

Why and How to Teach Your Kids Mindfulness

By Ellen Sturm Niz



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Last year, [my daughter started learning mindfulness in her third-grade class](#) at school. The students would sit in a circle, close their eyes, and quietly take notice of their own thoughts and what was happening around them. Each session, led by Danielle Mahoney, the mindfulness educator and literacy coach at P.S. 212Q in Jackson Heights, Queens, had a different lesson: mindful seeing, mindful hearing, mindful breathing, or heartfulness (or sending kind thoughts to others). The idea was that learning these techniques would help the young students focus better in school and be less stressed out.

Though at first my daughter resisted the mindfulness—she said the singing bowl they rang to start the sessions hurt her ears and gave her a headache—she slowly came around. She began enjoying the sessions and discovering they helped her focus. Since she began using the skill at school, I've noticed she is better able to center herself at home, too. When she starts freaking out about something, she is able to stop, take a breath, and shift her

perspective to come up with a less emotional—and more productive—reaction. For a [very sensitive](#) and dramatic kid, this is a major development.

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"The greatest impact I've seen so far with the students I have worked with has been an increase in compassion for themselves and for others," says Mahoney, who is certified in mindfulness teaching by [Mindful Schools](#). "They learn how to pause and respond to situations rather than react. They have a better understanding of the ways that their brains work and have an increased sense of curiosity and wonder about their own thoughts, emotions, and body sensations."

The children also seem to have better coping skills and communication skills, adds Mahoney, who has taught the practice to more than 300 students. "They have learned to be present—for themselves and for others."

The Benefits of Practicing Mindfulness

The benefits of mindfulness are not just anecdotal: A growing body of scientific research shows its positive effects on mental health and well-being. Practicing mindfulness has been shown to [improve attention](#) and [reduce stress](#) as well as increase one's ability to [regulate emotions and feel compassion and empathy](#). Mindfulness also is widely considered an effective psychotherapy treatment for adults, children, and adolescents with [aggression](#), [ADHD](#), or mental health [problems such as anxiety](#).

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"Mindful awareness helps students with self regulation, optimism, and planning and organizational skills," says Maria Hersey, Ph.D., the U.S. director of education and training at The Hawn Foundation, which trains

educators to teach its science-based mindfulness curriculum, [MindUP](#). "A lot of the research shows that mindful awareness—and understanding its pieces—helps students with cognitive and academic growth. It helps them follow through and prioritize."

In schools where MindUP has been implemented, the Hawn Foundation says 90 percent of children improved their ability to get along with other children. About 80 percent were more optimistic and had enhanced their self-concept, self-regulation, and self-management, while three-quarters of the children improved their planning and organizational skills, and the same amount had better impulse control and less reactivity. In addition, visits to the principal's office, incidents of bullying, and absenteeism—among both students and teachers—decreased.

"Students learn about attending to the here and now and being present with the people that they interact with, with themselves, [and] with their environment in a non-judgmental way," Dr. Hersey says. "It's really about getting students to reflect on their own thoughts and actions and learning how to make better choices for themselves and for others as well. So in our technology-based world where everybody is connected, we talk to students about the importance of self regulation and learning how their brains work so they might react less emotionally and more rationally in situations, and understand that they can be in control of themselves and their actions."

How to Teach Mindfulness at Home

Whether kids are learning mindfulness in school or not, parents can and should employ some of the same lessons teachers use in the classroom at home.

"If you really want children to embed a skill that schools are teaching into lifelong learning, it has to be reinforced at home as well," Dr. Hersey says, adding that MindUP's founder Goldie Hawn wrote a book, [10 Mindful Minutes](#), specifically for parents so they could help their kids develop these

skills, and that the foundation offers MindUP family workshops for parents and caregivers. "If kids want to really learn, they have to...embed the new learning into different situations. It's really giving them that context to say, 'Hey, I learned this in school, but this really works for me when I'm stressed on the softball field.'"

One of MindUP's core practices is the "brain break," in which students take a deep breath and calm themselves for three to five minutes to quiet their minds, be present, and just focus. Parents can encourage their kids to take a brain break during homework time, during stressful situations, or simply when transitioning from one activity to the next. "It's just a moment when you need to decompress a bit and just be present," Dr. Hersey says. "It's really about taking that time to be calm and peaceful and remember the things that are important in life and really focus on the positive."

Other lessons include practicing mindful awareness during everyday activities, like walking and eating, to teach kids to truly be in that moment and not thinking about tomorrow's math test or Saturday's birthday party. Dr. Hersey suggests parents do a "listening walk" with their children, asking them what sounds they hear, what the sounds remind them of, and how they help them remember a happy time or appreciate a happy experience.

"For mindful tasting, we talk about the importance of being mindfully aware when we are eating and focusing on each morsel and what does it taste like, just engaging with food and not watching TV or focusing on conversation," Dr. Hersey says. "There is a lot of research on watching TV when we are eating, and we will tend to eat more instead of taking our time to be present in that particular moment."

MindUP is also developing an app for teaching these skill to kids, and a few are already available from other developers as an easy way for kids to learn the practice on their own. [Smiling Mind](#) (free) offers mindfulness sessions, developed by a team of psychologists, that start with a quick series of questions to focus the mind followed by simple, easy-to-follow meditation

exercises. [Inner Peace for Kids](#) (\$1.99) from Kids Happy Apps features two meditation tracks, Colorful Balloons or Sleeping on a Cloud, and lets kids create their own zen garden. For bedtime, there is [Sleep Meditations for Kids](#) (free) where four bedtime stories are transformed into guided meditations designed to promote relaxation and contentment.

Developing a Family Practice

However a parent chooses to teach their children mindfulness, Mahoney says parents practicing it themselves may have the greatest impact on their children. "I would suggest that parents encourage their children to take a few minutes a day to practice and then practice right along with them," she says. "Setting routines in place for taking just a few moments a day to close your eyes and notice your breath, your thoughts, your emotions, and your body sensations, with kindness and curiosity, would make a great impact on the whole family."

As a busy mom trying to balance family, work, friends, chores, and "me time," taking a few moments a day to breathe can be harder than it sounds, but I'm determined to incorporate mindfulness into my life to model it for my daughter. Just like nutritious eating, exercise, reading, and any other habit we believe will help grow our children into happy, healthy adults, developing a skill that will help my kid connect with her own thoughts and feelings is worth the effort.

Being present in the moment is key to experiencing life to its fullest. As *The Family Circle* cartoonist Bil Keane said, "Yesterday's the past, tomorrow's the future, but today is a gift. That's why it's called the present."

Ellen Sturm Niz is a New York City-based editor and writer who is starting to practice mindfulness at home with her 9-year-old daughter. Follow her on [Twitter](#).

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