

Forest:

Withdraw into your concentration bubble for a bit



Design by Shion Ito

Text by Pieter Desmet

It was a sunny spring day, a lovely time to be outside. I was inside, in a meeting- significant effort was required to keep my attention. I'd rather look out the window at the cherry blossoms. Getting distracted, dreaming away or alternatively being restless and unable to sit still. Sound familiar? No doubt, everyone has trouble concentrating from time to time. For some children, however, this is a daily struggle. But how do you deal with this in the classroom, an environment with constant stimuli and distractions? Designer Shion Ito designed a mini-forest where you can retreat for a while to find your inner peace again.

Sit still for once!

Every child has trouble concentrating from time to time. For example, during a lesson they may miss things the teacher says, or there may be times when their heads are full of thoughts. In some children, this sense of chaos and lack of concentration and peace of mind dominates. These children may struggle with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). This may manifest itself in different ways. Some children are hyperactive and impulsive, while other children are more introverted and appear dreamy. The common denominator here is having trouble keeping one's focus. There are many potential sources of distraction: sounds, movements, thoughts, objects and people. Shion Ito set out to design something that would help children maintain focus in the context of the classroom. He had the opportunity to do this together with an actual class, in which two children had ADHD. A week long, he observed class dynamics and spoke to the children and teachers. He tested his ideas together with the children, a process which naturally resulted in a final design.



Figure 2. Communication Cards.

Turning one's back

Shion saw that children in the classroom are often encouraged to collaborate on assignments. This encourages interactions that contribute to the development and enjoyment of the learning experience. At the same time, these interactions can be a major challenge for children with concentration problems. The current solution is a table with a closed screen around it, so that the child can isolate themselves from the group for a while in order to concentrate. This is an effective method, but at the same time children often view it as a negative experience. The reason for this is that it makes them 'turn their backs' on the other children. In other words, they feel as though they are rejecting communication with others (Figure 1). There is a hard division between either being part of the group (with the risk of being overstimulated) or having a place of concentration (but being isolated from the rest of the class). Shion's goal was to break through this hard separation with a more friendly and flexible form of separation.



Figure 1. Separation or Rejection.

A Trip To the Forest

One initial idea was a set of cards with the words "I want to concentrate" on one side and "I want to work together with you" on the other (Figure 2). The initial responses were positive, but not in the way Shion expected. Although the children soon lost interest in the texts on the cards, they really enjoyed pinning them between the desks. He therefore decided to take that pleasure as the starting point for a new design. The result is Forest: a set of forest-themed figures, and a slot profile that attaches to the table (Figure 3). The figures slide into the profile, in order to create a personal separation. With different shapes, you can choose how sealed off your partition is, and thus how significant your contact

with the rest of the class is. The parts are made of wood and are painted with soft colours, matching the theme of nature and calming to the eye. They are abstract shapes of trees, plants and animals. This gives one the freedom to choose how high and how dense the forest is. At the same time, it is not a hard and therefore 'unfriendly' partition. When Shion tested his new design with the children, he particularly enjoyed seeing that they didn't create their own little bubbles, but rather created them together with the others (Figure 4). In doing so, a space is created for concentration without breaking the bond between the children.



Figure 3. Forest: a set of forest themed figures and matching slot profile.



Figure 4. Creating bubbles of concentration together.

Colophon

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2022

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The Netherlands

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This article was originally written for the Dutch Journal of Positive Psychology (www.tijdschriftpositiepsychologie.nl).

All articles from the series can be downloaded at www.diopd.org

Reference

Desmet, P.M.A. (2022). Forest: Withdraw into your concentration bubble for a bit. Delft, Delft University of Technology.

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The Power of the Average

In her book 'Diagnosedrift; hoe onze labelcultuur kinderen tekortdoet' ('Diagnostic drive; how our label culture is failing children Bloemink', 2018), journalist and writer Sanne Bloemink drew attention to 'the power of the average'. If children fall outside the range of the average, a diagnosis and possibly a label will follow. On the one hand, this has its benefits, such as recognition and access to help or therapy. On the other hand, there are also disadvantages. The drive for a diagnosis that problematises anything that deviates from the average does not recognise the beauty of diversity. In addition, children may start to behave

according to their label: "I'm not even going to try and concentrate because I have ADHD and I'm not going to succeed anyway." What I like about Shion's approach is that he didn't create a design with just the children with ADHD in mind, but rather the whole class: for all children, so that they can work together in a pleasant and social way. His forest helps children to find focus through their connectedness, not through isolation or polarisation. In my view, this makes his design a celebration of diversity with a sensitive eye for both the individual and the community.



Shion Ito (photo) developed Forest in 2022 as part of a project course ("Exploring Interactions") for the Design for Interaction master's programme. Supervisors were Maurizio Filippi and Heleen Bouman. Special thanks to Ingeborg de Wolff and Wilma Hokke from primary school Kronenburgh in Rijswijk, and all the children who participated in this project.