

MindShift

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Why Daydreaming Isn't a Waste of Time



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Allowing time for reflection helps kids make meaning out of experiences and information they encounter.

Parents and teachers expend a lot of energy getting kids to pay attention, concentrate, and focus on the task in front of them. What adults don't do, according to University of Southern California education professor Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, is teach children the value of the more diffuse mental activity that characterizes our inner lives: daydreaming, remembering, reflecting.

Yet this kind of introspection is crucial to our mental health, to our relationships, and to our emotional and moral development. And it promotes the skill parents and teachers care so much about: the capacity to focus on the world outside our heads.

Our brains have two operating systems, Immordino-Yang and her coauthors explain in an article [\[PDF\]](#) to be published in the journal *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. The first, which they call the "looking out system," orients our attention to the external environment, allowing us to get stuff done. The other, which they term the "looking in system," directs us inward, setting our thoughts

free to wander. By scanning the brains of study subjects asked simply to rest and relax, scientists have discovered that our minds are anything but inactive in these moments. Relieved of the obligation to pay

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attention to what's going on around us, we engage instead with a rich internal environment: recalling the past, imagining the future, replaying recent interactions and sorting out our feelings. It's when we engage our brains' "looking in" mode, notes Immordino-Yang, that we make meaning out of the mass of experiences and

information we encounter when we're "looking out."

Young people may have fewer opportunities to exercise the vital capacity of introspection. Immordino-Yang fingers two culprits: educational practices that demand constant attentiveness, even from young children, and a hyper-connected world that insistently draws attention away from the world inside. "If youths overuse social media, if they spend very little waking time free from the possibility that a text will interrupt them," the authors write, "we would expect that these conditions might predispose youths toward focusing on the concrete, physical and immediate aspects of situation and self, with less inclination toward considering the abstract, longer-term, moral and emotional implications of their and others' actions."

Ironically, a lack of time to daydream may even hamper kids' capacity to pay attention when they need to. The ability to become absorbed in our own thoughts is linked to our ability to focus intently on the world outside, research indicates. In **one recent neuro-imaging study**, for example, participants alternated periods of mental rest with periods of looking at images and listening to sounds. The more effectively the neural regions associated with "looking in" were activated during rest and deactivated while attending to the visual and auditory stimuli, the more engaged were the brain's sensory cortices in response to sights and sounds.

Focus and concentration are essential, of course. But so are introspection and reflection, and Immordino-Yang and her colleagues recommend that adults help children find a balance between the two modes: by regularly unplugging our kids' blinking, buzzing devices, and by providing time and space for a quieter, more inward kind of entertainment.

Annie Murphy Paul is the author of the forthcoming book Brilliant: The New Science of Smart. Visit her [website](#) and sign up for her monthly newsletter here.

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