



Being Mindful Through the Years

Roubie Younkin explores the benefits for children to learn and practice mindfulness.

A break from school is highly anticipated, and summer provides a perfect escape from the rigors of structured learning. For parents, it may be tempting to fill these days with activities to live each moment to the fullest. However, the greatest gift might be just slowing down. Carefree summer days lend themselves to introducing mindfulness and the importance of being present. By teaching children mindfulness skills, we can empower them to meet the stresses of the world with presence, self-compassion, and openness.

Mindfulness practices can be simple techniques that encourage the individual to focus on what is happening in the moment. Mindfulness practices help youth and adults intentionally observe what is going on in the present. Examples might include a mindfulness walk, where youth focus on lifting their feet, the sounds around them, their breathing, what the air smells like or a mindfulness snack where youth notice how the food smells, what it tastes like, and how it feels. Other examples include mindful breathing, listening, or drawing.

When mindfulness is taught to children, they gain tools to build confidence, cope with stress and relate to uncomfortable or challenging moments. For children, mindfulness may offer relief and a sense of control

when encountering difficulties. Teaching mindfulness to children can also help shape three critical skills developed in early childhood: paying attention and remembering information, shifting back and forth between tasks, and behaving appropriately with others. Children's brain development aligns well with mindfulness as connections in the prefrontal circuits are created at a fast rate during childhood. These abilities are known as executive functions and they are essential for more advanced tasks: planning, reasoning, problem-solving, and positive social relationships.

Practicing mindfulness is helpful in recognizing what is positive in our lives, and in noticing difficulties. Youth who practice being aware of their feelings during difficulties are better able to navigate through adverse situations.

Mindfulness is most effective when it is modeled by parents or teachers. Parents are encouraged to develop their own inner mindfulness skillset and share their triumphs with children. The results of mindfulness and its effects on a child's mental health make the time invested in modeling and

learning this ancient art worthwhile. It is not conceptual learning and cannot be "taught" like math or science. It is, however, one tool that parents have a unique opportunity to gift their children; the gift of peace, with the ability to pause.

Mindfulness is one tool that parents have a unique opportunity to gift their children

Mindfulness benefits include:

- Developing the habit of focusing on the moment, ignoring distractions, and improving attentiveness
- Staying calm and regulating behavior during stressful moments

- Finding peace through meditation
- Promoting happiness by lowering social anxiety
- Encouraging patience
- Creating habits for the future

Practicing mindfulness does not come naturally to most kids, but most are receptive to the process. The research-backed benefits of mindfulness are a parent's dream. They include positive effects on the child's physical and mental health, the power to promote kindness, patience, and compassion for others and the ability to boost self-control, increase attention/focus and encourage better decision making.

The more strategies a child has to handle emotions, the better equipped they will be to face challenges and move through hard times with confidence and resilience.

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Mindfulness Strategy

Early training typically involves breathing exercises with concentration on each breath; breathe in and breathe out. Focusing on breathing while learning to bring the mind back when it wanders is the first step. For young children, placing a stuffed animal on their stomach and encouraging them to watch it rise and fall as they breathe is one effective means of illustrating focus and how relaxing it can be to just breathe.

