

THE SOUND OF SILENCE

Helping students
develop
thinking skills,
self-reflection,
and internal
behavioral control

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Why is Silence Needed?

We currently live in a world of unceasing noise and interaction. Our children are surrounded by music, movement, and in some cases, sheer chaos. We must begin to understand that if a student is never given the opportunity to remain in silence, they do not have the opportunity to use internal thought. When you consider that internal thought is needed to ponder questions, make decisions, reflect on behavior, and problem-solve, the fact that this skill is being neglected becomes serious indeed!

So, how do you combat a world where every child seems to be attached to a music player, video game, or some other type of electronic device? Well, you do what all of us teachers have done for decades; you provide it in the school setting to the best of your ability. Please know that this will NOT be easy for you....many of our students simply do not know what to do when confronted with silence. But, let's be honest, many of us adults are not much better. It takes a strong person in a strong relationship to just sit quietly and be present for a friend or a loved one. We feel almost compelled to somehow "break the silence" even if it is with the most foolish comment.



Please know that this unit is only designed to provide a call to consider the issue and list some general techniques you can try to help students in your care. Beyond that, you will have to problem-solve based on the needs of your group. I have worked with some students that could only tolerate silence for seconds before dissolving into behavior problems. In those cases, you must not only start with this skill teaching in a limited way, but you probably will have to reduce your periods of silence to seconds in duration. In other words, don't be afraid to start small....let's

make that VERY small 😊 But, we have to start somewhere if we are ever to begin to recapture our students' ability to think!

Basics Techniques for Early Childhood

Like any technique used in early childhood, developing internal thinking skills must be imbedded in daily activities that are play-based in nature. It goes without saying that these must also be adjusted for the needs of your group. If you have children who are also struggling with quiet bodies, impulse control, and other attention issues, please see the unit titled, *Teaching Impulse Control*, for additional ideas.

Using Environmental Cues to Reduce Stimuli

While early childhood environments should be bright and engaging, many may be too stimulating for some children. In addition, they are often devoid of true, natural beauty and rely too much on the cute and commercial. This does not mean you need to throw out the cartoons animals and other graphics, but do take a look at your room in terms of aesthetics. Think of it as the difference between going to an energetic hamburger hangout versus fine-dining in a candle-lit restaurant. Our environments really do set a tone, and for many of our children, energizing is not what we are looking for. What these little ones really need is a calm, quiet beauty that promotes careful movement and control---they have more than enough energy.



How can you do this? One of the easiest ways is to bring nature into the room. Photographs, natural objects, live plants, lamp-lighting, muted colors, and even homey touches like doilies can do much to bring the tone of the room down a bit. If you must use some type of deoderizer, etc., go for vanilla or another scent with a similar, quiet nature. In addition, something like a fish-tank, visible bird-feeder, and ant farm or other live creatures that are slow or silent in their movements can be a nice focal point for children to stop a moment and be calm as well.

Also, take a look at your toys. Are they all brightly colored plastic? If so, consider also bringing in some natural objects to be used for play. Large, polished stones and smooth, varnished pieces of wood for building really do have different qualities. Like anything, this concept can be taken too far, you do NOT need to get rid of all commercial toys or plastic like some professionals advocate, just try to balance them with natural beauty as well, and you will find the right tone for your students.

Body-Cued Silent Thinking

Many young children simply cannot ignore stimuli around them. This is why it is a great idea to develop a special way to sit when they have to “think very hard”. This can be done by having the children cover their eyes, something that will give the illusion of isolation even when playmates are nearby. This also “forces” them to stop using their hands/playing for a moment, an essential first step to internal thinking at this age.

Other children will not find this simple action enough and may need to curl up in a ball to quiet their whole body and/or even go to a special location that is quiet and isolated. Regardless of how you approach this in your room, just know that young children often need this type of stimuli-reduction before you can even begin to develop the skill of thinking quietly.



Directly Teaching Internal Thought

Once you have the children quiet, you can begin to have them truly “think”. At first, you should have them think about something specific and concrete. This will especially be critical for the very young child. I personally suggest having children first think about **simple choices** or preferences. You can later move on to other forms of thought and eventually internal problem-solving of social problems.

Here is the rough sequence I suggest. It is definitely flexible, though, and should be adjusted to fit your students’ ages and needs:

- 1. Making Simple Choices** - Have the child stop and think about a simple choice prior to making it---and emphasize the stop-and-think aspect of this. Too many children just say the first thought that comes to their mind or the last thing they heard (usually the response of the child prior to them). This may mean slowing down rote activities that include choice-making like snack, free play, etc. You may also need to add body-cues (closing eyes, etc.) and/or picture cue cards or object to assist children having problems really considering their options. At times asking questions about why a choice is being made can further the thought process and even switching the order of the choices offered can force a child to stop a moment and think. Your main goal is to help the child consciously realize they are making a choice between two items. This is not as evident to the young child as you may think. They often make the choice without considering each option first.

2. Problem-Solving Non-Emotional Issues – Once a child is familiar with how to stop and think about their choices, it is a small step to use the same process to “stop and think about your solutions”. The most critical skill to teach during this stage is the ability to **say exactly what is wrong**.

For example, a child confronted with a broken car might say, “My car is broken.” This, however, does not lead to a solution other than “fix it”. On the other hand, a child who can state, “The wheels of my car won’t turn,” is much further down the road to coming up with solutions to “get the wheels to turn”. It is a small distinction, but it really is a very powerful one!



So, it is up to you to guide children so they can determine the exact nature of their problem. Once they realize, for example, their “red block keeps falling off”, they can be guided to the choices available to fix that ill-behaved, red block. You can then use the techniques described above to help them think and make the choice. For some children this will be an easy skill to develop, and others, well, you may be working on this a long time. The basis of “solutions” is the ability to create, a divergent thinking skill that not all people have in equal measure. Just help the child get to their highest level possible, given their age and developmental profile.

3. Guided Silent Thinking - Now that you have children silently thinking about concrete choices and specific, daily problems, you can begin to encourage silent thought that is less tangible and/or defined. This includes the following skills:

*Recalling known sequences: Seeing yourself completing a known skill (e.g., making a sandwich), walking to a known location (e.g., going from the classroom to the gym), performing a dance, finger-play, and other well-known actions, etc.

*Imagining a previous historical event: This involves re-living a previous experience. It can best be taught using a classroom-wide experience like a field-trip, class visit (e.g., animal brought in), a school party or play, or any other group event. Since you are familiar with the event, you can help children consider the sequence, details, and other aspects of the memory.

Once children show that they can recall memories fairly well and accurately, you can encourage them to think about special events from their own lives. This can be especially effective when used prior to having the child share the event with the class or writing a story or drawing a picture of the event. This skill is also useful as emotional control when the child is having a bad day or is unusually stressed.

4. Guided Imagination – Once children have the ability to recall, they then can begin manipulate the thoughts so they become less attached to reality. Some children have a great imagination and have no need for such lessons. Others, however, show signs of rote play and lack of creativity, and this is a wonderful way to begin to edge them into a more imaginative life.

*Imagining a previous historical event in a new way: The first step for many children (some may not need this) is to imagine a known event in a new way. For example, a school swim party that is held during a blizzard or a classroom play that has to be held when there is no electricity gives the children a concrete platform for their first attempts at “pretending”. This can also be expanded to include minor problem-solving (e.g., How could I have eaten the pudding during yesterday’s snack if we happened to be out of spoons?).

*Imagining the unknown or creating new concepts and ideas: This higher level involves the ability to think freely about ideas and concepts that are created in a person’s mind. This may include pondering deep questions and social issues. Again, some children are quite creative and can not only imagine a new “world”, but the people in the most wonderful manner. Other children, though, find creative tasks (and later creative writing assignments and art) rather painful.

One way to edge children towards this skill is to use story starters as thinking tools rather than writing exercises. Simply pose the questions, concept, or task and give the children the time to close their eyes and think. They can then relate what they thought about through verbal sharing, or if possible and desired, writing and drawing.



5. Guided Social Problem-Solving – Our ultimate goal is to have children begin to consider their behavior in new ways. We are hoping to use the skills developed in stages 1-4 for social issues. Here are some skills you should consider. Please note that some may need to be directly taught:

*Ability to imagine other actions that could have been taken: This skill stems directly from the old “time-out” question sequence where children consider what they “could have done instead”. For many children this is a seriously difficult question to answer! As you can see, it includes both the ability to articulate the problem and imagine possible solutions. Definitely a skill to develop.

So, how do you go about getting this in place? You simply use the techniques listed above but now center them on social issues. At first you may want to practice and/or discuss hypothetical situations. You can later have children analyze a recent behavior situation that is recent enough to remain in memory. Finally, you can help children take a deep breath and use the skill in the midst of a behavior problem (...but don’t start here—emotions can get in the way of the skill, especially when it is weak). Regardless of where you start, just remember that this is a skill that *can be taught*---and it should be!

*Ability to imagine the perception of others: Developing true empathy involves being able to take the perspective of another person. This, in turn, *involves a certain level of imagination*. Many children will have to use the concrete experiences of their own lives as the jumping off point for this skill. In other words, they remember how they felt in a particular instance and then make the connection that the other person must have felt the same way in a similar event. Regardless of how the connection is made, it still requires the child to be able to imagine something beyond their own feelings and experiences, a skill that they may lack. In addition, the child’s moral code (**caring** that someone is hurt, sad, etc.) will greatly influence how the other person’s perception is viewed. It is not unusual for a student to acknowledge that someone was hurt but attach no significance to this emotion in any way.

So, how can you go about getting this skill in place, especially if the child’s moral code does not attach importance to the pain and suffering of others? The only way is to work on the skill as mentioned above and pair it with Value Code Shifting (see manual titled the same). It is not the best way to go, but in some cases the only solution available to you in a school setting. At least with value code shifting you can get the **action/expression** of empathy....if not the true care and consideration (understanding) we might prefer.

Considerations for Middle Childhood

Working on internal thought in middle school is frankly no easier than establishing the skill in early childhood. Many of the students you work with will NOT have this skill in place. When you add in the natural social (and loud) nature of this age group, you can have quite a task on your hands.

In light of this reality, here are some additional things to think about when working with this age group:

1. Do not be surprised to find that the skill level is so low that you must use the ECED techniques described on pages 4-9. You will need to change the context to match the age group's activities and interests, but the actual skill level may be perfect. If that is the case, so be it.....start there!
2. Many students will need isolation to really consider serious concepts. They may also need to share in isolation (directly with you in writing) rather than openly in a group. Many children of this age are just too peer-driven to speak about their innermost thoughts or consider ideas that may veer from group approval. Once they have some skills, and the maturity to use them, you can slowly introduce "controlled" sharing that involves their friends. Until they develop the moral courage to express freely in a peer group, though, it is best to just avoid it. It really can undermine any progress you make with individual skill development.
3. As students mature, they begin to ponder deeper thoughts, and this inevitably leads to moral judgments and spiritual concepts. Do not avoid these topics but also remember the parameters of your school's value code (spiritual—traditional—civic—personal: see *Value Code Shifting* manual for more information). If you are dealing with a value code issue that falls outside of your school's code, refer it to the child's family for further discussion. That said, do not discourage the deep thoughts the students of this age group will begin to explore. This will be the basis for their future moral code and behavior and will naturally come up in school at some point. There IS a connection between simple childhood problems like cheating and the meaning of life, so allow students to think about these issues in the context they are ready to use and understand.

Considerations for in High School

As students move into high school, they usually transition from the awkwardness of middle school into an over-appreciation of self. In other words, they have every answer and are at the center of the universe. Now is the time to begin to help them move beyond this phase 😊

I have found that the best way to help this age group integrate the skills they have learned into a realistic world framework is to provide lessons that hit them with new understanding without making the “lesson” obvious. You really want to use indirect teaching with this age group! So, here are some additional ideas to consider:

1. You may still find a need to teach basic skills. Do not be afraid to go back to the sections on younger students and re-work the lessons to give this age-group practice. It is sometimes amazing to see how few of the basics they have mastered.
2. This age group seems to come permanently attached to electronic sources of noise and interruption. You can use the devices and music at first to transition to silence (e.g., listen to a song and imagine it with different words, to different music, etc.) but at some point true silence will have to be used, and that can be very painful for this age group. Start small and use the level of isolation needed to keep students from disrupting the exercises for others. If you need to, do not be afraid to collect devices so silence can be enforced.
3. You will definitely have students move into deep thoughts and concepts that move beyond the school’s code, deal with them as mentioned before. Also, do not be surprised if you see students coming up with concepts and ideas that seem to be purposefully edgy and controversial. Do not overreact! It is the nature of this age group to push buttons and test boundaries, and they will find a way to do so even when writing a mundane history paper. If you teach this age group, you are well-used to handling these moments----just a warning that working on this skill will produce no different of a response.



4. Many students need a major re-adjustment about their perception of the world and their place in it. They have very little understanding of space (how large the world is), history (e.g., their grandparents experienced the same thoughts and concerns), or time (e.g., I will eventually have to come to these decisions without peer influence). They also may have a high reliance on the opinion of others when setting the foundation for their own beliefs.

I discuss these topics to a greater degree in the manuals, *Gang-Proofing* and *Helping Students Find Stability in Today's Chaotic World*. For now, just know that you must give these students indirect experiences that help them see the real world. Even such casual facts as Alaska has more than three million lakes that are larger than 20 acres, or the Sarah Desert is roughly 3,000 miles wide (the U.S. is only ~2,880 miles wide) can begin to bring home the sheer size of the planet. These little tidbits begin to help a teenager realize the size of their world and their small (yet important) place in it. It puts it all into perspective without making a big issue of the concept. You can then use these new-found ideas as the basis for thinking activities.

5. The last concept may not be possible in all school settings---how I wish it was! But, the reality of the diverse value codes and sticky social environment will require a level of caution for teachers. That said, it is wonderful to hit certain behavioral situations head on and have students do some deep thinking about how to handle situations BEFORE they occur. That reduces the likelihood of the student will make the wrong decision out of panic.

So, if you can deal with these concepts in your setting DO consider having students think about how to handle environmental pressures. Lessons can take on any topic from drinking to bullying or drugs. It does help if these young people have a plan already formed in their mind.

Helping Students Who Cannot “Keep Silent”

The above ideas are useful, but what do you do with a student who simply cannot keep silent long enough to even begin thinking? Here are some strategies to consider when dealing with those students:

1. Look at processing disorders that may be hindering them. They include the following:

Central Auditory Processing Disorders and Hearing Disorders: ears ring when there is silence

SOLUTION: May need to use low music to counteract. True silence may not be comfortable.

Sensory Disorders: Silence is usually paired with a quiet body, and this may cause the student to feel off balance or cause skin sensations (prickling, tingling, etc.)

SOLUTION: Make sure the student is moving to a degree when silent (e.g., rocking chair, balance ball, doodling on paper, even rubbing a piece of playdough between fingers can cause problems to drop out).

2. Silence encourages thought, and these thoughts may be painful to the student (memories, unresolved issues)

SOLUTION: Work with the student’s family and counselor to determine the issues and their solutions. Continue to use structured silent thought activities that develop skill while controlling the concepts “thought about”. Consider giving safe choices about which thoughts should be targeted at any particular time.



3. Silence provides perfect opportunities to draw everyone's attention and disrupt the class

SOLUTION: Use isolation as needed to ensure the student will not intrude on others. Some students with this tendency do better if the internal thinking task is very novel and/or involves something within their value code (e.g., thinking through a better play that could have been used in a football game). Use what you need to continue to develop the skill in both the disruptive student AND the rest of the class. Read the *Value Code Shifting* document on my website for more ideas on how to adjust tasks to make them meaningful and motivating for students.



4. The student is developmentally young and cannot maintain a quiet body and/or tends to think “out loud”

SOLUTION: Frankly the answer is time 😊 You can make some headway, though, by structuring the activities so movement is possible and/or the student is isolated so they can think out loud AND move without disrupting other people. Teaching them to whisper in their own hand can also be effective for this younger age group. Older students should be provided spaces where their needs can be met without disrupting others. Hide what you are doing, though. These students will not respond well to being singled-out or identified. Because of this, whole-class adjustments should be made so the specific changes for an individual student go unnoticed by the group.

Closing Thoughts

Hopefully, this manual gave you some initial ideas to consider. I am sure you can add more, especially if you begin to mesh this skill with its natural partners---music and art.

The main thing is to take time to truly work on this skill in a systematic and purposeful manner. Adding back silence into our children's lives will benefit both their schooling and their emotional state.

There is a reason why adults are drawn to nature and the quiet atmosphere that surrounds it. The same holds true for children. Many of our students can benefit from the calm induced by silence as they struggle to cope with their stressful and confusing lives.

Let's re-explore how to make this happen for them despite the whirl of our electronic, modern world....

