

## **Mindfulness Exercises for Children (and adults too)!**

by Margaret DeLong, PsyD



There is good reason that you may have been hearing more about mindfulness lately. People have been practicing mindfulness for years. The mental health benefits for addressing stress, anxiety, depression, anger, and frustration are becoming more well-known. In addition to addressing troubling emotions, increased mindfulness increases overall life satisfaction and fosters a sense of peace.

### Gratitude Journal

Encourage your child to spend two to three minutes a day thinking about one or two new things to be grateful for each day. Make sure that the list is different every day, and keep it simple. This helps foster gratitude for the simplest, everyday things that we often take for granted. This is powerful and effective because you are helping your child to train his or her brain to see the world differently, to look for the positive. This is a quick way of learning and practicing optimism. It is important to be specific. For example, if your child is grateful for his or her best friend, encourage your child to write more than “I feel grateful for my best friend.” Instead, have your child think about something his or her best friend does for which your child is grateful. For example, “I am grateful that my best friend makes me laugh.” Being more specific helps the brain to think in the new pattern of optimism and positivity. You can do this activity along with your child, and then you have the added benefit of time together.

### Appreciate Sensory Experiences

Encourage your child to focus on the senses that we so often take for granted. When eating, ask your child to consider the taste and texture of what he or she is eating. When listening to music together, close your eyes and focus on the talent of the musician, the combinations of sounds, and the variety of sounds. Be grateful for the sounds and your ability to hear them with your ears. When stepping outside, take in the aroma of the outdoors and appreciate the different scents. Ask your child what he or she smells. Encourage your child to pay attention to the different textures that his or her hands touch, and be grateful for the ability to feel.

### Mindfulness apps

Mindfulness apps are great for teens and tweens who like to use technology. There are so many wonderful apps. Some popular ones are Mindfulness (guided meditations for children of all ages), Headspace (images may be more appealing to younger children), Buddhas Brain (older teens), Breathe2Relax (focused more on breathing), Destressify Stress Relief (older teens, focuses on stress and anxiety), Calm (guided meditation – helps with sleep), Zen Friend (guided meditations), Pacifica – Anxiety, Stress, and Depression Relief (self-explanatory!), and Insight Timer (Guided Meditations). I particularly like Stop, Breath, and Think. There are

several guided meditations that come with this app, and they are short, making it easy to incorporate into everyday living.

### Going Back in Time

Your child may believe that he or she is way too old to use playdough, or to simply draw with markers. However, these simple activities have a wonderful calming effect, and encourage us to connect with ourselves. The simple act of kneading playdough or coloring with a marker induces a sense of relaxation. This can be helpful for teens and tweens, who are facing the developmental task of becoming more independent, yet are very much still dependent in many ways. There is something special about connecting with our more childlike selves. Here is a link to making your own playdough: <http://www.momswhothink.com/preschool/playdough-recipe.html> and here is a link to some coloring books: [http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb\\_sb\\_noss\\_2?url=search-alias%3Daps&field-keywords=relaxation+coloring+books&rh=i%3Aaps%2Ck%3Arelaxation+coloring+books](http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_noss_2?url=search-alias%3Daps&field-keywords=relaxation+coloring+books&rh=i%3Aaps%2Ck%3Arelaxation+coloring+books)

### Team Gratitude

Have your child pick a friend or family member who is willing to make a commitment to sharing thoughts of gratitude for a specific amount of time, such as a week, and then switch and find a new person. Your child can text or email his or her thoughts to the other person by the end of the day. Having another person's perspective and ideas can open our minds to things to be grateful for that we may have overlooked.

### Start the Day off with Intentional Gratitude

Incorporate mindfulness into activities that your child is already doing every morning. While your child is eating breakfast, encourage your child to pay attention to the way the food tastes. If your child is drinking a warm beverage, have your child cup his or her hands around the mug and feel the warmth. Encourage your child to take in the smell of what he or she is eating and drinking. Look out the window and appreciate what you see, and that you have eyes to see it!

### Favorite Day Visualization

This is a visualization technique that your child can do anywhere, and it does not require anything but his or her memory! Encourage your child to think about one of his or her favorite days from the past. When thinking about this day, remember and visualize the experience in as much detail as possible, using the senses. Encourage your child to think about what he or she smelled, saw, felt, heard, and tasted. This is a wonderful technique to induce relaxation. It is also wonderful because the brain does not distinguish between visualization and the actual experience. In other words, the brain cannot tell the difference between living a positive experience and then recalling it later. This is an activity your child can practice for a quick boost in mood.

### Giving Thanks

Using a store-bought, hand-made, or computer generated thank you note, encourage your child to think of one person who has had a positive impact on his or her life, and write and mail a thank you note. This could be one single event, or ongoing. It could be someone from your child's past, or someone who continues to have a positive influence on your child's life. Encourage your child to think about the kind acts of others, big and small. Not only will this make the recipient happy to receive in the mail, but practicing this kind of gratitude will lift your child's spirits by remembering something special that was done for him or her. It also increases social connectedness, which tends to make us happier.

## The All Good Things Jar

In a place in your home where family members spend much time, keep a glass jar, along with blank slips of paper. When something good happens, big or small, encourage your child to write it down, along with the date, and how this made your child feel. Then when the jar is full, open the jar and read the slips during dinner.

## Engage in Random and Planned Acts of Kindness

Some ideas for random acts of kindness include paying for the person in line behind you at the coffee shop, leaving an inspirational note on a stranger's windshield, or complimenting someone while you are running errands. Point out to your child how this makes you feel, and how the recipient may feel. Encourage your child to come up with some of his or her own ideas.

Planned acts of kindness may involve outings to give to others. The possibilities are endless. Give to the food pantry, volunteer at a soup kitchen, gather gently used toys and clothes to donate, organize a toy or food drive, sing at a senior center, make cards for soldiers, make placemats for community meal delivery. Giving to others makes us more grateful for what we have, especially when we feel that we do not have much to give. Encourage your child to think about a cause that interests him or her, and began planning how to give.

## The Use of Visual Props

There are several kinds of visual props that can be used to increase mindfulness and induce relaxation. I recently came across the "Calm Glitter Jar". Watching the glitter settle has a soothing, calming effect. While watching, children can also focus on their breathing. Here is a link to making one.

<http://creativesocialworker.tumblr.com/post/49310812693/calm-bottle-aka-glitter-jar-aka-mind-jar>

Other visual props include blowing bubbles and watching them fall, lava lamps, snow globes, and simply watching snow or rain fall.

## Say Thank You Out Loud

This sounds so simple, but the impact is powerful. We are so busy going about our lives, that sometimes we do not pay enough attention when small, but kind, acts are done for us. When something is done for you, model for your child say a heartfelt "thank you" out loud. Thank the person who held the door open for you, the grocery cashier who bagged your items, the person who passed a piece of paper to you. These are acts that we are already saying "thank you" for, but engage in saying "thank you" with increased mindfulness and attention, and inflection in your voice. When appropriate, be specific – "Thank you for holding the door for me. That was so kind of you."

## Gratitude While Walking

While out for a walk for exercise, or during an errands with your child, make a conscious effort to pay attention to all of the positive information coming through your senses. Do you smell flowers, grass, leaves, aroma from a restaurant or someone's kitchen? Do you see a beautiful yard, pet, storefront? Point out to your child what you are experiencing through your senses, and encourage your child to pay attention to his or her senses. Try this especially in areas that are familiar to you and be grateful for what you may have missed before.

## Breathing Exercises

I like this because it is SO simple, and can be done anywhere. You and your child can sit in a recliner, or propped up in a bed. Place your hands folded on your stomach. Encourage your child to inhale, and watch you're the stomach and hands rise and fall with each breath. Encourage your child to imagine filling a balloon in his or her stomach with the air. Encourage your child to focus his or her mind on the breath, and to let any thoughts drift away. If your child is struggling with thoughts, it may be helpful to focus on repeating a word with each breath, such as "relax," "calm," or "peace." You can also use one of the breathing apps to help you get started.

Breathing exercises are helpful to increase mindfulness and relaxation. They have been proven effective in helping children (and adults) cope with troubling emotions, such as anxiety, anger, and depression. Encourage your child to practice breathing exercises when he or she is calm, and your child will be more likely to call upon this exercise when feeling frustrated or angry.

### Embracing the Ordinary Day

Some days are filled with simple ordinary activities and responsibilities. These ordinary days can be cherished. For example, you can point out to your child that although chores can be tedious, there is much to be grateful for. When doing laundry, we can be grateful for the washing machine, and that we have people we love in our lives whose clothes we wash. When your child is doing homework, he or she can be grateful for the supplies to complete the homework, such as the pen, paper, and computer. With increased mindfulness, we have increased appreciation for the ordinary.

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