

growing up mindful

ESSENTIAL PRACTICES TO HELP
CHILDREN, TEENS, AND FAMILIES FIND
BALANCE, CALM, AND RESILIENCE

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sounds true
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introduction

Meditation is a microcosm, a model, and a mirror. The skills we practice when we sit are transferable to the rest of our lives.

SHARON SALZBERG, *Real Happiness*



Mindfulness with kids doesn't have to mean twenty minutes of quietly sitting on a meditation cushion. In my time as a teacher, therapist, and parent, I've seen hundreds of kids of all ages and backgrounds practice mindfulness, and each kid's mindfulness practice looks as different as the kids themselves.

For seven-year-old Jackie, who struggles with ADHD and divorcing parents, it means playing with stuffed animals on the floor until either she or I ring a bell, and then we both take three mindful breaths. With Alexa, a curly-haired teen who struggles with food, mindfulness means tuning in to her body's signals, so she can respond to what her body, not her emotions, tells her she needs to eat. For burly Jared, an athlete who fears panicking on the lacrosse field, it means doing a quick body scan during a game and bringing his awareness to the soles of his feet when he senses his anxiety rising. For Ellie, who first came to my office at age twelve for chronic pain related to a childhood illness, it means sitting quietly on a cushion with the meditation club at school and trying her first teen mindfulness retreat for her own spiritual development.

For a classroom teacher, mindfulness might mean offering kids a focused listening practice to do before state exams; for a therapist, it might mean having the client draw while engaging all of their senses

in the process. For me, until my son was born, it meant meditation retreats and Wednesdays at a meditation center. Now it means noticing my joys and fears about his future and the world he will enter arise as I watch him at rest or at play.

No matter how we practice it, mindfulness offers the gift of calm and clarity when difficult times arise, which they inevitably will, no matter how hard we try to protect our children. The world is not always a compassionate place; they will get hurt, if they haven't been already. But if we teach them, they can discover that their greatest challenges can be the greatest teachers. One of the gifts of mindfulness is that it transforms life's inevitable pain into wisdom and compassion. The great philosophers all speak of pain as the touchstone of spiritual growth. If we want our kids to grow and flourish rather than be stunted by life's challenges, we must offer them the tools to work with suffering.

Human beings need to experience some degree of pain in order to develop compassion, and life is guaranteed to give it to us. Contemplative practices like mindfulness allow kids to heal and soothe themselves rather than distract themselves from the pain. Kids need to get hurt, scrape their knees, bomb the occasional test, cry over their first heartbreak, and see that they can survive and grow from the experience. And when they share their experience with others, they too can alleviate suffering in the world.

Although many people associate mindfulness with Buddhism, you don't have to be Buddhist, religious, or even spiritual to practice mindfulness or appreciate how it can help us all, personally and collectively. The story of the historical Buddha is essentially the tale of an overprotected child, with high-powered helicopter parents who outsourced their parenting to keep their child protected, sheltered, and safe so that he would be prepared for a stable, predictable adulthood. It was only when the young man encountered suffering in the world that he began a lifelong quest to end suffering, which he found through wisdom and compassion practices. Jesus transformed his suffering into salvation for all humanity. Judaism seeks to transform the suffering of a people into finding meaning and healing a

wounded world. Other religions and philosophies seek to transform and transcend earthly challenges.

The psychological research on mindfulness shows that it greatly enhances what psychologists call “flourishing”—the opposite of depression, avoidance, and disengagement. Mindfulness builds emotional intelligence, boosts happiness, increases curiosity and engagement, reduces anxiety, soothes difficult emotions and trauma, and helps kids (and adults) focus, learn, and make better choices.

In our distracted world, the default reaction to stress, unpleasant experiences, or even just neutral experiences is to *check out*. Don’t like how you feel inside? Bored with where you are in the present moment? Check out with something outside of yourself—watch a video, play a game, check your Twitter feed, scroll through Instagram. A recent study found that young men would rather receive ten minutes of low-level electric shocks than spend ten minutes alone with their thoughts, without their electronics.¹ Taking drugs, cutting themselves, and acting out are other ways kids check out of their immediate experience. When we teach children to disconnect from their experience from a young age, it’s no wonder they struggle with their emotions.

Mindfulness and compassion practices go radically against this cultural conditioning by emphasizing *checking in*—with our experience, with ourselves, and with the world around us—rather than *checking out*. Over time, kids learn to tolerate their experiences, whether they are comfortable or not, and come to see that everything in the range of human experience, pleasant or unpleasant, loved or loathed, eventually passes. Over time, through the lens of mindfulness, they may even become curious about their experience, their triggers, and their automatic responses. Teaching children to check in with, rather than check out of, their experience builds emotional intelligence, leading to happier kids and families. And the benefits can go viral through communities, leading to happier classrooms, schools, hospitals, and mental health clinics—and ultimately, to a happier, more compassionate future for humanity.

In fact, some of the most exciting research in mindfulness shows that these practices are helpful not only for the kids in your life. They

can also help *you* be calmer, less burned out, less reactive, more present, and more effective as a parent or partner or professional. This is one of the most precious gifts of mindfulness practice: that what we practice ourselves, physically, emotionally, spiritually, personally, and professionally, helps others.

About This Book

In working with young people over the last few decades, I've discovered that mindfulness can be learned by anyone, from young children with significant disabilities to rebellious adolescents. I have seen that they all can practice and all can benefit from even a small dose of mindfulness. That's why this book contains more than seventy practices—so that you can find at least a few that work for you and your kids. Each one has been road-tested by me, other parents, therapists, teachers, and, most importantly, by actual kids. What's more, you don't have to be an expert. Simple practices can be shared with kids by anyone with an authentic and openhearted intention.

The last thing I want to do is to make mindfulness another chore or something to add to the overbooked lives of families and teachers. For that reason, chapter 11 includes dozens of practices that take less than a minute. This book also includes ways to bring mindfulness to what you and your kids are already doing, including eating, walking, playing sports, making art, and even using technology.

This book does not offer a curriculum, but rather a set of building blocks and instructions for sharing mindfulness with kids at their pace, for their minds. When I was a kid, my favorite toy was LEGO, because I could get a set and build it according to the instructions or, if I wanted, make my own creation from the same blocks. My hope is that you will play with the practices in this book to create something together with your kids.

Part I covers the basics of mindfulness, while touching on the theory, research, and science behind it. Whether mindfulness is brand-new to you or a subject you already know a great deal about, having a solid foundation in why mindfulness matters is important when we

share mindfulness with kids or with other adults. Chapter 3 covers practices for you, the adult, because sharing mindfulness starts with your own practice.

Part II delves into a variety of practices, and offers adaptations for the different kinds of kids in the world and the different places they go—family, school, and elsewhere. We will talk about classroom adaptations, group adaptations, and age and learning-style adaptations.

Part III discusses teaching mindfulness practices in formal settings, getting kids engaged, and ways to create a culture of mindfulness among adults in your community.

The basic mindfulness practices shared in this book have evolved over thousands of years. Until recently, meditation practices were rarely practiced by laypeople, even in places we tend to associate with meditation. Many of the techniques in this book are adaptations of existing practices, often developed by other leaders in mindfulness education, including Susan Kaiser Greenland, Amy Saltzman, Jon Kabat-Zinn, and Thich Nhat Hanh. Some practices originate in spiritual traditions, but all of the practices in this book are secular. Throughout, I have tried to acknowledge the source of the practice as I know it, but this is a challenge in what remains a largely oral tradition.

It is also my intention that this book not be an explanation, but an exploration of mindfulness. I invite you to experience the transformative power of mindfulness for yourself and for the kids in your life. Learn or deepen your knowledge of the practices, and share the ones that resonate with you. Suspend judgment and open your mind and heart, letting go of preconceptions and prejudgments about some of the activities, and give them a try, doing the practices as you read. Let this book be a lab manual, and you both the guinea pig and the scientist.

Experiment with all the practices in this book, even if they don't seem like your thing. Some will resonate for you; some won't. I encourage you to be a little bit brave and a little bit vulnerable, and to let go of the self-consciousness we adults have developed. Being vulnerable and taking risks is what we ask our children to do on a regular basis—at the dinner table when we ask them to try a new vegetable, in the classroom when we teach them a new math concept, or in the

therapy office when we ask them to share deeply personal stories. To connect authentically with them, we need to experience and model the same vulnerability we ask of them. If we expect our children to be open to new experiences, it's only fair that we are too. So move your body in new ways to uncover new awareness, color if you've not picked up a crayon in decades, sing even if you hate the sound of your voice, and create something new to share. Most importantly, *have fun*.

As you read and try the practices, allow yourself to be surprised by what resonates for you and what doesn't. Try a little bit of everything your first time through this book, then return to pick out what works for you and your kids.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese monk known, perhaps more than anyone else, for bringing mindfulness to the West, uses the metaphor of planting seeds when he speaks about teaching young people mindfulness and compassion practices. A small seed of mindfulness can be planted in anyone, and it is capable of growing and blossoming into a mindful, caring life. This book will help you not only plant the seeds, but also create the conditions under which young people can flourish and bloom—physically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually.



PART I

understanding mindfulness

CHAPTER 1

stress and the american kid

Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look
around once in a while, you could miss it.

FERRIS BUELLER, in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*



In 2014, the American Psychological Association did a study of stress in American life. They found that the most stressed group in America are teenagers. If you've spent time with a teenager lately, they could have told you that—or maybe they already did.

Figure 1 shows a Venn diagram making the rounds online. “The Student Paradox” is funny, to be sure, but it's all too relatable for most teens. And this diagram doesn't include other issues, such as caring for a sick parent, dealing with a brother in prison, working an extra job to help keep your parents' house out of foreclosure, and other stresses that many teens are under.

It's not just teens who are under stress. Whether I am speaking to kids in the inner city or students on manicured university campuses, the concerns I hear are the same. Kids of all ages worry about whether they will have a future, given the wars and environmental devastation affecting the planet. They worry about the economy, violence, poverty, and prejudice. It's heartbreaking to hear a slender seven-year-old girl

in the suburbs tell me she is too fat to have friends, or an eleven-year-old boy in the city tell me the only way he will live past twenty is if he's in jail. No matter what background a kid is from, suffering and fear are universal.

Not only are kids under more stress, but they also have fewer skills for coping with it. Overburdened parents and teachers don't know how to help; schools are cutting life skills programs to make room for high-stakes testing. Yet if young people don't learn to manage stress by the time they hit their teenage years, they are hardly likely to learn later. Automatic responses to stress are learned at an early age and reinforced by life experiences. Stress, and kids' responses to it, are contagious, spreading from kid to kid and through schools and families like this year's flu, leading to long- and short-term negative effects on physical health, mental health, and learning. The good news is that mindfulness and compassion are contagious as well.

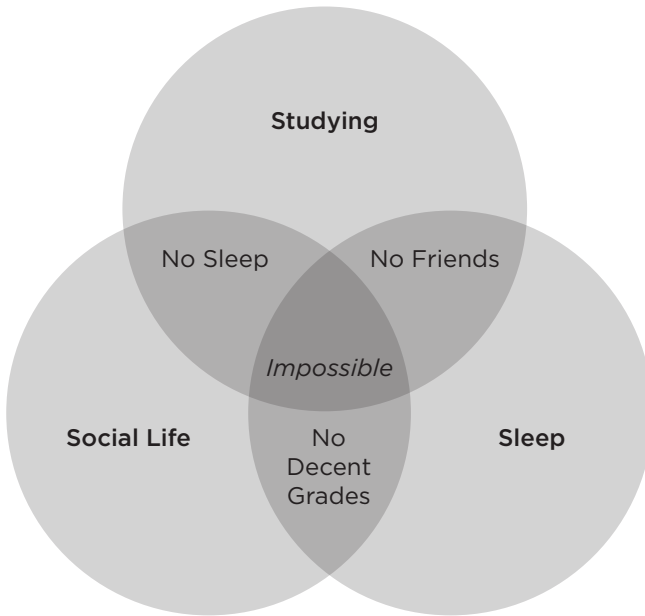


FIGURE 1 The Student Paradox: pick two

How We Usually Respond to Stress

Fundamentally, stress is a response to fear, real or perceived. Humans are hardwired to respond to fear in just a few ways. Our children facing SATs today react in much the same way that our ancestors did when facing a saber-toothed cat. Unfortunately, we haven't evolved that much.

The following exercise, adapted from one taught by Mindful Self-Compassion teachers Christopher Germer and Kristin Neff, demonstrates two of the body's built-in responses to stress.



Close your eyes and hold your hands in front of you, making tight fists. As you do, ask yourself these questions:

- What do you notice in your body? In your mind?
- What kinds of emotions are you feeling?
- What kinds of thoughts are you having?
- When during the day or during the week do you tend to feel this way?
- How does your breath feel right now?
- How open or closed do you feel?
- How energetic do you feel?
- How would it be to feel like this all of the time?

Now release your fists and drop your hands. Slump over and slouch, your head falling toward your chest.

- What do you notice in your body? In your mind?
- What kinds of emotions are you feeling?
- What kinds of thoughts are you having?
- When during the day or during the week do you tend to feel this way?
- How does your breath feel right now?
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