TEACHING MINDFULNESS TO CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Mindfulness, which features focused awareness training, is increasing in popularity among mental health professionals. Mindfulness training emphasizes focused attention to internal and external experiences in the present moment of time, without judgment. While mindfulness interventions have been used in treatments for stress, chronic pain, anxiety, depression, borderline personality disorder, eating disorders, and addiction, researchers suggest that this type of training also can be beneficial in everyday life.

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Most research and writing on mindfulness training has been about adults. In this paper, the authors argue for adapting mindfulness techniques for work with children. The authors propose that training in mindfulness has the potential to enhance children's attention and focus, and improve memory, self-acceptance, self-management skills, and self-understanding. Specific exercises to teach children to be mindful are presented in progression, beginning with awareness of the external environment, then awareness of the self in the environment, awareness of the body, and finally, mindfulness meditation exercises that feature attending to cognitive processes. Suggestions are made for incorporating mindfulness into school curricula.

INTRODUCTION

Whatever you are doing, ask yourself, "What's the state of my mind?"
– Dalai Lama, 1999

Have you ever arrived at work, only to realize that you do not remember any scenery or landmarks during your drive? At the end of your shower, have you ever realized that you are not sure whether you washed your hair? Or more important, think back to your last conversation with a loved one: Do you remember the details of what you talked about? For many, these examples highlight the fact that we live much of our days in automatic-pilot mode. We have our routines at home and at work, and we go through the motions, not truly paying attention to what we are doing. Our minds wander elsewhere, and we end up eating without tasting, looking without seeing, and talking without knowing what we are saying.

Human beings are blessed with the ability to think about the past, present, and future. We spend time thinking about the past: yesterday's meeting at work, last week's argument with a friend, or even more fondly about a happy memory from years ago. We also spend time thinking about the future: worrying about tomorrow's presentation, making a mental list of what to buy at the grocery store tonight, or, more favorably, thinking about an upcoming vacation or an evening out with friends. Yet, many of us do not spend a significant amount of time thinking about the present.

Stop for a moment and reflect on the following questions: Have you been paying attention to the room you are in? What is the temperature? How does it smell? What are you sitting on? Is it comfortable? And your body: Do you have any aches or pains? Are your muscles tight or relaxed? Is your stomach pleasantly full or is it painfully empty? There are many things going on right now, such as stimuli surrounding you in your immediate environment, sensations in your body, and thoughts and feelings in your mind of which you probably were not consciously aware.

Adults are not the only ones having this experience. Children can also move through their days on automatic pilot. It is true that children can be more focused on the present than adults. They focus intently on a game or an enjoyable activity with friends. They feel their emotions immediately, reacting to a current situation, even if they have

difficulty identifying or verbalizing those feelings. However, children also live in a world of being told what to do: what time to wake up, what time to go to school, how to do each activity while at school, and so on. Their lack of agency may lead to going through the motions of their daily tasks without conscious awareness of what they are doing. Ask a child what he or she ate for dinner last night. You may be surprised that they may not remember. This is not simply owing to a poor memory, but more likely that they were not paying attention at the time. They ate what was put in front of them, perhaps before rushing off to watch a favorite television show, or just after arriving home from soccer practice.

What is Mindfulness?

If you want to be happy, be.
– Henry David Thoreau

We can teach children to begin to pay attention to those things in the present moment that they never noticed before through a process called mindfulness. Mindfulness is defined as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experiences moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145). The first part of this definition expresses the idea that mindfulness is an active process; it involves active attention which leads to awareness. The second part of the definition highlights that it regards the present, rather than the past or future. The third part emphasizes that the attention is nonjudgmental and accepting, without thinking that the experience of the present moment is good or bad, right or wrong, important or not. It involves attending to the external environment such as sights, sounds, and smells, as well as to internal bodily sensations, thoughts, and feelings. In practicing mindfulness, one becomes aware of the current internal and external experiences, observes them carefully, accepts them, and allows them to be let go of in order to attend to another present moment experience.

Origins of Mindfulness

The only journey is the journey within.
– Rainer Maria Rilke

Mindfulness has its origins in the Buddhist tradition, through Eastern practices of meditation. It is often learned and practiced through meditation exercises. However, mindfulness should not be confused with meditation. The goal is not to achieve a higher state of consciousness or to distance oneself from the present experience, but rather to have an increased awareness of the present moment. To highlight with an example, one form of meditation is meditation using a mantra, in which the focus is to be aware of the chanting of a syllable or phrase, and only on the chanting (LeShan, 1974). In contrast, the focus of a mindfulness meditation is to be aware of and observe the constantly changing internal and external stimuli (Baer, 2003). Mindfulness also

should not be confused with relaxation (Dimidjian & Linehan, 2003). Again, they are related in that mindfulness may result in a more relaxed physical and mental state. However, the goal of mindfulness is not to become more relaxed, but to be aware of and accepting of whatever state the body and mind are in. Mindfulness can be practiced through meditation, but unlike these other techniques, mindfulness can be practiced through mindful eating, mindful driving, mindful walking, or any experience in our lives (Dimidjian & Linehan, 2003).

How Can Mindfulness Help?

> Understanding that disturbing emotions are destroyed by special insight with calm abiding.
>
> - Dalai Lama, 1999

Mindfulness is being used to treat many physical and psychological problems, including stress, anxiety, depression, borderline personality disorder, chronic pain, addiction, and eating disorders. See Baer (2003) for a superb review of the literature on the use of mindfulness as a clinical intervention and a description of the applications of mindfulness to mental heath problems.

Stress and Chronic Pain

One of the earlier and most frequently cited uses for mindfulness is stress reduction, through Jon Kabat-Zinn's program, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). This program is for people referred for stress-related disorders and chronic pain. It involves an eight-week course conducted in groups, focused on practicing mindfulness skills and mindfulness meditations, as well as discussion of stress and coping strategies. Researchers have adapted Kabat-Zinn's MBSR methodology for treating a variety of emotional problems, among which are borderline personality disorder, anxiety and depressions, eating disorders, and substance abuse.

Borderline Personality Disorder

Mindfulness training is a central component of Marsha Linehan's Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) for borderline personality disorders. (Linehan, 1993a; 1993b). Mindfulness training is one of the core components taught first in this program, honing the issue of shifting mood and affect modulation to promote acceptance and change. In DBT, "clients are encouraged to accept themselves, their histories, and their current situations exactly as they are" (Baer, 2003, p. 127). Linehan (1993, a & b), in adapting the program from Kabat-Zinn to her borderline populations, elaborates on the three "what" skills of mindfulness as observing, describing, and participating, and the "how" skills of mindfulness which stress being nonjudgmental and developing effective coping skills.

Anxiety

Mindfulness training also has been used successfully to treat anxiety disorders. Mov-

ing beyond mindfulness as stress reduction training, Roemer and Orsillo (2002) posit a conceptual connection between anxiety and the utility of mindfulness to alleviate such symptoms. They view anxiety symptoms as forms of experiential avoidance in that the person is not in contact with bodily sensations, thoughts, emotions, and memories. The first way in which mindfulness can help is by reducing this experiential avoidance. The way most people think about anxiety is as a chronic focus on worries about the future, without acknowledging the reality of the present. An anxious person worries about what *might h*appen in the future, rather than focusing on what *is* happening in the present. Even a non-anxious person, during the process of worrying, is engaged in future-oriented thinking, talking to self, and focus on anticipated events (Borkovec, 2002). Mindfulness provides an alternative focus as attention is drawn to the present moment, thus breaking the maladaptive cycle of worrying (Mennin, Heimberg, Turk, & Fresco, 2002; Roemer & Orsillo, 2002).

Mindfulness also may be useful for other characteristics of anxiety. In addition to the focus on the future, individuals with anxiety by self report were found to have reported higher levels of intensity of emotional experience than control individuals, thus identifying a marked need to regulate and control their negative emotional experiences—a task that mindfulness practice can help them achieve (Mennin, Heimberg, Turk, & Fresco, 2002). Anxiety also is marked by displayed difficulties in the ability to identify, describe, and accept emotional experience and deficits in ability to soothe themselves while experiencing negative emotions (Mennin, Heimberg, Turk, & Fresco, 2002). Through mindfulness, the anxious person learns to identify emotions, be aware of them, and accept them, whether they are positive or negative.

It should be said that no universal agreement exists regarding the utility of mindfulness practice as an intervention for anxiety, and thus it should be used with some caution. Wells (2002) argues that "mindfulness meditation does not contain information that can lead to unambiguous disconfirmation of erroneous beliefs about worry" (p. 95). Thus, he cautions that rather than using mindfulness alone, mindfulness might be better used in conjunction with cognitive-behavioral techniques to address the irrational thoughts. Roemer and Orsillo (2002), in further studies, integrate mindfulness training in acceptance-based treatment with cognitive-behavioral treatments for anxiety.

Depression

Mindfulness has also been used in the treatment of depression and the prevention of depression relapse (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). Two characteristics of depression discussed in the literature can be addressed through mindfulness: despairing thoughts and lack of focus on the self (Baer, 2003). Mindfulness training may enable depressed individuals to notice their despairing, hopeless thoughts and redirect attention to other aspects of the present moment, such as breathing, walking, or environmental stimuli. Mindfulness also has been shown to increase depressed patients' recall of autobiographical information, including memories of past experiences, thoughts, and feelings—which can be greatly lacking in depressed individuals—by drawing attention to the self and surroundings. Clinical research studies by Segal, Williams, and Teasdale (2002) stress the importance of the therapist actively engaging in mindful-

ness practice himself/herself while conducting mindfulness training with groups of depressed clients.

Eating Disorders and Addiction

Eating disorders and addiction are similar to each other in that the individual is focused on a persistent thought of future actions: when he or she will eat or not eat in the future, fear of gaining weight, or when there will be an opportunity for the next high. There are also similarities in the experiences of self-criticism: in individuals feeling terrible about themselves for binging and purging or for using the drug, hating their bodies, hating their life circumstances, and experiencing a strong sense of shame. Mindfulness can be useful for relapse prevention by shifting the focus to the present moment rather than to future actions, and through self-acceptance of whatever the present feeling or thought is without judgment and criticism (Baer, 2003). The individual can learn to note the urge, accept it, and let it go without acting on it. In addition, in the case of eating disorders, the "self-observation skills developed through mindfulness training might lead to improved recognition of satiety cues in binge eaters, as well as increased ability to observe urges to binge without yielding to them" (Baer, 2003, p. 129). One author of this paper discusses the useful of awareness training for embodiment using a Gestalt tracking process akin to mindfulness with eating-disordered women (Fodor, 1996).

The Benefits of Mindfulness

> Afflictive emotions—our jealousy, anger, hatred, fear—can be put to an end when you realize that these emotions are only temporary, that they always pass on like clouds in the sky.
>
> – Dalai Lama, 1999

How does mindfulness have a beneficial effect on these clinical problems? It appears that the meditator, by engaging in a process of enhancing awareness, is undergoing a self-management, self-acceptance, exposure, and cognitive therapy rolled into one experience.

Cognitive Change

My mental state, I think, is quite peaceful, quite calm. If there's some sad news, some heart-breaking news that comes, for a short moment, I am very disturbed,
very sad, but then it goes. So like an ocean, the waves come and go, come and go.

– Dalai Lama, 1999

Mindfulness actually may lead to changes in thought patterns and the attitude of one's thoughts: cognitive change. Kabat-Zinn (1990) suggests that this occurs through the practice of nonjudgmental thinking as well as the understanding that thoughts are not necessarily the reality or the truth. For example, "feeling afraid does not necessarily mean that danger is imminent, and thinking 'I am a failure' does not make it true"

(Baer, 2003). When this is realized and accepted, thinking changes.

Self-Management

Mindfulness practice, sitting and attending to one's thought, is in itself a self-management intervention. Again, the first stage in change is self-awareness of a problem or pattern. For example, the anxious person can sit and become aware of what they are worrying about, without the pressure to change. The bulimic person or substance abuser becomes aware of their urges, as well as the desire for the food, substance, or fix that will facilitate avoidance. By sitting and using focused awareness on what's happening at the moment the urges emerge; the triggers and stressors may also come into awareness and facilitate more active problem solving.

Relaxation

As stated earlier, mindfulness is not the equivalent of relaxation, nor is relaxation the goal. However, by meditating, a person may become more relaxed. Through mindfulness practice, there is a slowing of the racing thoughts simply by practicing to take time and note and observe each thought. There is often a decrease in muscle tension, a slowing of the breathing, and a slowing of heart rate.

Acceptance

> Sitting quietly, doing nothing,
> Spring comes, and the grass grows by itself
> – Alan Watts, 1957, p. 133.

A component of mindfulness training is acceptance of where one is. Gestalt therapy, which has many features in common with mindfulness training, posits a paradoxical theory of change. By fully owning and accepting where one is, change does occur (Beisser, 1970). In work with medical and clinical populations, mindfulness training includes an acceptance of pain, worries, thoughts, and emotions without trying to escape, avoid, or change them. By being willing to stay with the pain and negative emotions, researchers suggest, individuals may benefit through a greater sense of self-acceptance (Baer, 2003).

Research on Other Benefits of Mindfulness

Brown and Ryan (2003) created the Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) as an operational measure of mindfulness. It includes items such as:

- "I break or spill things because of carelessness, not paying attention, or thinking of something else."
- "I find it difficult to stay focused on what's happening in the present."
- "I forget a person's name almost as soon as I've been told it for the first time."
- "I do jobs or tasks automatically, without being aware of what I'm doing."

They found that the higher MAAS scores were associated with "higher pleasant

affect, positive affectivity, vitality, life satisfaction, self-esteem, optimism, and self-actualization," as well as with "higher autonomy, competence, and relatedness" (Brown & Ryan, 2003, p. 832). Clearly these positive states of mind enhance life satisfaction, as opposed to negative states of mind, which are associated with emotional disorders.

Mindfulness for Children

Most of the literature on mindfulness focuses on adults. Very little research and writing have been done on the use of mindfulness with children. However, work with children would appear to be a natural application. While at the beginning of this paper, we described children's tendency to function on automatic pilot in their daily lives, it is also true that children are often much closer to experiences of mindfulness than adults. The younger the child, the more evident this is—it can be seen in a baby's first experience with food. He or she looks at it, touches it, feels it against his/her face, and tastes it. An infant and toddler experience everything for the first time, the way one strives for the "beginner's mind" in mindfulness practice: every experience is fresh. Young children live moment to moment. They react emotionally in response to an immediate circumstance, and then they just as quickly let it go and move on to the next experience. You have observed this in a child crying, perhaps even throwing a tantrum, and then simply ceasing, standing up, and moving to engage in play with a toy. It is easier for children to let go of the past. You might notice this in the way a young child falls quickly into a deep sleep without thinking about the day's activities or other worries.

Generally, researchers report that people seem to have strong interest in and really like practicing mindfulness. Furthermore, mindfulness training programs are reported to have high completion rates (Baer, 2003). We believe that children, like adults, will like learning to be mindful, and will benefit from it as well.

We believe that in applying mindfulness techniques to children, children will benefit in ways similar to adults. Stress, anxiety, depression, and eating disorders have high prevalence in children and adolescents, and mindfulness techniques, adapted for children with these symptoms, seem indicated for these populations.

There are additional specific potential benefits relevant to children. First, mindfulness may improve memory. As previously mentioned, children often forget things simply because they are not paying attention. Children will remember things better if they are: aware of them, attending to them, and focused, which may help with both learning and sports (Fontana & Slack, 1997). It may be useful for children with concentration problems and those with ADHD to use mindfulness as a practice to improve their attention and focus. Mindfulness training may also be useful for children who are aggressive, as it promotes self-control and self-management. Furthermore, children, by becoming more self aware and by focusing on themselves, will learn how their mind works and about their thinking process, promoting greater self-understanding of their own experiences of the world, which they do not typically experience (Fontana & Slack, 1997).

Introducing Mindfulness Practice to Children

Don't worry about the world coming to an end today,
it's already tomorrow in Australia.
- Charles Schulz (in *Zen Paths to Laughter*)

Mindfulness practice for children is not dramatically different from that for adults. Exercises can be adapted to fit different ages and abilities. We should be aware of what the experience of a child is like. Children's thinking is more concrete; therefore, activities should be clear, concrete, and descriptive in their instructions. But children are also imaginative and are able to use their creativity and imagination. They enjoy movies, cartoons, and fantasy books. The use of humor also helps.

In teaching mindfulness to children, it is important to start with success, so starting simply is better. For example, while an adult might start trying to meditate for 15 minutes, it would be more appropriate for a child to start with five minutes. The exercises presented herein also will be discussed in a progression that will likely be helpful to most children: beginning with the more concrete attention to the external environment, then moving to the experience of the body, and finally, introducing attention to the mind and meditation exercises.

Another important note about teaching mindfulness to children is that the person teaching should be comfortable with the exercises prior to the teaching, and have practiced mindfulness in general. We must practice what we teach. As Kabat-Zinn (2003) states, mindfulness "cannot be taught to others in an authentic way without the instructor's practicing it in his or her own life" (p.149). It is not something you learn about at a seminar or read about and then pass along.

Some children may have difficulty with meditation and not take to it at first, but they should be encouraged to try, perhaps with different forms of meditation or shorter lengths of time. Many children report enjoying it.

To begin, meditation should be discussed with the children. They may have questions about it, or misperceptions. Gunaratana (1991) presents a list of myths about meditation, discussing the truth about each one. One myth that children may believe about meditation is that it is for saints and holy men. While saints and holy men, particularly in some religions, practice meditation, a lot of people meditate. They may believe that meditation means going into a trance. Rather than going into a trance, mindfulness meditation actually involves being highly aware of the present sensations, thoughts, and feelings. Children may also have the misperception that meditation is just used for relaxation. It is true that meditation produces a physiological state of deep relaxation, with slower metabolic rate and heartbeat (LeShan, 1974). But meditation is much more than relaxation, as it involves focus and awareness.

One specific caution in teaching mindfulness to children is that for some, there may be a heightened experience of anxiety as a result of the exercises. Some individuals report feeling more anxious after practicing meditation. This may happen because people are uncomfortable paying attention to themselves. Additionally, if the thoughts and sensations they are observing are related to worries and fears, they may feel increased

anxiety by recognizing them (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). For a child who has this sort of negative response to mindfulness, encourage him or her to keep trying and, at the same time, try to determine what part of the experience is causing the anxiety. It may be that the child does not like observing negative thoughts. In this case, it will help to practice letting go. Another possibility is that the child feels he or she cannot let go and has a feeling of being tightly wound to "hold it together," and a fear that letting go would increase anxiety. In this case, it will be helpful to encourage using mindfulness to increase focus and control on the present moment. If, after practice, the child still has a very negative experience, exercises such as meditation may not be right for that child. However, the activities such as awareness of the environment and the raisin meditation (described below) may still be appropriate. As in many interventions, customizing the right techniques and applications for each individual is important.

Mindfulness of the Environment

A way to introduce the concept of mindfulness to children is through directing their attention to things in their environment. The following exercises can draw children's attention to their surroundings, and illuminate the need for mindfulness by revealing what they are and are not aware of.

Awareness of an Object

This first exercise is adapted from an activity presented in Fontana and Slack's book, *Teaching Meditation to Children* (1997):

> Ask the child to select an object to draw. Examples of objects might be a telephone, a shoe, scissors, or a clock. Tell the child to draw a picture of their object. Remind them that the activity is not focused on their ability to draw, as this could cause frustration in some children, and to simply do the best job they can. Then the child should spend time looking at the actual object, paying attention to smaller and smaller details. If this exercise is done in school or some other setting, it may be a homework assignment to spend time looking at the object. Then the child should draw the object again. Compare the drawings, and ask the child to identify the details missing from the first drawing that they remembered in the second. In most cases, the second drawing will be more accurate and life-like. Ask the child what it was like to spend time really looking at the object that might otherwise have been something they never took time to notice.

Awareness of Self in the Environment

The second step in mindfulness training with children is to guide their awareness towards their own experience in the environment; in other words, to focus on the attention they are paying (or not paying) to themselves. You want to help the child to pay attention to both the environment and his or her actions, rather than moving through the day like a robot. These exercises should be fun. They could be presented by telling

the child that he or she is a camera whose lens is focusing on all the details about his or her own experience, and playing it back as it is happening. Or, the child could pretend to be a newspaper reporter and write down in a journal their experience of their day.

In keeping a journal, ask the child to write down, step by step, what they do in the morning when they wake up. If the child is younger, he or she may tell you to write it down for them. Then, pay attention each morning, repeating the exercise and adding to what they had noted the previous day. For example, the first morning, the child may report that he or she woke up, went to the bathroom, got dressed, had breakfast, and went to school. The second day, he or she may add steps such as washing his/her face, combing hair, brushing teeth, and packing lunch. The third day, the child may add details of what was eaten for breakfast and smaller steps, such as pouring the cereal. By the fifth day, the child should aim to include the smallest steps and details, such as opening his/her eyes, sitting up and putting feet on the cold floor, walking eight steps down the hallway, entering the bathroom, feeling the difference in flooring underfoot, closing the door, going to the bathroom, flushing, turning on the water at the sink, feeling the warm water under his/her hands, and so on. If child has difficulty at any point, encourage him or her by asking what the very next step is, and cue attention to details by asking how something feels or smells.

Mindfulness of the Body

> In walking, standing, sitting, or lying down he understands that he is doing, so that, however his body is engaged, he understands it just as it is. In setting out or returning, in looking before or around, in bending or stretch ing his arm. he acts with clear awareness.…
>
> – Alan Watts [1957, p. 61]

After the child has started to be more aware of the environment, the next step is to pay attention to their own experience, beginning with their body. This is important, as enhanced body awareness leads to fuller self-awareness.

Attending the Senses: The raisin meditation

This next exercise is actually the first meditation practiced by participants in Kabat-Zinn's program. It is simple to do, and does not even require adaptation in order for it to be appropriate for children. It involves being aware of an object in the environment—in this case, a raisin—and then being aware of one's own experience of that object. It is an excellent early practice with mindfulness, with clear instructions focused on awareness and nonjudgmental experience. It can be done with an individual child, or with a large group or class. Each child should be provided with three raisins. The exercise could be practiced again with another small food such as popcorn, but should not be repeated too much at the risk of becoming repetitive and uninteresting to the child, thus losing the purpose of the mindfulness.

This meditation can best be done by reading aloud to the children the following script in a slow, calm voice:

> Bring your attention to the raisin, observing it carefully as if you had never seen one before. Pick up one raisin and feel its texture between your fingers and notice its colors. Be aware of any thoughts you might be having about the raisin. Note any thoughts or feelings of liking or disliking raisins if they come up while you are looking at it. Then lift the raisin to your nose and smell it for a while and finally, with awareness, bring it to your lips, being aware of the arm moving the hand to position it correctly and of your mouth salivating as the mind and body anticipate eating. Take the raisin into your mouth and chew it slowly, experiencing the actual taste of the raisin. Hold it in your mouth. When you feel ready to swallow, watch the impulse to swallow as it comes up, so that even that is experienced consciously. When you are ready, pick up the second raisin and repeat this process, with a new raisin, as if it is now the first raisin you have ever seen [Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 27].

Awareness of Movement

> The quieter you become, the more you can hear.
> –Ram Doss

This exercise brings the attention to the child's own body as children interact with the environment. The exercise can be done easily with a group of children together. However, it is important that it be done in a room large enough for children to move around without being obstructed by many objects or being too crowded, so that they may remain focused on their own experience. Children may also enjoy doing this with music playing in the background.

Tell the children to move around the room as softly as they can, as if walking on eggshells or on a delicate glass floor. Tell them to be aware of each movement they make—feeling the thigh muscle lift the leg and move it to next position, feeling the foot coming off the floor and setting it back down, feeling their hands and arms in space. They might move faster or more slowly at times. They might focus on their left leg for a few steps, then focus on the right leg. Tell them that if their thoughts begin to wander away from their body and their experience moving, they should note what they were thinking about, and return their attention to a part of their body (adapted from Fontana & Slack, 1997).

Meditation on the Breath

The most basic body-based meditation is breath counting (Lehman 1974; Gunaratana, 1991; Fontana & Slack 1997; Kabat-Zinn 1990). Meditation on the breath is fundamental to mindfulness: training to enhance the focus on the present moment of experience. When the exercise is done properly, the child is aware only of the present, as the focus is on the current breath rather than the one before it or the next one coming. The exercise also has the effect of calming the mind and any anxiety in the body

that may be related to short, shallow breathing (Fontana & Slack, 1997).

This exercise should be introduced first by demonstrating breathing. For young children, this basic, natural function may be something to which they never paid attention before. Begin with noting how cool air enters the nose, then warm air is exhaled. There should be no attempt to hold the breath, push it out, or change the natural rhythm—just to be aware. Using counting helps remind the child to stay focused on the breathing, avoiding other distracting thoughts. Counting can be done in different ways. For most children, it will be helpful to count "one" as they inhale, and "one" as they exhale, then "two" inhale, "two" exhale, and so on, up to five. Then they should start back at "one." If they find it difficult to maintain their focus, they may repeat the number, counting "one, one, one, one" as they inhale, and the same as they exhale. Again, they should be reminded not to force the breath, but to follow its natural rhythm. Remind the child that in spite of his or her efforts to stay focused on breathing, his/her mind may wander away to places he/she has been, an activity once shared with a friend, a favorite book, or other thoughts. As the child becomes aware that the mind is no longer focused on the breath, he/she should simply note the thought and return to counting the breath, beginning with "one."

Children may be surprised at how much practice it takes to remain focused on their breath. Remember to begin with a short time period, and gradually increase it once the child has experienced success. If frustrated, children should be encouraged to continue trying. Remind them not to judge the distracting thoughts and feelings. Also, encourage children to use this focus on breathing in their daily life, particularly when they are feeling anxious, overwhelmed, or angry, but also before starting homework or before going to sleep.

Mindfulness Meditation

> We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts.
> With our thoughts we make the world.
>
> – Kornfield [1996].

Mindfulness—the focused awareness on the thinking process—is taught in many ways. Two applications that might be helpful to children are the focus on the process of thinking in the present moment of experience, and the meditation of the bubble, which highlights the non-engagement of our thoughts. (See LeShan, 1974, for a fuller description of such meditations.) Like all meditations, mindfulness meditation involves an "interest or fascination with the central object of meditation" that keeps the mind involved. However, "in mindfulness, this same quality of interest keeps the mind open, engaged with shifting objects of awareness, with the same fascination that a baby exhibits with a new toy, turning it every which way" (Epstein, 2001, p. 176). There is a focus on awareness, and attention to the present moment. Throughout the meditation, when the mind wanders to thoughts, memories, or fantasies, the content is briefly noted and observed nonjudgmentally, and then attention is returned to the present moment.

Mindfulness meditation can be described to children as focusing on the present mo-

ment while being aware of their internal sensations, thoughts, and feelings. For each of these meditation exercises, children should be sitting comfortably, with their back straight, in a position that they can hold without effort, in order to eliminate distractions from their body. They may close their eyes, but if that is difficult, their eyes may remain softly open with their gaze downward. As in other mindfulness exercises, soft instrumental music may be played in the background as long as it does not distract children from their focus.

Attending to the Thinking Process

> When you listen to the voice in your head, listen to it impartially. That is to say, to not judge. You'll soon realize: there is the voice and here I am listening to it, watching it.
>
> – Tolle, *The Power of Being*, "The Power of Being Present"

Once the child has practiced keeping awareness on the present moment by focusing on their breath, the next step is to bring awareness to their thoughts and feelings. Mindfulness training enables children to understand that they are the producers of their thoughts, and that thoughts come and go and influence their feelings and actions. One exercise to enhance awareness of how they are the producers of their own thoughts is the following: Close your eyes and say to yourself, I wonder what my next thought is going to be. Then become very alert and wait for the next thought. Be like a cat watching a mouse hole. What thought is going to come out the mouse hole? Try it now.

Meditation on the Bubble

> When you listen to a thought, you are aware not only of the thought but also of yourself as the witness of the thought.
>
> – Tolle, *The Power of Being,* "Portals to the Now"

To further focus on awareness of the thinking process as well as on letting go and not engaging thoughts, the meditation of the bubble is a useful mindfulness technique (LeShan, 1974). The purpose of this practice is to slow down, observe thoughts, and release them or let go without judgment.

Begin the meditation by reading the following script slowly and in a calm voice. Then, allow the child to continue the meditation for a few minutes in silence, setting his or her own pace. This meditation can also be adapted to feature thoughts on clouds drifting across the sky.

> Begin by sitting in a comfortable position, with your back straight and shoulders relaxed. Softly close your eyes. Imagine bubbles slowly rising up in front of you. Each bubble contains a thought, feeling, or perception. See the first bubble rise up. What is inside? See the thought, observe it, and watch it slowly float away. Try not to judge, evaluate, or think about it

> more deeply. Once it has floated out of sight, watch the next bubble appear. What is inside? Observe it, and watch it slowly float away. If your mind goes blank, then watch the bubble rise up with "blank" inside and slowly float away.

Visualization Meditation: Finding a safe haven

> If you are more relaxed, I think your brain functions more effectively.
> – Dalai Lama, 1999

This final meditation features visualization to encourage creativity and imagination. It will help children to focus their attention after they have practiced awareness of the present moment by focusing on their breath, and then released their thoughts and feelings through the meditation on the bubble. This final meditation may be particularly helpful for children who are anxious, since it is related to visualization for relaxation.

> Begin by sitting in a comfortable position, with your back straight and shoulders relaxed. Softly close your eyes. Allow the picture in your mind to become blank. You are going to imagine a place that feels comfortable, safe, and relaxing. Think of your place. It might be the beach, a lake, or even your own bed. Imagine it slowly appearing before you, becoming more and more clear. Look to your left. What do you see? Look to your right. What is over there? Look closer. Breathe in. What do you smell? Walk around your place. Look closer at certain things. Stay focused on your place. How are you feeling? If you find your thoughts wandering, observe them, and then focus on bringing the image of your place back into focus in front of you. (Allow some time.) When you are ready, put your hand in front of your eyes. Open your eyes. Slowly spread your fingers to allow light in. When you are ready, slowly remove your hand.

Children may also choose to draw the scene they imagined. This drawing can be saved to remind them of their safe, relaxing place.

Practicing Mindfulness

An essential component of mindfulness training is practice. It should be explained to children that practice in this case is not like practicing a musical instrument for a concert, but rather practice on a regular basis "aimed at cultivating a continuity of awareness in all activities of daily living" (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). After they begin to learn mindfulness techniques, children can practice being more aware as they walk around—noting sounds, sights, smells, and their own movement. As they eat, they should be aware of the tastes, the smell, the sensation of chewing each bite, and the increasing feeling of fullness in one's stomach. Mindfulness can become a way of being, embodied through implementation of the techniques in all aspects of life (Kabat-

Zinn, 2003). In working with children, one may use group discussion to facilitate the children talking about their experiences in doing mindfulness exercises.

CONCLUSION

Given the recent interest and popularity of mindfulness training with adults and its demonstrated usefulness to medical and clinical populations, we believe that children could benefit from this focused awareness training as well. Schools seem to be ideal settings for introducing mindfulness techniques. Mindfulness training could be introduced in schools using the progression of exercises and techniques presented here. The school psychologist or counselor also could consult with teachers to design or adapt mindfulness training to be appropriate for each classroom, level, and school setting. Over time, mindfulness training could be incorporated into the curriculum and used throughout the school day.

There are ideal times to use these mindfulness techniques. The beginning of the day (*e.g*., homeroom) may be a useful time to practice bringing awareness to the present, perhaps using a visual meditation, in order to focus attention on beginning the school day, and to begin the day freshly. Similarly, mindfulness might be used at other transition points during the school day, such as before or after recess, after lunch, and the end of the day. Mindfulness practice can also be used before important events such as tests, sporting events, and competitions. The goal is for children to learn to use mindfulness techniques whenever they need to calm themselves and refocus their energy and attention. Such a refocusing could enhance concentration, memory, and learning, as well as facilitate a more productive and relaxed—less anxious and stressful—school environment. Through bringing increased awareness to the external environment and to the internal experience of the body and the mind, children will likely benefit psychologically and emotionally, as well as through gaining a general sense of well being.

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