

Mindfulness for School-Age Children

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Teaching professionals have a lot going on: lesson planning, managing a classroom, communicating to parents, and balancing work/life responsibilities. Students, too, have a lot to deal with, like remembering to complete their homework, getting good grades, making friendships, and managing home responsibilities. With the many competing tasks to accomplish, it can feel overwhelming. Often, educators may feel ill-equipped to help themselves or their students find balance when they are out of sorts. Mindfulness practices offer simple and quick ways to ease the mind when it is on overdrive to help reset. This fact sheet offers an introduction to mindfulness and provides simple practices to achieving emotional balance.

BENEFITS OF MINDFULNESS ¹⁻⁵

When in a state of having too much on one's plate, it can lead to feeling emotionally dysregulated. **Emotional dysregulation** refers to a state of being emotionally imbalanced or experiencing intense emotions, like anxiety, anger, or hyperactivity, and having difficulty rebounding from these emotions. Left untreated, emotional dysregulation can lead to memory loss, attention lapses, learning problems, poor decision-making, or mental health crises. Decades of research suggests that mindfulness-based practices are the antidote to achieving emotional balance.

Mindfulness is described as the awareness of the present moment without judgment of interrupting thoughts or feelings.² Practicing mindfulness at an early age can set children up for success by:

- Promoting academic achievement.
- Improving the ability to manage different emotions.
- Increasing confidence and self-esteem.
- Reducing stress and anxiety.
- Strengthening memory and the ability to focus.

PRACTICING MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness takes practice. It may seem difficult at first, but mindful practices require little time or materials. By simply focusing on your breath, you can work towards perfecting your mindfulness skills. To practice, try the following:

- Close your eyes,
- Take in a deep breath,
- Focus on letting the breath expand your diaphragm,
- Release the breath while imagining unpleasant sensations or emotions exiting, and
- Repeat, as needed.

MINDFULNESS ACTIVITIES ⁶⁻¹⁰

Quick and easy mindfulness practices can be performed by both students and educators to cope with overwhelming thoughts. Here are simple activities to teach and encourage mindfulness.

Five Senses – Our senses provide five ways to practice mindfulness. For this activity, students will identify five things they see, four things they hear, three things they feel, two things they smell, and one thing they taste. It is important to maintain deep focus in order to notice the small details revealed by each sense.

MINDFULNESS ACTIVITIES (CONTINUED)

“I Spy” Colors – This practice is like “I Spy” but with colors. Students can either pick a color and look for things that are that color or count all the colors they can see. Similar to using our senses to practice mindfulness, these activities focus solely on the sense of sight.

Happy Place – Many of us have heard the phrase “go to your happy place.” This mindful practice helps us cope with uncomfortable feelings (i.e., stress) or sensations (i.e., pain). Instruct students to imagine their “go-to” happy place when they are emotionally dysregulated.

Pretzel Breathing – Breathing is the simplest way to practice mindfulness, as we always have our breath available to direct our focus and put other thoughts to the side. Breathing exercises allow us to calm down both physically and mentally. To guide the practice, display an image of a pretzel (a sideways figure eight works as well). Ask students to use a finger to trace the pretzel in the air. As they trace upwards, ask students to take a deep breath while expanding the diaphragm fully with the breath (also known as “belly breaths”). When they trace downwards, guide students to release the breath.

Class Mantras – Whether you repeat positive affirmations out loud in a mirror or write in a journal, positive self-talk contributes to our self-worth and productivity. Guide students through positive mantras and practice regularly as a class (“We are smart. We are productive. We are a great team!”). If students believe they are successful, they are more likely to be successful.

Cognitive Reappraisal – Students who make a conscious effort to reframe unkind and irrational beliefs with positive, strengths-based beliefs are better at managing their emotions. When students verbalize negative beliefs about a situation that is causing discomfort (“I got a bad grade because I’m stupid.”), help them to restructure them into a positive explanation about the circumstances of the situation (“I will do better next time. I am bright and a fast learner!”). Strategies like cognitive reappraisal help students be more optimistic about themselves and will promote a warmer classroom environment.

CONCLUSION

Practicing mindfulness as children encourages the development of confident, successful, and empathetic adults.² Mindfulness activities teach children to be present and aware of their surroundings.⁴ By starting this practice at an early age, children are able to perfect the skill of mindfulness earlier and effectively respond to future challenges.

LEARN MORE

- **Calm App**, free for schools (calm.com/schools)
- **Mindful Games (Susan Kaiser Greenland)** (susankaisergreenland.com/mindful-games)
- **Mindful Schools Educator Training** (mindfulschools.org/about-mindfulness/our-programs)

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