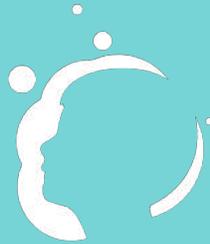


MINDFULNESS FOR CHILDREN

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Mindfulness is a state of active, open attention on the present. Mindfulness can help children improve their abilities to pay attention, to calm down when they are upset, and to make better decisions. In short, it helps with emotional regulation and cognitive focus.

The best way to get your child engaged in mindfulness is to make it fun and activity based. Instead of “teaching” your child about mindfulness, show them! Only a brief description is required, such as “Sometimes we spend too much time thinking and not enough time observing what is happening around us. Lets do a few activities together each week to take a ‘brain break’ and try to focus on other things aside from what is happening inside our heads.”

Here are some activities to help your child use mindfulness:

DEVELOP A FAMILY PRACTICE. Incorporate mindfulness into your family routine. If you cannot find time to build it into your life then do not expect your kid’s to. “Brain breaks” should occur every day and not just when your child “needs” a break. Do not make practicing mindfulness a punishment.

PRACTICE BELLY BREATHING. Get your child to place one hand on their chest and one on the belly. As they inhale, they are to fill up the belly like a balloon and as they exhale, they allow the balloon to deflate. This often feels counterintuitive at first, as most of us breathe shallowly into the chest most of the time. Belly breathing automatically turns on the relaxation response in the body. Get your child to practice belly breathing for 3 minutes each day.

SHARE A 3-BREATH HUG. Hugging your child, take three deliberate, synchronized, deep breaths together. Drop your shoulders, relaxing any muscles that feel tight. Let go and feel the tension melt away. Use it as you say goodbye in the morning, when you recognize when someone could use a calming hug, or just for the love of it.

BE GRATEFUL. Before bed, share something that you are grateful for that happened that day – something that made you happy. Have your child do the same.

“LIVING IN THE PRESENT, YOU MIGHT FIND THAT THIS MOMENT IS MANAGEABLE, EVEN WHEN IT IS NOT THE MOST WONDERFUL MOMENT OF ALL”

GET OUT IN NATURE. Go for a walk with your child and pay attention to what you both notice around you, what you see, hear, smell and touch. Playing "I spy" can be a fun way to engage in your surroundings.

MINDFUL LISTENING. Tell your child you are going to ring a bell (www.mindfulnessdc.org/bell has an assortment of meditations bells and tones). Ask them to listen carefully to the sound of the bell and raise their hands when they can no longer hear it. Then take turns telling each other what you hear in your environment.

MINDFUL EATING. This is a time when playing with your food is OK. Give your child a piece of fruit and ask them to pretend they are from another planet and have never seen this piece of fruit before. Ask them to describe their experience using all five senses. What does it look like? Smell like? Feel like? Taste like? Does it make a sound when you bite it?

PAYING ATTENTION TO HOW WE THINK. Becoming more mindful involves understanding that we produce our thoughts - they are not who we are. Once your child has learnt to keep awareness on the present moment by focusing on their breath, you can then help them become aware of their thoughts and feelings. You can use the following exercise:
"Close your eyes and say to yourself: 'I wonder what my next thought is going to be?' Then focus very carefully, waiting for the next thought - like a cat watching a mouse hole. I wonder what thought is going to come out of the mouse hole?"

ENGAGE THE SENSES. Ask your child to come up with three things they can see, hear, and touch. Have your child describe each item in detail without passing judgment, such as "I hear the sound of the dog breathing as he sleeps...it sounds like a mouse squeaking" as opposed to "The dog is making a weird sound."

BODY SCAN. This one is for older kids and teens. Have them lay down and relax their body. Then, starting with the feet and working up, bring attention to each body part, encouraging them to send the breath there, and then completely relax it. Include the areas of the body where tension lives like the belly, shoulders, neck, and face. While this exercise is not technically mindfulness because it is active, it can lead teens to a quiet head space where they can simply lay down and breathe – and that is mindfulness.

MAKE A GLITTER JAR. Get a jar and fill it with water and glitter glue. You can also purchase glitter wands. Have your child shake the jar and spend a few minutes watching the glitter fall to the bottom of the jar. Combine this with belly breathing for a brain break that helps with emotional regulation.

CHOOSE A TIME FOR MINDFULNESS. We are creatures of habit! Try to always practice mindfulness with your child at the same time. A great time is after dinner time.

PRACTICE EVERY DAY! The sooner you begin integrating mindfulness exercises into your daily routine, even for just a minute at a time, the quicker it will become a part of the family culture.