

A How-To Guide for teaching children

MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

We can teach children to begin to pay attention to those things in the present moment that they never noticed before through a process called mindfulness. Mindfulness is defined as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experiences moment by moment” (Kabbitt-Zinn, Mindfulness-Based Interventions in Context: Past, Present, and Future, 2003)

Time: before school, periods of transition, before tests, end of the school day, before bed

Duration: 5-15 minutes

Setting: quiet room on a carpet so children can sit or lie down OR outside with nature

Focus: on the body, the breath, the 5 senses: taste, smell, sight, sound, touch

Awareness, be a silent witness

Mindfulness meditation can be described to children as focusing on the present moment while being aware of their internal sensations, thoughts, and feelings. For each of these meditation exercises, children should be sitting comfortably, with their back straight, in a position that they can hold without effort, or if there is room, give the option to lie down. They may close their eyes, but if that is difficult, their eyes may remain softly open with their gaze downward.

Bring focus to their awareness of their environment. Then to their body.

Example script:

What do you hear?

(Suggested prompts: How far away can you hear? Can you hear your own breath?)

What do you smell?

What do you taste?

Even though your eyes are closed, what do you see?

(Suggested prompts: is it black and white? Color? One color or many colors? Maybe a reverse reflection of the last thing you looked at?)

What do you feel?

What parts of your body are in contact with the chair/ground? What about the negative space?

How do you feel in your heart? If you could name one emotion, what would it be?

Next draw attention to the breath:

Notice your breath. Your belly rise and fall. Notice if your chest moves, your upper belly, your lower belly...

Can you feel your nose exhale on your upper lip?

Can you feel the weight of gravity? Can you feel weightless like you are in the ocean? Or floating in space? Or on a magic carpet?

Choose an exercises for the day, the following are proven examples from the work of Jon Kabbitt-Zinn:

Raisin

Bubble

Eggshells/glass floor

Safe place

Close with drawing attention to each of the senses again, the breath, the emotions, the body, and then a mantra or positive affirmation of honoring self and this time.

Awareness of Environment

This exercise is actually the first meditation practiced by participants in Kabat-Zinn's program. It is simple to do, and does not even require adaptation in order for it to be appropriate for children. It involves being aware of an object in the environment—in this case, a raisin—and then being aware of one's own experience of that object. It is an excellent early practice with mindfulness, with clear instructions focused on awareness and nonjudgmental experience. It can be done with an individual child, or with a large group or class. Each child should be provided with three raisins. The exercise could be practiced again with another small food such as popcorn, but should not be repeated too much at the risk of becoming repetitive and uninteresting to the child, thus losing the purpose of the mindfulness.

The Raisin

“Bring your attention to the raisin, observing it carefully as if you had never seen one before. Pick up one raisin and feel its texture between your fingers and notice its colors. Be aware of any thoughts you might be having about the raisin. Note any thoughts or feelings of liking or disliking raisins if they come up while you are looking at it. Then lift the raisin to your nose and smell it for a while and finally, with awareness, bring it to your lips, being aware of the arm moving the hand to position it correctly and of your mouth salivating as the mind and body anticipate eating. Take the raisin into your mouth and chew it slowly, experiencing the actual taste of the raisin. Hold it in your mouth. When you feel ready to swallow, watch the impulse to swallow as it comes up, so that even that is experienced consciously. When you are ready, pick up the second raisin and repeat this process, with a new raisin, as if it is now the first raisin you have ever see.” (Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophic Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to face stress, pain and illness*, 1990)

Awareness of the body:

After the child has started to be more aware of the environment, the next step is to pay attention to their own experience, beginning with their body. This is important, as enhanced body awareness leads to fuller self-awareness. This exercise brings the attention to the child's own body as children interact with the environment. The exercise can be done easily with a group of children together. However, it is important that it be done in a room large enough for children to move around without being obstructed by many objects or being too crowded, so that they may remain focused on their own experience. Children may also enjoy doing this with music playing in the background.

Eggshells/Glass floor

Tell the children to move around the room as softly as they can, as if walking on eggshells or on a delicate glass floor. Tell them to be aware of each movement they make—feeling the thigh muscle lift the leg and move it to next position, feeling the foot coming off the floor and setting it back down, feeling their hands and arms in space. They might move faster or more slowly at times. They might focus on their left leg for a few steps, then focus on the right leg. Tell them that if their thoughts begin to wander away from their body and their experience moving, they should note what they were thinking about, and return their attention to a part of their body (adapted from Slack, 1997)

Meditation on the Breath

The most basic body-based meditation is breath counting (gunaratana, 1991) (Slack, 1997) (Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophic Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to face stress, pain and illness*, 1990) Meditation on the breath is fundamental to mindfulness training to enhance the focus on the present moment of experience. When the exercise is done properly, the child is aware only of the present, as the focus is on the current breath rather than the one before it or the next one coming. The exercise also has the effect of calming the mind and any anxiety in the body that may be related to short, shallow breathing (Slack, 1997). Also, encourage children to use this focus on breathing in their daily life, particularly when they are feeling anxious, overwhelmed, or angry, but also before starting homework or before going to sleep.

Awareness of thoughts and feelings

Once the child has practiced keeping awareness on the present moment by focusing on their breath, the next step is to bring awareness to their thoughts and feelings. Mindfulness training enables children to understand that they are the producers of their thoughts, and that thoughts come and go and influence their feelings and actions. One exercise to enhance awareness of how they are the producers of their own thoughts is the following: Close your eyes and say to yourself, I wonder what my next thought is going to be. Then become very alert and wait for the next thought. Be like a cat watching a mouse hole. What thought is going to come out the mouse hole?

To further focus on awareness of the thinking process as well as on letting go and not engaging thoughts, the meditation of the bubble is a useful mindfulness technique (LeShan, 1974). The purpose of this practice is to slow down, observe thoughts, and release them or let go without judgment. Begin the meditation by reading the following script slowly and in a calm voice. Then, allow the child to continue the meditation for a few minutes in silence, setting his or her own pace. This meditation can also be adapted to feature thoughts on clouds drifting across the sky.

The Bubble

Begin by sitting in a comfortable position, with your back straight and shoulders relaxed. Softly close your eyes. Imagine bubbles slowly rising up in front of you. Each bubble contains a thought, feeling, or perception. See the first bubble rise up. What is inside? See the thought, observe it, and watch it slowly float away. Try not to judge, evaluate, or think about it more deeply. Once it has floated out of sight, watch the next bubble appear. What is inside? Observe it, and watch it slowly float away. If your mind goes blank, then watch the bubble rise up with “blank” inside and slowly float away.

Visualization

This final meditation features visualization to encourage creativity and imagination. It will help children to focus their attention after they have practiced awareness of the present moment by focusing on their breath, and then released their thoughts and feelings through the meditation on the bubble. This final meditation may be particularly helpful for children who are anxious, since it is related to visualization for relaxation.

Creation of a Safe Place

Begin by sitting in a comfortable position, with your back straight and shoulders relaxed. Softly close your eyes. Allow the picture in your mind to become blank. You are going to imagine a place that feels comfortable, safe, and relaxing. Think of your place. It might be the beach, a lake, or even your own bed. Imagine it slowly appearing before you, becoming more and more clear. Look to your left. What do you see? Look to your right. What is over there? Look closer. Breathe in. What do you smell? Walk around your place. Look closer at certain things. Stay focused on your place. How are you feeling? If you find your thoughts wandering, observe them, and then focus on bringing the image of your place back into focus in front of you. (Allow some time.)

When you are ready, put your hand in front of your eyes. Open your eyes. Slowly spread your fingers to allow light in. When you are ready, slowly remove your hand. Children may also choose to draw the scene they imagined. This drawing can be saved to remind them of their safe, relaxing place.

Practicing Mindfulness

An essential component of mindfulness training is practice. It should be explained to children that practice in this case is not like practicing a musical instrument for a concert, but rather practice on a regular basis “aimed at cultivating a continuity of awareness in all activities of daily living” (Kabbitt-Zinn, *Mindfulness-Based Interventions in Context: Past, Present, and Future*, 2003) After they begin to learn mindfulness techniques, children can practice being more aware as they walk around—noting sounds, sights, smells, and their own movement. As they eat, they should be aware of the tastes, the smell, the sensation of chewing each bite, and the increasing feeling of fullness in one’s stomach. Mindfulness can become a way of being, embodied through implementation of the techniques in all aspects of life.” (Kabbitt-Zinn, *Full Catastrophic Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to face stress, pain and illness*, 1990)

Thoughts are like clouds floating by in the sky

If you are more relaxed, I think your brain functions more effectively.

– Dalai Lama

The quieter you become, the more you can hear.

–Ram Das

When you listen to the voice in your head, listen to it impartially.
That is to say, to not judge. You'll soon realize: there is the voice
and here I am listening to it, watching it.

– Tolle, *The Power of Being*, “The Power of Being Present”

When you listen to a thought, you are aware not only of the thought
but also of yourself as the witness of the thought.

– (Tolle, 2002) Tolle, *The Power of Being*, “Portals to the Now”

Sitting quietly, doing nothing,
Spring comes, and the grass grows by itself

– (Watts, 1957) p. 133.

In walking, standing, sitting, or lying down he understands that he is doing,
so that, however his body is engaged, he understands it just as it is. In
setting out or returning, in looking before or around, in bending or stretching his arm,
he acts with clear awareness....

– (Watts, 1957), p.56

We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts.

With our thoughts we make the world.

- (Kornfield, 1996)

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