

Mindfulness for Children

Susan Kaiser Greenland

At what ages developmentally can kids meditate? I will be very honest with you and tell you, I don't have a clue, but as far as I can tell, nobody else does either. I look forward to the day when some of the research scientists I work with figure this out. I am very interested in this intellectually, but what I am more interested in is teaching children how to approach experience with an open mind, with an open heart.

Which brings me to the Quaker Oats box, how we start most of our new classes. There is a Quaker Oats box and I ask kids, "What's in it?" We get all sorts of answers, from Quaker Oats to lizards to spiders to candy. But we come down pretty quickly to the fact that we do not know what is in it. And it is not always comfortable to sit with not knowing.

I would like to help children become more comfortable with not knowing, to approach it with curiosity, an open mind and an open heart. Going back to the body, we start to think about how our bodies feel when we do not know something and we feel we should. Very often we feel a clutching in our body, a clutching in our throat for instance, or our heart races. By encouraging kids to notice how their bodies feel when they don't know something, and wish they did, we're building an awareness that helps them identify what is happening in their inner and outer worlds in different situations.

So for me, whether they are practicing meditation or not is not determined by the content of the child's mind. I am interested in that, but I am not all that interested in whether they are reaching some exalted (or even peaceful) mental state. Instead, my emphasis is more on the process of looking rather than on what the kids see in their inner and outer worlds. Do they look with an open mind, with curiosity, with as little fear as possible and appropriate, with the perspective of the friendly impartial spectator?

The next question is extremely important. You look at something, now what do you do about it? And that is the beauty and brilliance of mindfulness training. After looking, we develop a capacity to respond to what we see in a way that is both in our own best interests, and is also kind and compassionate to all those involved. As we better understand interconnection and change, we will understand that what is kind and compassionate for all those involved is also in our own best interests.

Back to the question of whether kids can actually meditate. When practicing with kids at least some of them are having the kind of experience that makes me think they are meditating. I can also tell you that not all children like to meditate—some kids hate it and some kids love it. But what is important is that we are training awareness, a way of looking at inner and outer experience, and a way of responding to what we see without expecting kids to be, do or see anything specific or special.

Clear seeing

Some of the parents, educators, and health care professionals who are interested in secular mindfulness seem to be looking for a magic wand—something, anything, that will solve all the problems of childhood. And obviously mindfulness is not a magic wand. But one thing mindfulness practice can offer that comes close to magic, for me, is clear seeing, a concept deeply embedded in classical Buddhism. For kids we encourage them to practice and build the capacity to clearly see what is happening, as it is happening, without an emotional charge. This goes back to both concepts of developing a more mindful world view and the perspective of a friendly, impartial spectator. When we clearly see what happens, as it happens, we are better able to take the emotional charge away or at least reduce it. Then we are able to respond with compassion.

I love this quote, "Rowing harder doesn't help if it involves moving in the wrong direction."



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How often have we worked so hard at something, and then seen it is just the wrong thing to be working at? With the best of intentions we have been working away only to learn that all that “doing” has been taking us in the opposite direction of the way we were hoping to go? The only way we can figure this out is if we learn to see clearly, without an emotional charge. It requires us to step back from an unpleasant experience and reflect on it before we dig in and start trying to fix or change it.

This is one way kids can use mindfulness in real life situations. You see a child who is upset about something take a breath, settle down, and use his or her calming skills to settle the mind and see things more clearly. That is pretty magical! Now I would be lying to you if I told you that all the kids I practice with just take a couple of deep breaths when they are upset and settle down. Sometimes it takes quite a while. They can get upset or over-excited again; that is totally normal. We use our calming skills over and over again. Sometimes it takes one experience and sometimes it takes many experiences. But they do learn, and the response clearly grows.

We are using the world view of curiosity and acceptance. We teach them to be easier on themselves because, as you know, these kids from a very early age are often very hard on themselves. We emphasize openness, acceptance, sense of humor, and peace.

Hello game

We start every class with the hello game. We start with the color of your eyes, a terrific practice that helps kids really look at somebody else in a way that is not emotionally charged. A lot of kids have difficulty making eye contact. This also grounds what we are doing in the practice of mindfulness; children start to notice and identify what is happening in their minds and bodies when they look at people closely. They start to recognize their mind-body reactions to these social exchanges. You build awareness of yourself because you are being aware of how you respond. You become aware of how others respond too. You notice how rare it is in this

world for people really to look at each other without bias, with an open mind. You see the value of this gentle curiosity of the friendly, impartial spectator, who sees you as a whole person.

From the color of the eyes we go to body sensations: seeing, tasting, smelling. Thoughts can get a little tricky; kids are often shy about sharing their thoughts, but by the time in the program that we focus on awareness of thoughts they know these things are going to be said out loud. Then we go into emotions, and from there, to how can we stay connected.

Structure of classes and courses

Our courses generally meet once a week for eight to twelve weeks and we can do the hello game throughout the entire course. There is always something we can notice at the beginning of class that will reinforce the teaching objective that day. Our classes are set up with a beginning, middle and end. It starts with the hello game, and then an introspective period, sitting up. The end is always an introspective period lying down, ending with friendly wishes (a version of *mettā* practice). In the middle is some sort of teaching objective, for example, how to use mindfulness to calm down, to help you go to sleep, to see yourself more clearly, or in conflict resolution.

At first the beginning and the ending introspective periods are quite short; the first period could be as little as a minute, the last period, meditating lying down, could be as short as three minutes. But over the course of the term, those beginning and ending periods get longer because the kids have built a capacity for introspection they did not have at the beginning. The middle section, which includes a game or an activity that focuses on a teaching objective, becomes shorter over the course of a term as the beginning and ending periods grow longer.

The prompt for the hello game that we play at the beginning is related to the middle section, which includes a game and discussion relating to the theme or objective for the overall class. So when you ask about fear, for example, a

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discussion of fear might take place when the learning objective is awareness of thoughts and emotions. Because it is mindful awareness, the goal is to first bring a gentle awareness to our fears. Then the question is, now that you are aware, what do you do?

With little kids you teach them, where could you ask for help, or what else could you do? We do not pretend that emotions do not exist, that they are not painful sometimes, that other people do not have similar things. That is one of the reasons it is important to have a referral system in place. With little kids we meet once or twice a week for eight weeks. The older ones meet once a week for ten or twelve weeks. Sessions last half an hour for the little kids, forty-five minutes for the older kids. Half an hour is tight, even for the little kids; it is hard to keep their attention for that long, but it is also hard to fit everything in.

The whole child

The classical teaching of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness beautifully integrates the whole child. We start with awareness of the body, then awareness of the mind, including thoughts, and then awareness of the heart, including emotions and world view. To serve the whole child, a mindful awareness program cannot leave any of these three elements out: body, mind and heart. Also important for kids today is integration of what is popularly called left hemisphere, right hemisphere processes. We use mindful awareness to integrate right hemisphere creativity and left hemisphere analytical or linear processes.

That is very important in today's school system, which is tilted to traditional left-brain processes: memorize information, analyze data, report back. Unfortunately, more and more programs that support creative, holistic approaches (like art, music, sports, for example) are being cut. It is a shame because we do not want kids who can only do math problems and do not have broader views as well.

How do we teach kids about non-conceptual experience? One example is a movie I show about this fabulous Ferris wheel on the Santa Monica pier. It has 180,000 lights, each one powered by wind and sun. That took a really smart left-brain processing-type person to figure out how to make those lights, but also somebody with right-brain-type creative

skills to come up with the idea of a beautiful work of art that lights up the Santa Monica skyline.

Mindfulness and concentration skills

Mindfulness can, through focused awareness practices, build those left-brain concentration skills, and through the world-view parts of mindfulness, and open awareness, it can also build more holistic skills. It is wonderful in how it develops both left- and right-brain skills.

But that is only the beginning because mindful awareness is also about getting on that Ferris wheel, strapping yourself in and taking a ride. It is fully experiencing the present moment the best you can at any given time. It is taking that ride through the integration of the left and the right brain; and that is what I mean when I say that mindful awareness is "more than the sum of its parts."

By now there has been a lot of the research around mindfulness, with scientists picking it apart into "concentrated attention" and other parts. This is good, because we need to know these things, but when we go to a school, they may say, "We do that already in the music program," or "We do that already in dance movement therapy." We need to show how we combine all these elements to teach a skill that's a certain way of being, a felt sense of experience that is more than the sum of its parts. That is why it is so important that those who are teaching mindfulness practice it, know it themselves from experience—they have to embody it.

Kindness and compassion

Along with attention, of course, you must have kindness and compassion. This is straight from the traditional teachings. It is so simple, still it took me nine years to get it down to this: kindness and compassion for myself, for other people and for the world around me. That is the same way we teach traditional mindfulness: inner experience, outer experience, both together without blending the two.

To teach that, we start with what we call "friendly wishes." It is basically the *mettā* instruction. There are various classical instructions, one of which is to send *mettā* aspirations to yourself; then people you like, to your friends or family; then to those about whom you are neutral; then to those you are not

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fond of—your enemies for example; and then to the whole world. But that is awfully abstract for little kids, so we start with friendly wishes to ourselves, and then friendly wishes to people we know. If I have enough time I'll start with people in the room with them, and then we will go to people we do not know but might like to know, and then we will go to everyone and everything, but it is really important that you give concrete examples to the children each time. For instance, when sending friendly wishes to people we know I might say, like your mom, or your teacher, or your friends. When sending friendly wishes to people we do not know yet, but would like to meet, I might suggest the President of the United States for example.

After awhile, I will ask them, "Who do you send friendly wishes to?" They will say, "I send friendly wishes to me," and I'll post that on the board. Then it will be grandma, and grandpa, and the farmer, and we put these next things up, and my little sister, and we go through the animals, the frog, the bunnies, and one says cat. Then I will say "What kind of things do we send friendly wishes to?" The sun, the corn, the breakfast cereal, and maybe we will send friendly wishes to the rain.

Four year olds are well able to understand how these things relate. One of the fundamental pieces in mindfulness training is teaching people about interdependence. That helps explain why it makes perfect sense to be compassionate to everything involved; it makes perfect sense to pay attention to not just yourself and other people. So the kids say, well, the rain is connected to the corn because it makes it grow, the sun is connected to the corn because it makes it grow. Somebody else will say, grandma is connected to the corn because she makes the cornmeal, and then, they will say "And we eat the corn!" So you are starting to in a very literal, concrete way.

We do the same thing with attention: I pay attention to myself and to the world around me, so this is a really helpful way of bringing interconnection into teaching with very little children and also with the older kids. With older

kids we talk more about recycling, starting with the earth and then on to people and the planet.

***Mettā* for enemies; domestic violence**

For years, I stayed away from the classical instruction which includes enemies, because I am extremely sensitive to the amount of messy violence in the world. The last I read it was one in five of children in this country has either been a victim of domestic violence or has seen it. I was recently told by a trauma expert that the number is one in three. I cannot vouch for the statistics, but I think it's safe to say that in any mainstream class there is a good chance you have somebody who has been somewhere where there is domestic violence. I did not want to encourage them to send friendly wishes to people who are hurting them.

But I was speaking in Thailand and I was lucky to be on a panel with Alan Wallace and Mathieu Ricard, who is one of my heroes. He encouraged me to try to figure out a way to include people you really do not like with friendly wishes, not to forget about it entirely simply because I was worried. He had some ideas, which I have tried, and it has been feeling safer to me, but I still do not do this with the very young kids. I do this with the older kids in the elementary school. It is an area I am going to continue to explore though because it's an important one.

It is wonderful to see how powerful these practices can be for kids. We clearly still have a lot to learn about integrating these ideas into how we teach children to be in the world, but we are making a start. There is no magic wand, but clearly seeing and responding with compassion for yourself and others does have a magical quality to it. What is so amazing is how many kids take this home to their parents, how many parents report back that the kid's singing the breathing song while they are fighting in the back of the car.

Susan Kaiser Greenland develops mindfulness programs for children, classroom teachers, parents, therapists and health care professionals. She is co-founder of InnerKids, is on the clinical team for the Pediatric Pain Clinic, UCLA's Children's Hospital and consults with UCLA's Mindful Awareness Research Center.

Mindfulness for Children: Questions & Answers

Using the breath to calm down

There are ways to take a very complicated notion such as seeing clearly and show it to kids. You can take a snow globe, or just a glass of water with baking soda in it, and have them watch it settle. That helps them settle too, keeps them less distracted, and allows the breath regulation to take effect. If the water glass is too small, or you don't have enough baking soda, it happens so fast that they don't actually have a felt sense of the experience. You want enough so that they can actually be interested; associating this with the breath lets them feel what happens.

When psychological issues come up

A wide range of things can happen. Sometimes it comes back in homework writing. The classic one was a response to a homework prompt something like "What do you do when people bug you?" "Well my mother bugged me this morning when she whacked me in the mouth and I started bleeding." Particularly in schools that are underserved, kids can immediately start crying and you don't know why.

You also look for kids who have a very hard time with the mindfulness. For example, some kids have a very hard time lying down, or closing their eyes. They look like they are ready to crawl out of their skin while they are lying down, or sitting, but do not look like that otherwise. You watch for tears. None of this necessarily means abuse. Some private-school teenagers cannot close their eyes because they are so anxious. The work is so hard. I bring it to teachers' attention. If someone is having a very hard time lying down, it can help to suggest they sit up.

Classroom techniques, ground rules

The main rule is that absolutely everything you do has to be respectful of yourself, others and the environment. There is zero tolerance about that. Other than that, we make it very clear that there are no right or wrong emotions, and no right or wrong physical sensations. There are not too many right or wrong thoughts, as long as it is not a disrespectful thing you are voicing, because it is not about right or wrong. It is about the process of building a capacity for

awareness. We cannot really deal with a problem until we bring awareness to it, so we do not judge when people say some pretty horrible things. That's just how they're feeling right now—as long they are respectful to people in the room.

I enforce zero tolerance. I tell them that is not appropriate; they have to make another choice.

Be accepting of whatever comes up?

I am not big on encouraging them accept whatever comes up. That is not the traditional instruction, but with kids I focus on becoming aware of what comes up and then after the practice period talking about ways to get some help. If something comes up and it is confusing to you, get help, and then we talk in a friendly way about who might be able to help you.

Working with parents

In a perfect world, I want to have a parent meeting up front and in the middle, as well as a teacher meeting up front and in the middle. Sometimes it happens, sometimes it does not. But we are very limited unless we get the whole family system working together. We have homework prompts about once a week so the kids are bringing home something in writing that their parents can see. The assignment is paying attention to breathing before they go to bed at night and writing about it, eating one meal mindfully, and writing or drawing a picture about it.

Some parents take a weekend morning to come and sit on the cold floor and try to practice mindfulness. They do this for their kids, not themselves. Most of those parents have a child who has an issue that they want to work on. I had the easiest time with parents when I was in a domestic violence center. Every mom showed up at 6 a.m. to practice, dressed for work, with their kids cleaned up, ready for school.

It really helps if the parent program focuses on basic self-care practices for parents, and the parents talk about the stresses they're under. In the domestic violence clinic, these moms were under tremendous stress. They came there for their kids, but we started with self-care.

—SKG