

SPEAKER PAPER

Mindful Meditation for Children

Cultivating creative, happy minds

Janet ETTY-Leal: *Young Minds* 2012

Mindful Meditation for Children ... Cultivating creative, happy young minds

A huge blessing in my life is to be the mother of two wonderful daughters. During their childhood I have often pondered the quote by Hodding Carter:

“There are only two lasting bequests we can hope to give our children: one is roots, and the other, wings”

These qualities have certainly been goals that I have aspired to in parenting. My desires and wishes for my own children hold true for my professional work with children in schools. For over a decade I have been engaged in a rich journey of exploration and discovery. It has been a privilege to work with thousands of children from 3 to 18 years of age in metropolitan and rural Victoria, introducing the life skills of Mindful Meditation.

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a way to cultivate a clear mind and engaged heart. This approach is beautifully described by John Kabat-Zinn;

“Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment”

Mindfulness paves the way to be alert and make kind, conscious choices in the present moment. A way to maximize precious opportunities, culminating in enhanced wellbeing and happiness.

The dynamic relationship of Mindfulness and Meditation

Often learning has an external focus. Yet there is so much to learn and discover about our inner world.

The art of Mindful meditation addresses this imbalance. Children can begin to deeply appreciate, even marvel, at the magnificent resource of their bodies and minds. This awareness allows them to make more astute, considered and kind choices for themselves and ultimately for others and the planet!

Meditation brings children the priceless gift of ‘space’ ... space to just be. Space to be quiet and still; where there is nowhere to go, nothing to do and nothing to achieve. In this space the gentle skills of self-awareness and compassion can incubate over time.

As meditative skills develop, the way is paved for living mindfully, forming a gentle, symbiotic relationship. True, lasting life skills are established. The benefits of this Mindful evolution can then flow on to every aspect of life.

The Difference between Relaxation and Meditation

It is important to clearly define what is understood by relaxation and meditation. Like adults, children can relax with an ice cream, in front of the television, on the computer or lying down with a good book. These moments may be relaxing, but they can be mindless! Consequently skills are not being developed. Mindful meditation teaches children to hone their ability to be present and to be aware.

Children can consciously learn to relax in preparation for meditation practice, sensing the ease of letting go of tension and allowing the mind to clear. A state of Mindful Meditation evolves, where in stillness attention can be returned (again and again) to the present moment. Focus is fine-tuned and the innate, self-regulating properties of the body/mind can flourish.

Why Introduce Children to Meditation?

Never before have children faced so many distractions and challenges to their ability to focus. Mobile phones and ever-evolving technology bring wonderful opportunities, but also endless temptations for minds to be elsewhere and constantly multi-tasking. When children are distracted or anxious there is little energy, or aptitude, for the task at hand. Neural pathways can be scrambled and ineffective.

As well as the pace of life, the pressure to perform also impacts on the lives of many young people. Nervous systems can literally become over-loaded. There are increasing reports of high levels of anxiety and mental health problems amongst students, even at primary school levels.

Incidences of anti-social behaviour amongst youth, such as bullying and violence, pose increasing challenges for schools and the wider community.

A national study of mental health problems among children was conducted in 1998 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2009) and at that time the prevalence of mental health problems among children and adolescents aged 4- 17 was 14%. According to Professor Patrick McGorry, mental illness could affect up to 50 percent of people at some stage of their lives.

It is therefore understandable that a focus on student wellbeing that embraces emotional intelligence and resilience is increasing rapidly in education. A Mindful meditation practice has so much to offer children, as they develop powerful, personal life skills.

The Gifts of Mindful Meditation

Self-knowledge is the key skill that grows with a practice of meditation. Meditation creates the opportunity to create balance, connect and learn about what's going on inside. A clearer, kinder perception of the outside world can then emerge.

Emotional states often are as variable the weather – a continuum of highs and lows colours our lives, moment by moment. Temporal states of happiness, anger, excitement and fear pervade our being. Cultivating the skill of self-awareness can literally shed light on children's lives. With mindful skills children can feel more assured as they navigate their way through the currents, eddies and sometimes turbulent waters of life.

Sustained focus, silence and stillness can be rare, even uncomfortable experiences for children. For some they may have negative associations, possibly bringing feelings of boredom and disconnection. A meditation practice can gently reveal the pleasure and rewards of sharpening focusing abilities and befriending calm, quiet moments.

Mindfulness skills hone inner resources, nurturing the key attributes of compassion, commitment, acceptance, patience, persistence and resilience. These strengths underpin success in every aspect of life.

Teaching Mindful Skills to Children

Developing mastery in any field of human endeavour is the result of years of sequential skill development, consolidation and hours of practice. Learning the skills of mindfulness and meditation requires structure and successive, ordered skills, moving from familiarization with the general tenets of self-awareness to specific practices to enhance subtle levels of focus.

A wonderful starting point is connection to the body. This complex, magnificent instrument is so often taken for granted or completely ignored. It is so rewarding to introduce young children to the concept of being good custodians of their own body and mind! Awareness of immediate, simple self-care choices often equate with feeling better. Choices such as postural alignment, hydration, diet and letting go of tension are accessible and practical. Children instinctively respond to the

needs of their bodies as they engage in simple stretching and balancing, regulating mindful movements.

As their skills develop, children are able to refine their skills to enhance awareness of breathing, emotions, energy levels and even their own thought processes. Over time they can become inspired to respect and even be awestruck by the inter-connected brilliance of the systems and cells within them!

The Mindful Repertoire:

Young Children

Boundless opportunities for creativity and joy exist as little ones are introduced to Mindful activities. Learning can begin within the basic framework of body awareness where a wide range of fun-filled, engaging activities can be pursued! Even at the tender of age of 3, the ability of children to settle and focus is quite remarkable. Magical, mindful moments can be shared using a range of simple activities; stories and games, props and gifts from nature. These experiences fully absorb attention and engage children in a natural, simple way.

Enjoyable opportunities to bring attention to the present moment can bring immediate benefits to children with special needs. Engagement in these activities helps children to calm down, flowing through to immediate behavioural benefits.

Fostering compassionate self-awareness is a wonderful 'seed to plant' in children. It is a thrill to then let the 'kindness ripples' extend to the awareness of others, contributing to bonding and harmony within the group. In time, the ripples can flow on to the classroom, family and community. Activities and props such as the 'talking stick' (which can be a piece of wood or a simple beautiful object) effortlessly engenders active listening, respect and patience. Quietly, calmly sitting together in a circle offer palpable moments of pure self-awareness combined with unity and connectedness for the group. These experiences can be unique and transformative.

Adolescents

Themes can be tailored for older children. The level of sophistication and scope of concepts can extend to explore a wide range of relevant issues. Human physiology can be studied in greater detail, encompassing relevant information on all the systems of the body, including a deep understanding of the interconnection between the various parts of the brain and the nervous system.

Recognizing and understanding the stress response is increasingly relevant as children mature. The realization can dawn that security is achieved by skillfully handling things, not just having things! Mindfulness helps young people reframe and do things differently. Gradually they begin to learn to deal with stress in a more considered, skillful way. 'Knee-jerk', impulsive reactions are automatic; calm, creative responses require cultivation and practice! With commitment to practice, the ability to pause and choose wisely grows.

In time the skills of mindfulness radiate through to many aspects of young lives. This can include waking up to the power of words. A daily 'fire hose' of words is fed through the internet, text messages, conversation, radio, newspapers and books. Instantaneous, powerful 'emotional buttons' connecting to pleasurable or painful memories; or fanciful or fearful projections into the future are pressed. These can influence choices, attitudes and beliefs.

One of the many pleasures of introducing children to mindfulness is helping them discover the extraordinary, in the 'ordinary'. With a heightened experience of sensual connection, a whole new realm of knowing emerges - beginning to hear layers of sound, seeing the perfect spiral in the head of a dandelion ... smelling crushed herb leaves, create moments of true immersion leading to a

state of flow. A transcendent state they may treasure as they mature to become great thinkers, writers, artists, scientists and musicians!

Mindful practices and meditation can be interpreted individually and creatively. Ultimately students can discover which focus and approach suits them best. Meditation and moments of mindfulness create opportunities to fine tune the senses and the mind.

Billions of neural networks respond as the refinement of awareness evolves with a range of mindfulness practices. Meditation and mindfulness practices serve physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual needs, transcending cultural backgrounds or beliefs. Space for a portal to the richness of spiritual connection is created.

Positive Mindful Outcomes

Mindful meditation is not practiced with the intention of any specific outcome. Kindness is the most important attribute of practice. In time however, benefits can be experienced and noted.

Mindfulness skills are being taught in a rapidly growing number of schools globally. Compelling research exists that consistent practice brings positive results in students:

- Lowered stress and aggression
- Reduced anxiety
- Improved concentration and academic performance
- Increased happiness, liking of school/sense of belonging
- Enhanced executive function and impulse control
- Effective emotional/behavioural regulation
- Increased empathy and optimism
- Benefits to home and family relationships

Improved focus, stress management, well-being and just ways to feel better about themselves and life are some of the benefits children can look forward to experiencing as they master awareness skills.

Over time, attributes such as compassion and empathy can evolve from the meditation practice. With commitment to regular practice, teachers and parents can look forward to calmer, more focused and harmonious students and children! Introducing a practice of Mindful meditation is a precious gift. It can create a strong, stable personal foundation, to be built upon over a lifetime.

One of the most important outcomes of a sustained practice of meditation is that children can develop a capacity to trust themselves.

They know how to feel centered and stable in the midst of life's challenges, imperfections and joys. Grounded in self-knowledge ... elevated by the wings of the heart and the mind!

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Janet Etty-Leal is a teacher who has facilitated mindfulness training in areas as diverse as education, health, the corporate sector, sport and community wellbeing. Her primary focus and passion is to implement mindfulness teaching programs within schools. She has designed programs for students (three to 18 years of age) and teachers; working with over 50 schools and educational organisations. These programs are interactive, fun, produce immediate results and long term benefits. Simple ways to practice self-care, de-stress, and master the mind are explored. Find out more here <https://www.meditationcapsules.com/>.