

Mindfulness activities for children

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Combining mindfulness with fitness and coordination training is a powerful way to help a child with a fearful/anxious temperament overcome fear related avoidance and defensive behaviors (meltdowns, tantrums, hyperactivity), improve attention skills and promote fitness and coordination at the same time.

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a deceptively simple idea: it is the ability to pay full attention to the present moment and the capacity to respond to events in a thoughtful manner rather than reacting in an automatic and thoughtless way.

The capacity for mindfulness allows us to use attention skilfully to regulate our immediate emotional responses to all the different inputs that bombard our senses: body sensations (discomfort, touch, pain, changes in heart beats and breathing), sounds and sights, thoughts and feelings.

Mindfulness activities help children to learn that they can control their bodies and can experience periods of calmness when they choose to. Regular mindfulness practice also changes the way the brain works - it literally calms the fear brain so that it is less reactive to sensory inputs.

Ways to train the capacity mindfulness

The capacity for mindfulness can be trained in many different ways:

Sitting practice involves sitting still and paying attention to an aspect of present experience, such as sensations that go with breathing, sensations that arise from different parts of the body, sounds in the environment or just noticing the way in which thoughts arise in the mind.

In **mindful movement practice** attention is paid to the sensations that arise from doing slow and deliberate movements. Tai Chi and yoga are forms of mindful movement.

Mindful eating practice encourages close attention to the actions involved in eating as well as the smell and taste of the food.

Daily routines mindfulness practice encourages taking time to be mindful during everyday routines by focusing attention on the sensations and thoughts that occur as we go about the many activities that are part of our daily lives, such as washing the hands, setting the table, taking out the garbage, taking a shower.

Mindful sitting

Although young children are naturally very active, curious and impatient when they need to wait, they can from about the age of 4 quite easily be taught to enjoy taking charge of their bodies and spending time sitting quite still, quietening their busy minds and paying attention to whatever arises in the present moment.

Being able to sit still and take charge of busy minds and active bodies is a skill, and like all skills it can be taught and improves with practice. This skill is particularly important for children who have difficulty controlling their tendency to rush into action without considering the consequences as well as those in whom anxiety is expressed as fidgeting and hyperactivity.

For many children sitting quite still is a novel experience and they are really pleased and excited to discover that they actually can take charge of their bodies and not move when they put their minds to it.

A simple exercise: sitting quite still

In this activity the child and parent practice sitting quite still for 20 seconds or longer. The activity can be practiced sitting cross legged on the floor or upright on a stool with the feet resting flat on the floor. You can also do it lying flat on the back.

Start by talking about who is in charge of the actions of our bodies. Ask the question: "Who is the only one who can stop your fingers fidgeting, your feet wriggling and your eyes roving around the room?"

The answer is: *I am in charge: I am in charge of my brain, it is my brain that sends messages to the fingers, feet and eyes to do the wriggling. And because I am in charge I can decide to sit still or to wriggle and fidget.*"

The next step is to practice being in charge and sitting quite still.

"Now we are going to practice sitting quite still for 20 counts. I will count to 20 and your job is to sit very still. Nothing moves. You can close your eyes or look down at the floor just ahead of your legs."

Start to count slowly to 20, interspersing your counting with a few words of encouragement and reminders to sit quite still.

You may find it useful to stop counting for a short period of time if your child starts to fidget. I find that directing my gaze at a fidgeting child will often be enough to focus the child's attention on staying still.

Once you have reached 20, in a quiet voice tell your child how well they have done and perhaps have a short discussion about how easy or difficult it was to sit still and stop their fingers and toes from wriggling.

Children will often comment that they continued to breathe and that they could feel their hearts beating.

Sitting still with attention to breathing

One of the powerful elements of mindfulness practice is the opportunity to focus the attention on one aspect of the present experience. For adults the most commonly used technique is to focus on the breath. You bring your attention to the sensations that arise from the repeated act of breathing in and breathing out.

Asking children to pay attention to their breathing does not work – they immediately try to control their breathing, drawing air in through the mouth and sucking in their tummies at the same time.

I have found that a useful way to incorporate some attention to the rhythm of the breathing is to ask children to imagine that they have a small pond of water in their laps, and as they breathe a trickle of water flows into the pond and then out again. I suggest to the child that imagine that they can feel the trickle of water flowing into and out of the pond.

Carry over into daily routines

Take time to slow down and be still for short periods during the day. This is particularly useful at those times when children tend to rush into an activity.

I live with three very active and at times boisterous children ages 8, 6 and 4. This summer vacation I had them in my care all day for a whole week. I decided that if I was going to survive I needed to bring some order into our lives. I implemented a routine of being still and waiting your turn getting into and out of the car, standing in a row with hands behind their backs in the supermarket queue, waiting without moving while I poured mugs of water, sitting still and waiting until everyone was served at lunch time and so on.

Surprisingly the children responded without complaining and needed very little prompting to implement short periods of stillness into our routine.

A guided sitting meditation

In this guided meditation you imagine that you are a beautiful stone statue in a large park surrounded by trees and animals. The statue has a small fountain of water that flows into a small pond in its lap and the animals in the park come to take a drink from the pond.

Start by sitting on the floor with the legs crossed or on a chair with the buttocks well supported and the back up straight.

Here is the story

You are a stone statue sitting in the middle of a park with lots of trees all around you.

Remember that you are made of stone, so nothing moves as you sit here.

Of course you cannot stop breathing, so let's pretend that your lap is a small pond and a trickle of water flows into the pond and out over the edge again as you breathe in and out.

So here you are sitting quite still and the only thing that moves is the trickle of water that flows into and out of the pond in your lap as you breathe in and out.

And as you sit there imagine that you can hear the wind rustling through the trees and feel the wind as it passes over your body and the hot sun baking down on your back.

Oops what is happening now? A dove has landed on your head. Imagine that you can feel the dove walking over the top of your head, with its sharp claws scritch and scratching your head.

Another dove softly lands on your head. Imagine you can feel the weight of the two doves on your head as they walk around.

Ah, one of the doves jumps down and lands on your forearm and slowly walks down your arm to the little pond in your lap. It bends down and takes a drink of water from the pond. Can you see the dove in your mind's eye sitting on your hand? Can you feel the weight of the dove on your hand.

Now the other dove has jumped down onto your other arm. Feel it walking slowly down your arm. It jumps into the pond and starts to take a little swim. It flutters its wings and sprays water all over your arms. Can you see the dove in the pond in your mind's eye? Can you imagine the sprinkle of water on your arms?

The two doves fly away, but what are these two squirrels up to? They have jumped up onto your

knees, one on each side. Imagine that you can feel them sitting on your knees. They are not very heavy but their claws are quite sharp.

Now the squirrels are bending down to take a drink of water. Slurp, slurp, slurp. Now they have finished drinking and jump down off your legs.

Ah what is happening now? A large big black cloud has moved over the park and it starts to rain. Large cold heavy drops of rain are falling on your head and shoulders and running down your arms and back.

Can you feel the drops landing on your head? Imagine the trickles of water running down over your face.

Listen to the sound of the rain drops as they hit the water in your pond. Plip, plop, plip, plop, plop.

This a fast moving cloud - the wind has blown it right across the park and now the sun is shining again.

Can you feel the sun shining on your head and back. It feels nice and warm.

The rain has also washed away all the dust. So here you still are, a stone statue, sitting quite still the only movement is the trickle of water going into and out of your pond as you breathe.

Feel the water running into the pond as you breathe in and flowing over the edge as you breathe out again.

I am going to count to five - then you can slowly start to come alive again and stretch your arms and legs. Take your time to do this.

Eating a block of chocolate very, very slowly

My granddaughter is very fond of chocolate, but is rarely given more than one block at a time. She has learned to savour the block, taking her time to finish it. And because that one block of chocolate lasts for several minutes she is quite content with just one block.

When you hold a block of chocolate on your tongue without sucking or chewing, the flavor and smell expands to fill your mouth.

But with a bit of practice the pleasure of eating a block of chocolate can be increased by taking time to mindfully inspect it, smell it, and lick it before you put it into your mouth.

Children really enjoy the experience of mindfully and slowly eating just one block of chocolate.

A chocolate eating mindfulness activity

When you first introduce this activity, it is a good idea to encourage your child (or group) to think about and report what they are experiencing. You will be surprised and delighted by the answers you receive. On a later occasion it is good to do this activity in silence: the questions are an invitation to quietly explore and think about the experience, rather than talking about it.

Here are the instructions

Start with the child or group sitting facing you, either cross legged on the floor or on a chair. Each child is given just one block of chocolate.

Let's sit comfortably and quietly. Place your block of chocolate in the palm of one hand. I am going to count to 10 and we are all going to sit quite still.

Now we are going to pay careful attention to the piece of chocolate in our hand(s).

First take a good look at the block of chocolate. *What color is it? Is it smooth? Is it a little shiny. Are the edges a bit jagged where the block was broken off?*

Gently touch the chocolate with the tip of one finger. *Is it hard?*

Move your finger over the surface? *What do you feel? Is it still smooth or has it become a little sticky?*

Turn the block over. *Has the underside started to melt a little? Is it still shiny and smooth?*

Now smell the chocolate. *Does it smell like chocolate? Off course it does. Notice where you feel the smell. Does the smell tickle your nose a little?*

Next it is time to taste the chocolate. Lick the top of the block a few times with the tip of your tongue. *What do taste and smell? How does the tip of your tongue feel?*

At last, time to put the block of chocolate on your tongue in your mouth. Just let it rest there for a little while. *What do you notice?*

Next you can lift your tongue in your mouth and press the chocolate against the top of your mouth. *What do you notice?*

Finally, when you are ready you can slowly suck the chocolate and feel how the taste spreads across your mouth.

When you are ready you can stretch your arms up, stretch out your legs and wriggle your toes and fingers.

Lets talk about the game.

Give your child (or group) a chance to report on their experience of eating very slowly.

You can use a few questions to get them thinking about the experience. Did you have fun? Was it difficult to go so slowly?

Walking very slowly

In this activity you and your child practice walking very slowly across the room or down the passage.

Walking very slowly is a challenging task for young children, partly because they have to work against the natural walking rhythm and partly because balance is trickier.

Instructions for taking a very slow walk

Stand next to your child at one side of the room. Staying next to each other, walk as slowly as you can to the other side of the room, turn around slowly and walk back again.

Young children are often motivated by being the winner, so if your child is having difficulty remembering to walk slowly, let the slowest person be the winner.

Pay attention to sensations from the body

Once your child has the hang of walking slowly, you can start to pay attention to some of the sensations from the body as you walk.

Start by feeling the ground under your feet. Feel the heaviness of the body as the weight is carried on each foot. Notice the bottom of the foot as it is lifted off the floor, swings forwards and then is placed back on the floor and all the weight is shifted onto it.

You can also pay attention to the sensations from the knees as they alternately carry the weight of the body.

Change the walking pattern

You can vary the walking exercise by practicing lifting the leg very high with each step, taking very small steps forwards, or walking backwards.

Walking with a beanbag or book on the head

Walking with a beanbag or book on the head is another good way to encourage slow walking. You can make the task more difficult by placing a few obstacles in the way.

Stepping over the obstacles without letting the bag or book fall off the head requires attention to the task.

Walking slowly out of doors

Walking out of doors on different surfaces and slopes provides different experiences for slow mindful walking.

Try walking up and down a steep slope, up and down steps as well as puddle walking.

If you are lucky enough to live near a park or other open space which has a rugged path over rough ground, find time to take a slow walk there.

The rough ground creates a wealth of different sensations underfoot. Or you can pay special attention to where you put your foot down. What do you see and feel each time?

Mindfulness-in-action: washing hands

Washing the hands is a task we perform many times a day, and provides a wonderful opportunity for taking a few minutes to practice mindfulness-in-action. Washing hands involves many actions that can be slowed down, watched and felt with full and focused attention.

As you go through this activity you will also start to understand more about how movements are planned and coordinated.

Ideas for practicing mindful hand washing.

The first time you practice mindful hand washing with your child, you will need to guide his or her actions, and spend time talking about the experience.

After practicing the task a few times with verbal guidance, try to decrease the guidance and do at least part of the task in silence.

Things to notice as you wash your hands

Start with paying attention to getting ready for washing the hands. You may want to start by pulling up your sleeves to stop them from getting wet.

Notice how your hands move the pick up the basin plug and insert it in the plug hole.

You move your hand towards the plug, open the fingers, close the fingers around the plug, lift it up, move the hand towards the plug hole, fit the plug into the hold and let go.

Next pay the same degree of attention to turning on the cold tap and watching the water running into the basin

Take some time to watch the ripples that are created as the water forms a small pool in the basin.

You may also like to put your hand under the running water and notice the sensations you experience as the cold water trickles over your hand.

Turn and move your hand so that the water flows over your palm and your fingers, then over the back of your hand.

When there is enough water in the basin turn off the tap, slowly and with close attention to your movements and sensations that arise from the actions.

Now it is time to pick up the soap and smear it over your hands.

Rub your hands together and feel the slipperiness of the soap.

Put the soap down and take some time to smear the soap onto the back of your hands and between the fingers.

Next rinse your hands in the basin of water and lift them out.

Stop for a moment to observe the shininess of the drops of the water as they drop from your hands

You can also shake your hands or flick your fingers to move some of the water off your hands.

Finally take time to pay attention to drying your hands on a towel. Feel the texture of the towel as you move it across your skills. Notice the many movements you use to get your hands dry.

Bibliography

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