- (Blair & Raver, 2014)

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FOCUS DEVELOPMENT

MODELING FOCUS AND ATTENTION



VISUAL MODELING

Show children what focused behavior looks like



VERBAL MODELING

"This is how paying attention can look and sound"

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DEVELOPMENT

FOCUS FEELS SAFE: HOW ATTENTION BUILDS EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE

- * Strong focus strengthens the brain's "calm down" center
Just 5 mins of sustained attention lowers cortisol by 18% (Child Dev, 2023)
- * **The Security Cycle**
 1. Child focuses → 2. Reads cues better → 3. Gets needs met → 4. Feels safer to focus

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WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE DAILY

Without Focus Skills:

- Meltdowns when switching activities
- Missed social cues → friendship struggles

With Focus Skills:

- "I need a break" instead of hitting
- Noticing a friend's sad face → offering comfort
- **Try Today:**
"Name the focus → feeling link when you see it:
'I see you concentrating hard on that tower. That helped you stay calm when it fell!'"



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ATTENTION

Ⓢ

Think about "Wiring Differences"

What ADHD Doesn't Change:
⚡ Creativity • Energy • Problem-Solving

UNDERSTANDING ADHD



What ADHD Changes:

- ⚡ **Attention:** Focus works best with high engagement
- ⚡ **Impulses:** Fast idea generation, harder to filter
- ⚡ **Regulation:** Big feelings need movement breaks

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STRUGGLES WITH ATTENTION MIGHT NOT BE ADHD!

We equally should consider:

- Anxiety
- OCD
- Trauma
- Learning disability or delays
- Communication issues
- Development

As one 2012 study found, youngest boys in class are 30% more likely than oldest to be diagnosed with ADHD—and the stat goes up to 70% for girls!

<https://childmind.org/article/not-all-attention-problems-are-adhd/#:~:text=Quick%20Read,also%20cause%20an%20attention%20problem.>

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ATTENTION

STRATEGIES THAT WORK

For Attention:

- "Focus sprints" (short bursts with movement breaks)
- Fidget tools *that work* (putty, wobble cushions)

For Impulses:

- "Pause prompts" (nonverbal cues like touch cues)
- Role-play "waiting" through games

For Regulation:

- Designated "reset spaces" with sensory tools
- Emotion thermometers (visual scales)

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STRATEGIES BENEFITTING THE WHOLE CLASSROOM

- Creating structured environments
- Modeling deep presence and single-tasking
- Incorporating play-based, inquiry-driven activities
- Reducing distractions
- Providing clear expectations
- Scaffolding attention development

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PRESENCE

FROM FOCUS TO DEEP PRESENCE

Traditional Focus:
Cognitive Skills

- Sustained concentration
- Self-regulation
- Task completion

Deep Presence Adds:
Full Sensory Engagement


- Emotional & physical availability
- Shared curiosity & inquiry
- Responsive, playful interaction

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KEY PRINCIPLE:

FOCUS AS "DOING", NOT "HAVING"

FOCUS IS AN ACTIVE PROCESS	EMBEDDED IN RELATIONSHIPS	ENVIRONMENT SHAPES ATTENTION
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NEUROSCIENCE

KEY FINDING: KIDS DON'T FOCUS LIKE ADULTS

CHILD VS. ADULT ATTENTION	NEED TO SHAPE THE LANDSCAPE	MIND-WANDERING'S ROLE
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CHALLENGES

CHALLENGES OF THE DIGITAL MINDSET

FREQUENT DEVICE CHECKING	CONSTANT SCROLLING AND MULTITASKING	REDUCED CONVERSATIONAL QUALITY
COGNITIVE DRAIN FROM NOTIFICATIONS	LESS ROOM FOR REFLECTION AND INQUIRY	DIMINISHED FACE-TO-FACE CONNECTION

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TOO MANY "QUICK ANSWERS" CAN CUT DOWN ON LEARNING

- Bjork's 'desirable difficulties' research shows that some cognitive struggle strengthens learning—like kids guessing a word's meaning before Googling it

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SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Impact on Empathy

DISTRACTION AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SKILLS

Relationship Challenges

Missed Opportunity for Social-Emotional Skills




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MINDSET

UNDERSTANDING THE PRE-INTERNET MINDSET

- * Embodied Connection
- * Delayed Gratification
- * Creative Boredom
- * Awareness and Navigation



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THE BRIGHT SIDE OF TECH: INTENTIONAL INTEGRATION

Information Access


- Virtual field trips to zoos/museums
- Multilingual story apps (11% vocab boost - NWEA 2023)

Global Connections

- Pen-pal videos with classrooms abroad
- Grandparent storytime via Zoom

Creative Tools

- Digital art portfolios showing progress
- Audio recordings of kids explaining their block structures
- *Tech shines when it expands real-world experiences.*



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THE DIGITAL DILEMMA: FROM TOOLS TO ENVIRONMENTS

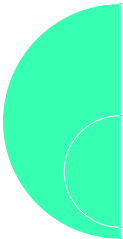
**How Tech Changed the Game:
From Occasional Tool → 24/7 Ecosystem**

Cognitive Impact:

- "Popcorn brain" effect, craving constant stimulation

Social Shifts:

- 40% fewer face-to-face interactions in device-heavy homes
- 2x increase in missed social cues (Stanford, 2023)




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FUTURE SKILLS

* ESSENTIAL SKILLS IN THE AGE OF AI

- CRITICAL THINKING
- CREATIVITY
- EMPATHY AND COLLABORATION

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EMBODIED NAVIGATION

Ask: "How would you guide me through this space using only landmarks?"

Maguire's taxi driver study proves spatial navigation grows brain matter—skills we lose with constant GPS use.

62



Maryanne Wolf's research shows digital reading erodes observation. Try 'sensory walks' to rewire attention.

DEEP OBSERVATION AND PLAY: THE "SENSES AS A MUSCLE"

63

Protect one 25-minute 'focus block' daily—what activity deserves this?

EXTENDED FOCUS



UC Irvine study shows it takes 23 minutes on average to recover from an interruption

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Try it: Ask "What are all the ways we can combine those two animals? How can we take parts from that drawing and mix it with this one?"

ORIGINAL THOUGHT



When have you relied on quick searches rather than deep thinking with kids? What was gained? What was lost?

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"IT'S NOT JUST NOSTALGIA"

ACTIONABLE STEPS: FOUR KEY TOOLS



DIGITAL MINIMALISM



ANALOG PRACTICES



STRUCTURED BOREDOM



TECH-FREE ZONES



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DAILY IDEAS

KEY CLASSROOM STRATEGIES: FOCUS ON "FLOW"

- ⌘ **CURIOUS WAITING**
- 📄 **DOCUMENTATION**
- ⦿ **ACTIVE QUESTIONING**
- ⦿ **KINESTHETIC LEARNING**
- ⚖️ **SINGLE-TASKING SESSIONS**
- ⦿ **FULL SENSES ENGAGEMENT**

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NEURODIVERSITY

SUPPORTING NEURODIVERSE LEARNERS

- * **Tailored Scaffolding**
- * **Adaptive Environments**
- * **Progressive Challenges**
- * **Collaborative Approaches**

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ACTION

● **CALL TO ACTION: PICK ONE JUMPSTART**



1. **Productive Uncertainty:** "Ask a child 'What do YOU think?' before answering."
2. **Embodied Navigation:** "Walk somewhere new without GPS."
3. **Direct Observation:** "Describe a student's play without taking photos."

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CONCLUSION

THE PRE-INTERNET MINDSET IS ESSENTIAL TO PRESERVE HUMAN CONNECTION AND CRITICAL SKILLS FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS.

In our digital world, nurturing deep presence, empathy, creativity, and focus has never been more urgent.

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Get a 14-page guide and my free newsletter here!

THANK YOU ! PLEASE STAY IN TOUCH:

SCAN ME

SCAN ME

My website

[HTTP://WWW.REBECCAROLLAND.COM](http://www.rebeccarolland.com)

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