

Cultivating Mindfulness in Children: A Parent Guide



Compiled by Elisa Gwilliam

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Introduction

The goal of ProActive Caring, a program of the Center on Aging and Disability Policy at Mount Saint Mary College, is to enhance the well-being of family caregivers of individuals with intellectual, developmental, and other disabilities.

While the focus of the program is on teaching mindfulness and providing tools that will help family members cope with the stress in their lives, strategies the program teaches



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will also benefit children for whom family members are providing care. If mindfulness helps adults to focus on the present moment, manage emotions, and increase self-acceptance, it stands to reason that mindfulness techniques might also help calm an anxious child, increase a child's ability to focus, and increase a child's self-awareness.

In this guide for parents, Elisa Gwilliam has scanned the vast literature documenting the benefits of mindfulness and mindfulness activities for children, including outstanding review articles by Courtney E. Ackerman, MSc. — *25 Fun Mindfulness Activities for Children and Teens (+ Tips!)*, and *Mindfulness in Education: 31+ Ways of Teaching Mindfulness in Schools* — and selected some activities and scripts

for teaching mindfulness that you can try at home.

We have provided links to all of the original citations within the text, with the hope that these activities and scripts will intrigue you enough that you will want to learn more.

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Mindfulness Games

5 Mindful Games for Kids — Fun with Benefits! Devised by Kellie Edwards (2014) and included in Courtney E. Ackerman's *25 Fun Mindfulness Activities for Children and Teens (+ Tips!)*.

Blowing Bubbles: Have your kids focus on taking in a deep, slow breath, and exhaling steadily to fill the bubble. Encourage them to pay close attention to the bubbles as they form, detach, and pop or float away.

Pinwheels: Use the same tactics from blowing bubbles to encourage mindful attention on the pinwheels.

Playing with Balloons: Tell your kids that the aim of this game is to keep the balloon off the ground, but have them move slowly and gently. You can tell them to pretend the balloon is very fragile if that helps.

Texture Bag: Place several small, interestingly shaped or textured objects in a bag. Have each child reach in and touch an object, one at a time, and describe what they are touching. Make sure they don't take the object out of the bag, forcing them to use only their sense of touch to explore the object.

Blindfolded Taste Tests: Use a blindfold for each child and have them experience eating a small food, like a raisin or a cranberry, as if it was their first time eating it.



Blowing Bubbles can be a fun mindfulness game for children.

Meditation Scripts

From [Mindful Moments: Mindful Listening](#), published by The Happiness Project, a non-profit organization founded by Randy Taran.

Script #1: Listening Meditation

Please get into your mindful bodies— still and quiet, sitting upright, eyes closed.

Now place all your attention on the sound you are about to hear. Listen until the sound is completely gone.

[Ring a “mindfulness bell” or have a child ring the bell. Use a bell with a sustained sound or a rainstick to encourage mindful listening.]

Raise your hand when you can no longer hear the sound.

When most or all have raised their hands, you can say, “Now slowly, mindfully, move your hand to your stomach or chest, and just feel your breathing.

[You can help students stay focused during the breathing with reminders like...]

Just breathing in ... just breathing out ...

[Ring the bell to end.]



Meditation Scripts

The Leaves on a Stream exercise was devised by Russell Harris (2009) and published by mindfulnessmuse.com, a website created by Laura K. Schenck, Ph.D., LPC.

Script #2: Leaves on a Stream

1. Sit in a comfortable position and either close your eyes or rest them gently on a fixed spot in the room.
2. [Picture] yourself sitting beside a gently flowing stream with leaves floating along the surface of the water. [Pause 10 seconds.]
3. For the next few minutes, take each thought that enters your mind and place it on a leaf... let it float by. Do this with each thought – pleasurable, painful, or neutral. Even if you have joyous or enthusiastic thoughts, place them on a leaf and let them float by.
4. If your thoughts momentarily stop, continue to watch the stream. Sooner or later, your thoughts will start up again. [Pause 20 seconds.]
5. Allow the stream to flow at its own pace. Don't try to speed it up and rush your thoughts along. You're not trying to rush the leaves along or "get rid" of your thoughts. You are allowing them to come and go at their own pace.
6. If your mind says "This is dumb," "I'm bored," or "I'm not doing this right," place those thoughts on leaves, too, and let them pass. [Pause 20 seconds.]
7. If a leaf gets stuck, allow it to hang around until it's ready to float by. If the thought comes up again, watch it float by another time. [Pause 20 seconds.]
8. If a difficult or painful feeling arises, simply acknowledge it. Say to yourself, "I notice myself having a feeling of boredom/impatience/ frustration." Place those thoughts on leaves and allow them to float along.
9. From time to time, your thoughts may hook you and distract you from being fully present in this exercise. This is normal. As soon as you realize that you have become sidetracked, gently bring your attention back to the visualization exercise.

Meditation Scripts

Meditation to Believe in Yourself (for teens) Published by mindfulnessexercises.com.

Script #3: Meditation to Believe in Yourself (for teens)

This session will guide you to relax and fully believe in yourself. Have a seat on the ground with your legs crossed, and your spine straight, or you can be sitting in a chair, just make sure you keep your posture tall and dignified during this session. If you would like to [lie] down and fully relax, that's fine, too. You can do this meditation in different positions to see what's best for you.



Let's begin by acknowledging something that has been keeping you alive since the very beginning of your life, oxygen. Breathing is the most important thing we do. We cannot go for longer than two minutes or so without breath, yet most of us do not even notice we are breathing all day.

So, let's honor our breath now by taking five deep and full breaths together in a moment, letting each breath fill you with energy, and each time you exhale, allow yourself to feel deeply relaxed.

Take five significant and purposeful breaths:

1. Fully inhale ... expanding your belly and chest as much as you can. Hold it for a moment ... And exhale ... feeling a wave of relaxation sweep over you...
2. Inhale ... filling your entire breathing system with fresh oxygen. Hold it... And exhale ... the wave of relaxation gently sweeping over you...
3. Inhale ... so that you are brimming with air. Holding it ... soaking in oxygen ... And exhale ... your body relaxes in different areas, without any effort ...
4. Fully inhale ... feeling these breaths purifying your entire body ... Exhaling ... just notice how you are feeling ...

Meditation Scripts

Script #3: Meditation to Believe in Yourself — continued

And 5 ... a beautiful breath coming in ... hold it, feeling invigorated from oxygen ... And exhale ... allowing relaxation to sweep over you ... Take note of how you feel at this very moment.



You now have an abundance of oxygen. This is how we are created to feel. Breathing deeply and fully is an expression of self-compassion. Let your breath flow naturally now, and notice how you feel. Good.

Return your focus on your spine. Is it straight, radiating confidence in yourself?

Make your posture tall and proud, lifting your head high.

If you haven't done so already, allow your eyes to gently close, and feel a nice relaxation in your eyelids when you do so. This relaxation in your eyelids is so comforting, that you let it grow and begin to fill your entire body with calmness.

Become aware of your head now. Just notice your eyes ... and ears ... what sounds can you hear? ... now notice your nose and

can you feel the air gently coming in?...

Now notice your mouth and chin. Let your awareness go down your neck, and shoulders, down each arm, and all the way to the tip of each finger.

Become aware of your lungs now, expanding, and contracting. And notice your heart beating strongly. Notice your belly and hips. All the way down each leg, to notice your feet and each toe.

Meditation Scripts

Script #3: Meditation to Believe in Yourself — continued

Take another nice deep breath in and let a smile come across your face. Bring into your mind a memory when you were laughing. It could be a memory from long ago or a funny moment that happened recently. Just let the feeling of laughter and joy rise in your body as it comes into your mind. Vividly see yourself laughing.

Now hear yourself saying, “When I laugh, I am calm and relaxed. Whenever I am in a stressful time, it is helpful for me to smile even just a little and remember that this stress shall pass on by. When I breathe deeply and focus on a time when I was laughing, I can bring the feeling of happiness and joy, back to the very moment of now.



I am an important addition to this world. I accomplish things in my own time. I am worthy and I deserve goodness. When I relax, I can focus. I don't have to worry about what I will be, because I already am.” (pause)

Vividly see yourself now accomplishing all that you want to do. See this in as much detail as you can. The more details you can add to your imagination of yourself achieving goals, the better. (pause)

Very good. Now, whenever you are ready to come back to the present moment, take a nice deep refreshing breath, feeling energized, and ready to accomplish your goals.

Open your eyes to see the beautiful world that's yours to explore.

Children's Meditation Activities

The following activities were devised by Karen Young (2017). Published by heysigmund.com and included in Ackerman's "4 Fun Mindfulness Activities and Exercises for Children."

Mindful Posing

One easy way for children to dip their toes into mindfulness is through body poses. To get your kids excited, tell them that doing fun poses can help them feel strong, brave, and happy.

Have the kids go somewhere quiet and familiar, a place they feel safe. Next, tell them to try one of the following poses:

The Superman: This pose is practiced by standing with the feet just wider than the hips, fists clenched, and arms reached out to the sky, stretching the body as tall as possible.

The Wonder Woman: This pose is struck by standing tall with legs wider than hip-width apart and hands or fists placed on the hips (Courtney Ackerman, 2020).

Ask the kids how they feel after a few rounds of trying either of these poses. You may be surprised.

Spidey-Senses

While on the subject of superheroes, this can be a related "next step" to teach kids how to stay present.

Instruct your kids to turn on their "Spidey Senses," or the super-focused senses of smell, sight, hearing, taste, and touch that Spiderman uses to keep tabs on the world around him. This will encourage them to pause and focus their attention on the present, opening their awareness to the information their senses bring in (Karen Young, 2017).

This is a classic mindfulness exercise and encourages observation and curiosity — great skills for any human to practice.

Children's Meditation Activities

Safari



The Safari exercise is a great way to help kids learn mindfulness. This activity turns an average, everyday walk into an exciting new adventure.

Tell your kids that you will be going on a safari: Their goal is to notice as many birds, bugs, creepy-crawlies, and any other animals as they can. Anything that walks, crawls, swims, or flies is of interest, and they'll need to focus all of their senses to find them, especially the little ones (Karen Young, 2017).

A similar exercise for adults is the mindfulness walk. This exercise provokes the same response in children that a mindful walk elicits in adults: A state of awareness and grounding in the present.

If you're interested in more information on how to encourage the practice of mindfulness in children and teens, you can check out the other exercises suggested by Karen Young by clicking [here](#).

Children's Meditation Activities

The Body Scan and Heartbeat exercises below were developed by Kaia Roman (2015), a frequent blogger on the wellness site Mind Body Green and author of The Joy Plan, and included in Courtney E. Ackerman's "[Mindfulness in Education: 31+ Ways of Teaching Mindfulness in Schools](#)" (see the section called "The Basics: Teaching Essential Mindfulness Practices and Skills").

Body Scan

The body scan is a key practice in mindfulness, and an easy one to teach to children.

- Have your kids lie down on their back on a comfortable surface and close their eyes;
- Then tell them to squeeze every muscle in their body as tight as they can.
- Tell them to squish their toes and feet, squeeze their hands into fists, and make their legs and arms as hard as stone;
- After a few seconds, have them release all their muscles and relax for a few minutes;
- Encourage them to think about how their body is feeling throughout the activity (Roman, 2015).

This simple exercise gets kids to be more aware of their bodies and helps them find a way to be present in the moment.

Heartbeat Exercise

Paying attention to one's heartbeat has a role in many mindfulness exercises and activities. To begin, tell your kids to jump up and down in place or do jumping jacks for one minute.

When they have finished, have them sit down and put a hand over their heart. Instruct them to close their eyes and pay attention only to their heartbeat and, perhaps, their breath as well (Roman, 2015).

This exercise teaches children to notice their heartbeat, and use it as a tool to help their focus. These skills will come in handy as they start engaging in more advanced mindfulness activities.

Children's Meditation Activities

[Hot Chocolate Breathing](#) was devised by Kate Beddow at Calmer Classrooms.

Hot Chocolate Breathing

1. Ask your children to imagine they are picking up a big mug of hot chocolate (if they don't like hot chocolate they can imagine it is hot tea, coffee, apple cider, whatever hot drink they enjoy).
2. Imagine the warmth of the drink in your hands, you can close your eyes if you like.
3. Now hold your drink up to your mouth but don't drink, just take a big smell of your hot chocolate.



4. Breathe out slowly enjoying the smell of your hot chocolate.
5. Take several big deep smells of your drink and slowly breathe out as though you are cooling your drink.
6. When you are ready imagine you are taking a sip: Is it cool enough to drink? Can you feel the warmth of the hot chocolate in your mouth? Can you feel it moving through your chest and down into your stomach?
7. You can repeat these steps as many times as you like.

It is such a simple process but by focusing on their breathing the children are calming themselves down immediately. They are also [using their imaginations](#), something which is so important for children's development and creativity.

Resources

Apps: from Courtney E. Ackerman's "[Mindfulness in Education: 31+ Ways of Teaching Mindfulness in Schools](#)" (see the section called "8 Mindfulness Games, YouTube Videos, and Apps to Support Your Teachings).

Apps

Technology offers learning and development for these practices. To ensure that you are using technology to your advantage when it comes to teaching children mindfulness, give some of these resources a try.

Mindfulness for Children — Meditations for Kids App: This is an application that can be downloaded through the Android App Store, iTunes, Google Music, or the Apple App Store. Multiple versions are available. There are a few versions that must be purchased and one

free version, which offers fewer conveniences than the paid versions. This app is centered around guided meditation. It is designed to help children relax before bed. Nature sounds and instructions start the sessions. The app can guide the user through a body scan, visualizations, and breathing exercises. Reviews for this app have been positive and the developers report that parents have



seen a reduction in ADHD symptoms by using this app.

Smiling Minds App: This is a popular application for children as young as seven. Smiling Minds app is available through the Apple app store as well as the Google Play store. It is free to download and use. This app offers similar features to the Mindfulness for Children app, including a body scan activity. There are dozens of modules with hundreds of sessions available, each customized for well-being, education, and the workplace (for adults).

Resources

For a fuller list and annotations, see [“22 Best Mindfulness Books for Kids.”](#) Compiled and annotated by Alfred James for his blog, “Pocket Mindfulness.”

Books

Ages 4-8

Crab and Whale by Mark Pallis and Christiane Kerr

I Am Peace: A Book of Mindfulness by Susan Verde

Cassidy's Present by Sue Mateer

Listening with My Heart: A Story of Kindness and Self-Compassion by Gabi Garcia

A Handful of Quiet: Happiness in Four Pebbles by Thich Nhat Hanh

Meditation Is an Open Sky: Mindfulness for Kids by Whitney Stewart

Puppy Mind by Andrew Jordan Nance

Books

Ages 8-12

Listening to My Body by Gabi Garcia

Cassidy's Present by Sue Mateer

Sitting Still Like a Frog: Mindfulness Exercises for Kids by Eline Snel

Freeing Freddie the Dream Weaver by Brent Feinberg

Just Breathe: Meditation, Mindfulness, Movement, and More by Mallika Chopra

Meditation for Kids: How to Clear Your Head and Calm Your Mind by Johanne Bernard & Laurent Dupeyrat

YouTube

[Mindfulness for Kids: What does being present mean?](#)

[3 Minutes Body Scan Meditation - Mindfulness For Kids And Adults](#)

[Mindfulness Meditation for Kids: Breathing Exercise](#)



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This booklet is published by the ProActive Caring Project. The ProActive Caring Project was created by the Center on Aging and Disability Policy at Mount Saint Mary College. It aims to teach effective coping mechanisms for short- and long-term stressful situations. The project is funded by the New York State Developmental Disabilities Planning Council (NYS DDPC) in order to provide family caregivers of individuals with intellectual, developmental, and other disabilities in New York State with expanded training and support.