

Introducing Your Child or Grandchild to Meditation and Mindfulness

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Mindful Listening Meditation

Sit upright, gently close your eyes. Take a few deep breaths, breathing in for a count of 3 through your nose like you're smelling a rose, and breathe out for a count of 5 like you're blowing out a candle. Do 3 times. Still keeping your eyes closed I am going to ring the singing bowl and I want you to pay attention to the sound of the bell as it slowly fades and I want you to raise your hand when you can no longer hear the sound. With your eyes still closed, I want you to pay close attention to any sounds you notice after the ringing has stopped for one minute. Now I'm going to ring it again. Now listen for any sounds. Now I want you to slowly and mindfully move your hands to your stomach and feel how your inhales and exhales move your stomach up and down. Pretend that you have a balloon in your stomach and it gets big with every in-breath and gets smaller with every exhale.

Feel the coolness under your nose as you breathe in and the warmth as you exhale.

Now I am going to ring the singing bowl to end this meditation and just listen for the sound as it fades away and raise your hand when you can no longer hear the sound.

Now you can open your eyes when you are ready, no rush though, whenever you are ready.

(When I do this exercise with the kids, we go around the room and I ask the kids to tell me the sounds they noticed during that minute).

- When I started my meditation teacher training, my sister, who is a grade 3 teacher in Edmonton, started doing meditation in the classroom for 5 minutes every morning. One little boy who was very disruptive and angry all of the time, in 7 weeks his behaviour began to change – my sister's words "it was like night and day."
- There is now a credit course at the University of Alberta called "Mindfulness for Teachers."
- Kids should be able to begin to meditate by 5-6 years old, although that could vary depending on the child. They should be old enough to understand the very basics of

feeling peaceful and feeling agitated. They must want to learn or at least be curious about what it's all about.

- As a guide, children should be able to meditate one minute for every year old that they are – of course there are exceptions, eg. If the child has ADD, ADHD
- I only teach children to meditate if one of their parents or caregivers meditates or is now learning to meditate with them. I've taught children in the past to meditate without their parents learning and if it's not supported in the home, the kids aren't likely to keep it up. Parents need to be the role model with meditation.
- I teach the kids how to set up a meditation place in their home, a peaceful, quiet space: a chair or a cushion on the floor, you can personalize it with things that you love or make you feel calm and comfortable, photos, flowers, anything kids may have. Some people also like to do it in their beds, by sitting up in their bed when they wake up in the morning or at night before they go to bed. With kids, I tell them that there is no right way or wrong way to meditate, that it's more important that they do it daily.
- I teach them the 5 essentials of mediation:
 1. It's okay to have thoughts.
 - It's the job of the mind to think, just like it's the job of your eyes to see.
 - Remember that we have an average of 60,000 thoughts a day.
 - Meditation is not about clearing you mind, but more about recognizing (or being mindful) of when an unwanted thought has arisen, to go back to your anchor, either your breath or a word or phrase.
 2. Don't try too hard.
 - Too much effort can ruin the experience. For example, when you try too hard to fall asleep, what happens? Or trying too hard to come up with a creative idea, what happens? Most of the time when we're trying to be creative, we get the best ideas when we are relaxed and calm and not "trying" to "make" it happen.
 3. Let go of expectations.
 - Don't think you should feel this way or that way, let go of ideas of how it's supposed to go or how you should be feeling. Every meditation will be different. You will know that meditation is working by the positive experiences and calmness you will be experiencing in your life.

4. Be kind to yourself.
 - How you treat yourself in meditation should be how you treat yourself in life – self compassionately and non-judgmentally.
 - Don't get down on yourself if in a meditation one day your mind keeps wandering or you're feeling bored.
 - Don't compare your meditations to other one's you've had or to anyone else's.

5. Stick with it.
 - Meditation only works if you do it. During your meditation your mind may wander or you may feel restless, have a brilliant idea or think of something you have to do right away, but don't stop meditating.
 - Instead begin again, and gently return to your focus (anchor), your breath or your mantra (word).
 - By staying with the meditation, and as you let your thoughts and impulses come and go without taking action, you are training your mind not to react. This is the part where you are making your brain stronger (just like when you lift weights and your muscles get stronger).
 - Even when you think nothing is happening in meditation, science show dramatic changes occurring in the brain long after the meditation session is over. I tell them about MRI scans in a child appropriate way of understanding.

Some Research Findings

- There hasn't been as much research and studies done on children and meditation/mindfulness but that's changing and more and more studies are being done, and it's exciting to see that they are being done in Canada, specifically at UBC.
- MindUp – developed by Goldie Hawn and the Hawn Foundation. MindUp is a research-based training program for educators and children. The program is composed of 15 lessons in neuroscience. Students learn to self-regulate behaviour and mindfully engage in focused concentration required for academic success.

MindUp teaches a number of mindfulness practices, including breathing, tasting and movement exercises. University of BC researches found the program had a positive effect on students' emotional control, more optimistic, helpful, academics (especially math), empathy, stress regulation and attentiveness.

- The Toronto District School Board 2011-12 Student and Parent Census, released in June, 2013 showed almost a 1/3 of grade 7 and 8 students said they are concerned about relationship issues such as making friends and fitting in, nearly ½ worried about family matters all the time or often, the majority have anxiety about schoolwork all the time or often and 59 percent worry about their future, and 11 percent feel unable to overcome difficulties all the time or often.
- A more recent study conducted by the University of Toronto found between 23 and 40 percent of high school students suffer from high levels of stress, while another study estimates that the total number of 12 to 19 year olds at risk of depression is a staggering 3.2 million.
- Four and five year olds were part of a study conducted by the University of Wisconsin-Madison Centre for Investigating Healthy Minds assessed a new curriculum meant to promote social, emotional and academic skills. Researchers found that the kids who participated in the study earned higher marks in academic performance than those who did not. One reason for the study was a strong interest in cultivating qualities of compassion and kindness. The scientists in this study say that early childhood is an opportune time to equip children with these skills since their brains are rapidly developing. They suggest that these skills may also help them cope with future life stress.
- A 2009 study published in Advances in School Mental Health Promotion found students learning about mindfulness reported being more relaxed and calm following their training.
- Another study, out of the University of California, found kids in grades 2 and 3 who learned mindfulness techniques for an hour a week for 8 weeks could better regulate their behaviour and showed improvement in executive functions, such as paying attention, making decisions and focusing without getting distracted.
- There's a high school in San Francisco which was once dubbed the "fight school". The principal decided to extend the school day by 30 minutes for meditation time. This resulted in better academic performance and a 75 percent decrease in suspensions. Students say they are more conscious of their actions, calmer and less angry.
- And finally, there's an elementary school in Peterborough, Ont. incorporating mindfulness and meditation into the classroom to teach students more about how to think positively about the world around them, to be empathetic and to show gratitude.

These are just a few, there are many, many more.

Some Benefits of Children Practicing Meditation

- Reduces stress – when a child is under stress, they can't focus well. Therefore they won't perform well on tests. Stress can also lead to violence – when a child is under pressure, they will lash out.
- Increase focus – when a child closes their eyes and bring attention to their breathing, they are training their attention. And since your brain is like a muscle, the more you're training it, the stronger it becomes.
- Increases empathy – when a child starts to do mindfulness, they develop more empathetic emotions, which helps them communicate better with others. This leads to less bullying and violence in the classroom.
- Calms children down – when a child is calm, he will focus better, be more optimistic, make better decisions and less likely to cause trouble in the classroom. This will lead to better test scores and a much better learning environment.
- It simply makes You Happy – Mindfulness is an effective tool to increase happiness and optimistic states of mind. When a child is optimistic, they will do better in school and life.

When I'm Teaching Kids

- I tell them that your brain is like a muscle and just like the muscles in your body, your brain is trainable.
- Poster of Brain

Amygdala – Feeling frightened? Upset? Your amygdala is on alert! It regulates and blocks information from going to your prefrontal cortex (PFC), so you can react in a flash. When you feel safe and happy, the amygdala will pass information on to the PFC so you can think.

Pre-Frontal Cortex – The prefrontal cortex (PFC) uses information to focus, decide, compute, analyze and reason. There's the catch: the PFC gets information only when the amygdala is calm. Then it passes on to the hippocampus any information worth remembering.

Hippocampus – The hippocampus creates, stores and processes all important facts and memories the PFC passes on to it – such as birthdays, your friends' email addresses and the brisk salty smell of the ocean.

- Mind Jar and how it represents your mind/thoughts and meditation.

Ask them to look through and see what's on the other side. They'll probably see you or whatever's sitting on the tabletop. Shake up the jar. What does it look like now? Can they still see through to the other side? Probably not. The sparkles could the water and obscure your vision. Just like the sparkles in the water, thoughts and emotions create havoc in our heads and cloud our otherwise clear minds. Let the sparkles settle, and take another look at the water. What happens when you leave it alone? Sure enough, the more the water rests, the more the sparkles settle, and the clearer the water becomes. Soon all of the sparkles settle to the bottom and we are able to see through the glass again. The same holds true with our minds. The longer we rest in the steady rhythm of our breathing, the more our thoughts and emotions settle down and the clearer our minds become.

Different Meditations I Do With Kids

- Firstly, when I start to teach them to meditate, I teach them how to breathe deeply.

Close their eyes or gaze at a spot in front of them if they don't feel comfortable closing them (capping). I always ask them to take a few deep breaths, breathing in through their nose (for a count of 3) and out through their mouths (for a count of 5), breathing in like you are smelling a rose and out like you're blowing out a candle.

- Children put hands on belly and ask them to feel it rise on the in-breath or fall on the out-breath. Tell them to imagine that they have a balloon in their stomachs that inflates with every breath in, and deflates with every breath out.
- Take 5 – inhale for a count of 5, exhale for a count of 5. Younger kids can use their fingers to count.
- Squish and Relax (Progressive Muscle Relaxation) – It's a meditation that will help your child recognize the difference between being tense and feeling relaxed so they be able to relax when he or she is feeling anxious or stressed. I would ask them to stretch out their legs and squeeze the muscles in their legs for 5 seconds and then let them go limp like spaghetti noodles and relax all of the muscles in their legs. Then I would guide them through doing it with their hands, imagining that they are holding an orange and are squishing it. Then ask them to stretch out their arms and tense and relax them.

Then with their shoulders, pulling their shoulders up to their ears and then relax. Then their tummy muscles, imagine with an elephant has just stepped on their tummy. Then to wrinkle up their faces and nose, mouth, eyes, forehead, cheeks, lips. Lastly I get them to do their whole body, tighten up their whole body and then relax like a rag doll.

- Belly Buddies – Have the child lay down on their backs and place their stuffed animal on their bellies. Tell them to breathe in silence for one minute (or longer depending on the age of the child) and notice how their Belly Buddy moves up and down, and any other sensations they notice. Tell them to imagine that the thoughts that come into their minds turn to bubbles and float away.
- The Art of Touch (do with a partner) - Give each child an object to touch, such as a ball, a feather, a soft toy, a rock, etc. Ask them to close their eyes and describe what the object feels like to their partner. Then have their partner trade places. This is a simple exercise but teaches the kids the practice of isolating their senses from one another.
- The Heartbeat Exercise – Have the kids jump up and down in place for one minute. Then have them sit back down and place their hands on their hearts. Tell them to close their eyes and feel their heartbeats, their breath, and see what else they notice about their bodies while they are still.
- Smell and Tell - Pass something fragrant out to each child, such as a piece of fresh orange peel, a sprig of lavender or a flower. Ask them to close their eyes and breathe in the scent, focusing all of their attention only on the smell of that object.
- Heart-to-Heart – Let’s talk about our feelings (most kids LOVE this one). What feelings do they feel with different experiences in their lives? Where do they feel those feelings (in their body?) One girl asked me what anxiety is? She may be experiencing these thoughts and feelings in her body but didn’t know what it was. This gives them the ability to “label” like Phil teaches, what they are feeling so they can now use different relaxation techniques to calm themselves down in a safe environment.
- I do the body scan with them.
- I teach them in any meditation that they are doing, that when thoughts or feelings come up, think of them as clouds passing through your mind. They can watch the clouds come and go just like you would watch clouds in the sky move and shift their shapes. Not attaching to any of the clouds (thoughts) but just being aware that they are there.
- I have discussions with them and ask them if their thoughts are always true?

- I get them count their breaths (1-10) and start over again, or count 1 for an in-breath and 2 for an out-breath.
- Or they do “I am breathing in” and “I am breathing out.”
- Or I have them choose a mantra (a word) to silently repeat with every in-breath and out-breath.
- *Loving Kindness Meditation (I always send them home with homework to be mindful and to send kindness to others every day until the next class).*

Loving Kindness Meditation – Start out guiding them in a regular meditation, then say now, while continuing to breathe naturally, think about someone that you love and the nice things you do together. Think of a wish you have for them.

Then we continue to breathe and then I ask them to think about someone who doesn't have as many friends or people that care about them. Think about what you can do after this quiet time to help someone to feel happier or more peaceful.

Then I get them to think about themselves and think about how they can feel happier and more peaceful.

- Groups of Kids - I do an exercise where one person is meditating and the other kids (3-4) are standing, sitting or walking around them being distractive. One girl who was meditating in this exercise visualized herself sitting in a garden and every sound she heard, she accounted it to something in the garden (ie. water bottle, waterfall, some were blowing on her, the wind).
- I do the walking meditation. I like to always try to get the children engaged in the activities we are doing so I let one child be the leader and the other kids can't go faster than the leader. I taught a girl with ADHD and OCD and when we did this exercise she said to me “I wasn't thinking about anything else.”
- I have the kids sit in a circle around me and close their eyes. I drop coins in my singing bowl (some slow and some fast, so they really have to focus). Then they have to guess how many I dropped. I have them take turns dropping them and counting them just to keep them engaged.

- With respect to mindfulness – I tell them that the past is over and done with and the future isn't here yet, so the present moment is all we have and all that they need to focus on.
- Sometimes we do mindfulness exercise, where we just close our eyes and I ask them to name what they are feeling in that moment (labelling) – happy, sad, anxious, hungry, bored, tired. Lots of times they have just come from school, so they've had a full day of learning and activity and it helps to check in with your body and mind to see how they're doing.
- Explain mindful eating exercise (from book and raisin exercise - attached) using all of their senses.

Exercises to do as a family

1. Just before leaving for school/work in the morning, before opening the front door, stand together and take three mindful/deep breaths.
2. Take three mindful/deep breaths as a family before eating and try to eat the meal mindfully to make everyone at the dinner table present. Pretend that you are from another planet and have never seen this food before. Ask yourself these questions: What does it look like? Feel like (if that's appropriate), taste like, smell like, what kind of sound does it make when you bite it, then bite and chew it slowly so you can taste and savour the flavour of the food.
3. Make it a game when you go for a walk and pay attention to what you all notice around you – what you see, hear, smell and touch – and say them out loud to each other – eg. I see a dog, I smell a flower, I feel the gravel underneath my feet.
4. Gratitude Exercise Together Before bed - share something with each other that you are grateful for that happened that day – something that made you happy or made you feel good. Then continue with 3 mindful breaths, so you start and end the day with 3 mindful, deep breaths.