

10 WAYS TO TEACH MINDFULNESS TO KIDS...

NOVEMBER IS THE PERFECT TIME TO HAVE MINDFUL MOMENTS WHILE JUMPING IN PILES OF LEAVES OR ENJOYING BRISK OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES!

Before beginning Establish your own practice. You would have trouble teaching your children ballet if you had never danced. To authentically teach mindfulness to your children, you need to practice it yourself.

Check your expectations. A core principle of mindfulness is *letting go of expectations*, and this certainly applies to teaching mindfulness to kids. Are you expecting mindfulness to eliminate tantrums? to make your active child calm? to make your house quiet? If so, you are likely to be disappointed. While feeling calm or being quiet are nice side-effects of mindfulness, they are not the ultimate purpose.

The purpose of teaching mindfulness to our children is to give them skills to develop their awareness of their inner and outer experiences, to recognize their thoughts as “just thoughts,” to understand how emotions manifest in their bodies, to recognize when their attention has wandered, and to provide tools for impulse control. It is not a panacea, and it will not completely get rid of what is, frankly, normal kid behavior, like tantrums and loudness and whining and exuberance and arguing...

Don't force it. If your kids aren't interested in your activity, drop it.

Don't make mindfulness a punishment. This shouldn't be, “You hit your sister! Go sit in the mindful corner!”

Here are some suggestions for how you can begin to introduce mindfulness to your children this Fall.

1. **Keep it simple.** Mindfulness is noticing our thoughts, what our body feels like, what our ears are hearing, and anything else that is around us and happening right now.

2. **Listen to the bell.** An easy way for children to practice mindfulness is to focus on paying attention to what they can hear. You could use a bell, a set of chimes, or a phone app that has sounds on it. Tell your children that you will make the sound, and they should listen carefully until they can no longer hear the sound (which is usually 30 seconds to a minute). I find that this exercise does have a calming effect on my children, and it's a fun way to teach them to pay attention to their surroundings.

3. **Create a mindful bedtime ritual.** Bedtime is a great time to introduce mindfulness to kids. My son loves to do a short body-scan meditation before bed — he closes his eyes, and I tell him to bring his attention to his toes, to his feet, to his legs, etc. It is a calming way to return to the body at the end of the day.

4. **Practice with a breathing buddy.** For young children, an instruction to simply “pay attention to the breath” can be hard to follow. In my 2nd-grade classroom lessons I use a “breathing buddy” exercise: each student grabs a stuffed animal, and then lies down on their

back with their buddy on their belly. They focus their attention on the rise and fall of the stuffed animal as they breathe in and out.

5. Make your walks mindful. Take your child on a leisurely walk. As you stroll through your neighborhood take notice of things you haven't seen before. Designate one minute of the walk where you are completely silent and simply pay attention to all the sounds you can hear — frogs, woodpeckers, a lawnmower. You don't even have to call it "mindfulness," but that's what it is.

6. Establish a gratitude practice. I believe gratitude is a fundamental component of mindfulness, teaching our children to appreciate the *abundance* in their lives, as opposed to focusing on all the toys and goodies that they crave. Each night at dinner or before bedtime, you can each share one thing you are thankful for. It might become one of your favorite parts of the day.

7. Try the SpiderMan meditation! Teach children to activate their "spidey-senses" and their ability to focus on all they can smell, taste, and hear in the present moment.

8. Meditate with your children. I cannot even tell you how many times my meditation sessions were interrupted by my children. They know by now what I am doing, so I will try to continue with my meditation even as they are around me. Sometimes, my daughter would sit down and join me for a few minutes.

9. Check your personal weather report. In *Sitting Still Like a Frog*, Eline Snel encourages children to "summon the weather report that best describes their feelings at the moment." Sunny, rainy, stormy, calm, windy, tsunami? This activity allows children to observe their present state without overly identifying with their emotions. They can't change the weather outside, and we can't change our emotions or feelings either. All we can change is how we relate to them.

10. Practice mindful eating. The exercise of mindfully eating a raisin or a piece of chocolate is a staple of mindfulness education, and is a great activity for kids. This is a fun way to teach children to pay attention to and savor their food, and by extension, the present moment.

Above all, remember to have fun and keep it simple. You can provide your children with many opportunities to add helpful practices to their toolkit — some of them will work for them and some won't. But it's fun to experiment!