

Mindfulness for Children

By [David Gelles](#)

Illustrations by Sam Kalda

Children of all ages can benefit from mindfulness, the simple practice of bringing a gentle, accepting attitude to the present moment. It can help parents and caregivers, too, by promoting happiness and relieving stress. Here, we offer basic tips for children and adults of all ages, as well as several activities that develop compassion, focus, curiosity and empathy. And remember, mindfulness can be fun.

What Is Mindfulness, and Why Do Kids Need It?

From our earliest moments, mindfulness can help minimize anxiety and increase happiness.



How It Helps

Adversity comes at us from the moment we are born. Infants get hungry and tired. Toddlers grapple with language and self-control. And as children develop through adolescence to become teenagers, life grows ever more complicated. Developing relationships, navigating school and exercising independence — the very stuff of growing up — naturally creates stressful situations for every child.

At each developmental stage, mindfulness can be **a useful tool for decreasing anxiety and promoting happiness**. Mindfulness — a simple technique that emphasizes paying attention to the present moment in an accepting, nonjudgmental manner — has emerged as a popular mainstream practice in recent decades. It is being taught to executives at corporations, athletes in the locker room, and increasingly, to children both at home and in school.

Early Habits

Children are uniquely suited to benefit from mindfulness practice. Habits formed early in life will inform behaviors in adulthood, and with mindfulness, we have the opportunity to give our children the habit of being peaceful, kind and accepting.

“For children, mindfulness can offer relief from whatever difficulties they might be encountering in life,” said [Annaka Harris](#), an author who teaches mindfulness to children. “It also gives them the beauty of being in the present moment.”

Part of the reason why mindfulness is so effective for children can be explained by the way the brain develops. While our brains are constantly developing throughout our lives, connections in the prefrontal circuits are created at their fastest rate during childhood. Mindfulness, which promotes skills that are controlled in the prefrontal cortex, like focus and cognitive control, can therefore have a particular impact on the development of skills including self-regulation, judgment and patience during childhood.

Modeling Mindfulness

Mindfulness isn't something that can be outsourced. For parents and caregivers, the best way to teach a child to be mindful is to embody the practice oneself.

“Learning mindfulness isn't like piano lessons, where you can have someone else teach it to your children,” said [Susan Kaiser Greenland](#), a mindfulness instructor who works with children. “You have to learn it yourself.”

Of course, being a parent is an incredibly stressful experience in its own right. For those raising children, practicing mindfulness exercises — and ideally practicing mindfulness meditation for even a few minutes a day — can be **profoundly beneficial**, allowing caregivers to not only share the skills of happiness and acceptance with a new generation, but also take better care of themselves at the same time.

“In order to play the game of life mindfully,” said [Sumi Loundon Kim](#), a Buddhist chaplain at Duke University who works with youth, “you have to practice mindfulness.”

Related Guide



How to Meditate

Meditation is a simple practice available to all and can reduce stress, increase calmness and clarity, and promote happiness. This guide offers basic tips to get you started on a path toward greater equanimity, acceptance and joy.

More On Mindfulness for Children

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The Mindful Child
May 10, 2016



Giving Kids Some Meditation With Their Vacation

January 19, 2017



Infants

Even the youngest children can sense distraction. So work on being present.

Right From the Start

During the first year of life, the most effective way to share mindfulness with a child is to embody it. Children are hungry for our attention and affection, and can sense when parents or caregivers are distracted. So when you are with an infant, try to stay in the present moment no matter what is happening.

In practice, this can be as simple as holding a baby quietly and maintaining eye contact with a gentle, loving demeanor. "When the baby gazes at the parent, the

parent can gaze back,” said Ms. Kim. “That kind of reflective mirroring behavior is a good way of teaching infancy mindfulness.”

Smartphones are popular, but distracting. **Mindfulness teachers encourage parents and caregivers to put down the phone and engage with a baby**, even if it’s simply making eye contact and smiling. “Instead of scrolling through email, put down the device and be fully present and attentive,” said Ms. Kim.

Mothers and other caretakers have an opportunity to practice this several times a day, when feeding their babies. “When you’re with your child, where’s your attention?” said [Jessica Morey](#), founder of Inward Bound Mindfulness Education, a nonprofit that brings mindfulness training to youth. “That starts even from breast feeding.”

Stay Calm

When infants do become upset, try not to let that make you agitated. Doing so can trigger an unhelpful cycle where parent and child are each feeding off each other’s unhappiness. “Parents and children really co-regulate each other,” said Ms. Greenland. “As the child starts screaming, if the parents escalates, too, they ratchet each other up.”

When You Are Feeling Frustrated

For parents or caregivers who find themselves upset and out of touch with the present moment, a popular mindfulness exercise known as S.T.O.P. can be helpful.

- **Stop.** Just take a momentary pause, no matter what you’re doing.
- **Take a breath.** Feel the sensation of your own breathing, which brings you back to the present moment.
- **Observe.** Acknowledge what is happening, for good or bad, inside you or out. Just note it.
- **Proceed.** Having briefly checked in with the present moment, continue with whatever it was you were doing.

Movement

Being mindful is simple, but it’s not always easy. Especially when spending time with infants, there can be many moments when caregiving is, well, boring. “There’s nursing, there’s diapering, there’s feeding,” said Ms. Kim. “That’s about it.”

If you find your mind wandering, one way for parents to re-engage with mindfulness is to move, either performing gentle yoga when the baby isn’t being held, or trying out a walking meditation.

“Too much of the mindfulness work is really oriented towards staying still,” says Ms. Greenland. “If your nervous system is riled up, many people, especially those new to practice, are better with moving.”



Thankful With Every Step

For parents with infants, it can be useful to cultivate a sense of gratitude. This exercise, like others in this guide, is adapted from "Mindful Games," an activity card set created by Ms. Greenland and Ms. Harris.

First, find a space where you can safely and comfortably walk indoors while holding your child. If you're not feeling particularly happy, that's okay. The point of this exercise is not to magically feel better. It is to experience the sensation of moving and to focus your attention on the sensation of holding a baby and walking, and to focus on the feeling of gratitude.

Holding the baby safely and then turn your gaze downward and **begin walking slowly and deliberately**. Notice the feeling in each foot as you step. Do you feel the heel of your foot, the ball of your foot and your toes? Parents naturally feel a range of emotions when holding a child, from deep love to being intensely overwhelmed and anxiety. If paying attention to your body makes you uncomfortable for any reason, you can try listening to sounds as you walk instead. Simply listening to the orchestra of

sounds while walking slowly — from the rustling of your clothes as you move, to singing birds, to the everyday activity of your home — can be a calming break from the constant caretaking required for an infant.

Then, every time you take a step, think of how much you appreciate your child, feeling their warmth as you hold them. Silently repeat phrases that capture your gratitude for the experience, such as “I’m thankful that I can hold you,” or “I’m thankful that you’re smiling right now.”

Next try sending yourself and your baby well-wishes with each step. Caring for an infant can be deeply exhausting, as all of your energy, day and night, is being devoted to another human being. It’s an especially important time to be kind to yourself. Every time you take a step, send yourself and your baby a wish. (You can use these wishes or create personal ones in your own words.)

- *May we be happy.*
- *May we be healthy and strong.*
- *May we sleep well soon.*
- *May this exhausting time together make our bond stronger.*
- *May we have compassion for each other.*

As you turn around and retrace your steps, **think of the ways your life is better because of your child** and continue the exercise. Remember that at times, infants and caregivers can co-regulate. If a caregiver is feeling agitated, his or her walking slowly and deliberately, with a focus on something other than the baby being upset and worrying about how he or she will get the baby to calm down, will settle the caregiver, which in turn may help regulate the baby.

Meditation for Real Life



How to Be Mindful Holding a Baby

Remember that whatever state of being that your baby is in at any particular moment, it is not a permanent condition.

Toddlers

Raising children between the ages of 2 and 4 can be incredibly rewarding and immensely challenging.

Moving On

In the course of months, toddlers discover language, gain control over their bodies and begin to exert their independence. Yet even at this young age, toddlers can begin to experience and understand mindfulness. When toddlers are in a good mood, mindfulness exercises can help them become more familiar with the sensations of happiness and gratitude. And when they get upset, mindfulness can help toddlers move on from the fleeting experiences that might have made them cry, and instead focus their attention on new, less upsetting sensations. This shift moves “their attention away from whatever it is they’re worrying about, to a present moment experience such as the feeling of their own breath,” said Ms. Greenland. “We don’t pretend that the bad isn’t happening, but let’s also think about three good things that are happening right now, too.”

The most effective way to bring mindfulness to toddlers is, of course, to embody it. “When I think about mindfulness for children, I think of family culture,” said Ms. Kim. “The emphasis needs to be on the parents.”

From the time your children are young, **try to instill good habits of attention in them by practicing them yourself.** Here are some things to try:

- Don’t look at your phone too often when your children are around.
- Spend time doing activities that promote focus, creativity and inquiry — such as reading, making art and having conversations — rather than watching a lot of TV.
- Treat other people — especially your children — kindly, even when you are frustrated and upset.
- And express gratitude for the things in your life you feel thankful for.

“We’re not even aware how many times we’re checking our phone, how many times we’re at our computer with our backs turned,” said Ms. Kim. “We are phenomenally distracted and we are demonstrating those habits to our children. A prerequisite for cultivating mindfulness is looking at our habits of distraction and working to change those.”

Breathing Exercises

Even with the best of intentions, raising toddlers isn't easy. The exercise described above, known as S.T.O.P., can be helpful in challenging moments.

In addition, getting to know our bodies is an essential part of mindfulness practice. This starts with our breath. Breathing exercises can help you become more familiar with the rhythms of your body.

Try this one and, after, think about how it might be useful in your life — maybe when you're tired, or when you're feeling worried about something?



Breathing With a Pinwheel

This exercise allows us to see how different ways of breathing affect how our mind and bodies feel.

TRY IT!

Mindful Seeing

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Young Children

Don't make mindfulness seem like something only to be used in times of trouble — present it as a tool to be used in a variety of situations.

Being Mindful Every Day

As children develop into early childhood, they become capable not only of practicing mindfulness with the guidance of a parent or caregiver, but also of retaining some of these skills and turning to them in times of need. “By around age 4 they are able to learn skills that they can utilize on their own,” said Ms. Greenland.

To instill these habits in children, **practice is key**. Don’t make mindfulness something that is turned to only in times of stress. Instead, make mindfulness exercises a regular part of the daily routine, an activity in and of itself, just like reading, playing outside or making art. And rather than making mindfulness seem as if it is only as an antidote to irritating situations, present it as a tool that can **help children explore new sensations, including those that are pleasant, neutral and unfamiliar**.

“Use it as a tool to explore kindness and curiosity,” said Ms. Morey. “Ask children what they feel in their bodies.”

Parents can also continue to embody mindfulness, and should feel comfortable meditating in front of their children. “It’s a wonderful practice for parents, too, to meditate in the midst of whatever is going on,” said Ms. Harris. “The children may not have any concept of what we’re doing when we meditate, but they’re mimicking the behavior and they’re interested.”



Seeing Clearly

A glitter ball can help us understand the connection between mind and body.

TRY IT!

Teaching Forgiveness

As children grow older and become more independent, parents and caregivers grapple with a loss of control. When children are in school and out with friends, there's simply less a parent can do to influence the lives of their children. And when setbacks occur, as they inevitably will, it is important for parents to meet those misfortunes with mindfulness.

Rather than getting hung up on whatever the problem is, note it and address it, but at the same time recognize that it is fleeting and will pass. If it is the child who misbehaved, make an effort to forgive them.

And if the parent or caregiver is blaming themselves, they should work on self-forgiveness, too. "Wisdom doesn't come from being perfect," said Ms. Greenland. "Wisdom comes from being present."

Mindful Breathing by Annaka Harris

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