

Mindfulness: Helping Children Learn to Pay Attention Helps Them Be Successful

Would you like your child(ren) to be more attentive to themselves and others? More in tune with his/her emotions and feelings? Have more self-control? Be a better problem solver? More aware of their environment? How about happier? If this sounds appealing, you may want to consider mindfulness training or mindfulness practice (not only for your children but your entire family).

There is a growing body of research support for mindfulness practice as an easy, effective, and low cost method of reducing stress, increasing the ability to concentrate and sustain attention, increasing awareness of and compassion towards other people, and increasing self-control/self-regulation and the ability to respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively to situations (e.g., Brown & Ryan, 2003; Burke, 2010; Greeson, 2008). Mindfulness also helps individuals develop self-esteem, cultivate calm, and successfully deal with difficult situations. Mindfulness also has been shown to have multiple physical health benefits including stress reduction and an increased sense of well-being. The good news is that mindfulness practice can have a positive impact on the physical and mental health of children as well as adults. An increasing number of school and community-based programs across the country are teaching children and teens how to use mindfulness in real life situations. Mindfulness, or the ability to focus attention and become aware of what is happening in the present moment, informs and allows children to respond thoughtfully to what is happening inside and around them.

So what exactly is mindfulness? Mindfulness is being balanced, being still, being open to the moment, being clear, being accepting, and being playful (MindfulnessNow, 2010). It also commonly is referred to as “teaching paying attention.” Jon Kabat-Zinn (2003), Ph.D., Professor of Medicine Emeritus and founding director of the Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School defines mindfulness more clinically as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experiences moment by moment.” In more layman terms, mindfulness awareness turns an individual’s attention to what is happening *right now*, including our thoughts, feelings, emotions. Through mindfulness, children initially learn to bring their awareness to their breath and then also to sounds, sensations, thoughts and feelings. It is important to understand that cultivating mindful awareness is similar to physical exercise in that it takes repeated practice/exercise to see benefits. Just as physical exercise produces visible changes in our body, mindfulness as mental exercise produces actual physical changes in our brains. The more we, and our children, are able to identify what we are paying attention to and consciously shift our attention to what is happening at the current moment, the easier and more natural it becomes to more automatically pay attention to the current moment and respond to situations thoughtfully rather than be “in our heads” and move blindly through the day.

Children find mindful practices and exercises to be fun and mindfulness exercises are quick, easy, and can be done literally anywhere and any time. Ready to get started?

Drs. Bailey and Clements (2010) from Duke University provide the following exercises to get you and your children started with mindfulness practice.

Mindful Walking:

- Walking is something we do every day but we often fail to notice what we pass along the way. Take a few minutes each day to feel your body as you move through the world. Pay attention to your arms as you walk. How do they move?
- Notice how your feet feel as they strike the ground. Once you’ve discovered how your body feels as you move, explore your environment using the five senses. What sights do you see? Look for shades of color and patterns. What sounds do you hear?
- Take a moment to examine the texture of objects around you, trees or plants if you’re outdoors, walls or furniture if you’re indoors. This is a wonderful way to be in the moment with your child.

Mindful Breathing:

- Have your child take a deep breath in and slowly let the air out. With each inhale say, “In” and with each exhale say, “Out”. One breath cycle is made up of one inhale and one exhale.

- The practice of becoming more aware of your breathing triggers the relaxation response. This results in slower breathing and increased feelings of calm. Have your child practice this for five breath cycles then repeat.
- Noticing your breathing is one of the fastest ways to bring your attention back to the present moment. Use this practice when your child is upset or to help the body and mind prepare for restful sleep.

Mindful Eating:

- For many children and adults, eating has become one more item to check off the to-do list. Distractions such as eating in front of the TV or eating on the go take away from the pleasure of eating. The following tips can help you and your child to eat more mindfully:
 - Chew each bite of food 20 times before taking the next bite.
 - Put your fork down between bites.
 - Taste a small amount of food and notice the appearance, aroma, taste and texture of the food in your mouth.
- Eating in this way helps you to slow down and notice when you're full and satisfied, reducing the risk that you will overeat and providing a more enjoyable dining experience.

Anna Narvid (2009) describes some additional exercises that help children learn to focus their attention:

Drawing Meditation:

- Sit down with your child in a quiet, comfortable spot
- Allow your child to pick one object in the room to focus on
- With your child, look at the object and describe what you see
- Have your child draw the object as best she/he can
- Together, descriptively compare and contrast the drawing and the object
- If your child seems finished with the exercise, then you are done—if not, continue...
- Now, choose a different place in the room to sit
- Look at the object again from this alternate location
- With your child, look at the object and describe what you see
- Repeat the exercise until you feel your child feels like she/he is finished!

Reporting Meditation:

- Toward the end of the day, sit with your child in a quiet, comfortable spot
- Ask your child to go through the day in his/her mind
- Next, have your child narrate the story of his/her day
- Help your child identify the order of events chronologically
- Repeat back what your child has detailed and allow him/her to clarify, correct, or confirm
- When the conversation feels complete, you are finished!

Body Meditation:

- Lie down with your child in a quiet, comfortable spot
- Ask your child to name the parts of her/his body, one by one, from foot to head
- As your child names each body part, have her/him describe how that particular body part feels
- After you each say how your body feels, move/wiggle/twitch/shimmy that body part in different ways
- Help your child identify each major body part as she/he moves up the body
- For each part, complete all three steps: naming, feeling, moving
- When your child and you have reached the top of your heads, you are done!

Practicing these activities repeatedly with your children and perhaps, investigating some of the additional resources listed below will help your child develop mindfulness and along with it, important life skills such as the ability to soothe and calm themselves, become more self-aware and more aware of others, become more purposeful and thoughtful in their actions, and become better problem-solvers (Kaiser Greenland, 2010). These skills and abilities help children become happier and more successful - starting right now and reaching far into adulthood!

Research/resources cited in this article:

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Brown, K. W., & Ryan, R. M. (2003). The benefits of being present: Mindfulness and its role in psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84, 822–848.

Burke, C. A. (2010). Mindfulness-based approaches with children and adolescents: A preliminary review of current research in an emergent field. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 19, 133-144.

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Kabat-Zinn, J. (2003). Mindfulness-based interventions in context: Past, present and future. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 10, 144-156.

Kaiser Greenland, S. (2010). *The mindful child: How to help your kid manage stress and become happier, kinder, and more compassionate*. New York: Free Press/Simon & Schuster, Inc.

MindfulnessNow (2010). Retrieved from: <http://www.mindfulnessnow.com.au>

Narvid, A. (2009). Retrieved from: <http://www.examiner.com/emotional-health-in-los-angeles/mindfulness-for-children>

Additional resources appropriate for parents and kids:

Biegel, G. (2010). *The stress reduction workbook for teens: Mindfulness skills to help you deal with stress*. New York: New Harbinger Publications.

Kabat-Zinn, M. & J. Kabat-Zinn (1997). *Everyday blessings: The inner work of mindful parenting*. New York: Hyperion.

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Muth, J.J. (2005). *Zen shorts*. New York: Scholastic.
*picture book for children

Siegel, D.J., & Payne Bryson, T. (2011). *The Whole-Brain Child: 12 revolutionary strategies to nurture your child's developing mind, survive everyday parenting struggles, and help your family thrive*. New York: Delacorte Press.

<http://drdansiegel.com> Dr Dan Siegel is a Harvard and UCLA-educated physician and expert in how the mind, brain and relationships interconnect and influence our lives. Dr. Siegel's website has audio and video clips to aid in the development of a balanced, healthy mind as well as to introduce you to and help you practice breath awareness.

<http://www.mindfullifetoday.com> Dr. Kristen Race has developed a series of parenting resources that are based on mindfulness, positive psychology, and cognitive science.

<http://www.stillquietplace.com/> Dr. Amy Saltzman's is well known in mindfulness circles. You can learn more about research on mindfulness, Dr. Saltzman's work, training and education in mindfulness, and also purchase resources to assist you and your family in the practice of mindfulness at her website. Resources are separated into those appropriate for young children and those appropriate for teens.

