



Children are naturally mindful, even when they're playing.

KIDS AND MEDITATION

Little minds can reap big benefits from mindfulness, from enhanced learning to better focus. Here's why children take to it so easily and how you can help. **BY DEBORAH SKOLNIK**

Kids and meditation seem to go together about as well as kids and Brussels sprouts. But ask the experts and they'll tell you that children may actually have a knack for it. "I definitely think they're more in the present moment than adults, so they have a natural inclination to notice what's happening and be aware," says Stephanie Romero, EdD, executive director and founder of Awaken Pittsburgh, a nonprofit that teaches mindfulness practices.

While research into kids and meditation is still emerging, early trials suggest it can yield serious benefits. In one 2016 study, published in the journal *Pediatrics*, 300 children in two lower-income Baltimore schools were randomly assigned to Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (aka MBSR, a specific type of mindfulness practice) or health-education classes for 12 weeks. At the end of the trial, those who'd followed the MBSR program were significantly less likely to have depression, self-hostility, rumination and other signs of distress. In another study, published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* in 2011, researchers randomly assigned 166 adolescents at increased risk of cardiovascular disease to a

three-month program of Breathing Awareness Meditation (BAM), life skills training or health education. Those who participated in BAM had a reduction in heart rate and blood pressure.

The evidence in favor of meditation is strong enough that the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) encourages pediatricians to have an open dialogue with their patients about their use of meditation and other so-called "complementary" therapies, saying these appear to be safe and potentially effective in controlling pain and anxiety, among other chronic conditions.

PROGRAMS FOR TINY MEDITATORS

The AAP isn't alone in recognizing meditation's upsides for kids: Various schools and other institutions have embraced it. Newark Yoga Movement, for instance, is a 10-year-old nonprofit that's brought mindfulness and yoga to 32,000 children in the Newark, New Jersey, school system. "We teach meditation, but we never call it that. At the end of many of our yoga classes we do 'quiet breathing.' We can show the students how—through one minute of breathing—they can chill out," says Debby Kaminsky, e-RYT,

*what's
in a
name!*

MANY IN-SCHOOL PROGRAMS AVOID USING THE WORDS "MEDITATION" OR "YOGA" SINCE THEY POTENTIALLY HAVE RELIGIOUS CONNOTATIONS THAT MAY BE OFF-PUTTING FOR SOME FAMILIES OR SCHOOL OFFICIALS.

Meditation gives children the skills to help soothe themselves.



apps: pro or con?

THERE'S AN APP FOR EVERYTHING AND KIDS' MEDITATION IS NO EXCEPTION. "YOUNG PEOPLE ARE ON THEIR DEVICES, AND MAYBE TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THAT TO SUPPORT PRACTICING IS GOOD," SAYS STEPHANIE ROMERO, EDD, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND FOUNDER OF AWAKEN PITTSBURGH. "HOWEVER, THERE'S NO SUBSTITUTE FOR HUMAN CONNECTION AND ONE-ON-ONE SUPPORT."

RESEARCH OUT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO, NEW ZEALAND, SHOWS THAT MINDFULNESS APPS CAN IMPROVE PEOPLE'S MENTAL HEALTH. GIVE THEM A TRY AND SEE IF THEY APPEAR TO BE HELPING OR HURTING YOUR CHILD'S PRACTICE AND CONCENTRATION.

Newark Yoga Movement's founder.

Romero's Awaken Pittsburgh currently operates in local Brashear High School and has also trained teachers from 12 other schools. Instructors lead students through a different mind-body practice each week. Exercises might involve picking an object to focus on, and then consciously bringing their attention back to it as the mind wanders. "We might also have them imagine something they regret doing, then forgiving themselves for that," says Romero.

In Chicago, the Namaste Charter School fully embraces meditation as part of its curriculum. "I've been floored by walking into PE classes and seeing kindergartners sitting and meditating," says executive director Natalie Neris.

Colorado Children's Hospital in Aurora utilizes meditation in its outpatient therapy

for kids with anxiety issues. "The most basic meditation I lead kids through is to inhale and exhale, and to focus on their exhale," says group leader and yoga therapist Michelle Fury, LPC, C-IAYT. Among other exercises, Fury also leads her young patients in walking meditation, where they have to be mindful of using their bodies while connecting with the environment.

DO TRY THIS AT HOME

Wynne Kinder, MEd, who teaches kids in the urban school districts in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, through her Wellness Works in Schools program, sees a real change in her students. "I think the benefits are far-reaching, from enhanced academic ability to noticing when they are distracted," she says.

If you're eager to see some of these same changes in your own child, there are plenty

of meditation exercises you can do together. One tension-reliever that Kinder, author of the new book *Calm: Mindfulness for Kids* (DK Children's Books, 2019), recommends children of just about any age do is called "melting": Together with your child, stand with your arms crossed, holding your shoulders with your hands. Tuck your chin and tighten (or "freeze") every muscle of your body, starting with your feet and moving up. After holding that position for a few seconds, start to loosen (or "melt"), from the top down, letting your arms glide down to your sides and your legs bend as you sink to the floor in an imaginary puddle. Repeat once or twice.

Kelsey Evans, e-RYT, a kids' yoga instructor, and host of the *Happy Healthy Kids* show on PBS, is a fan of what she calls Chocolate Meditation. "I hand a Hershey's kiss to the child and ask them to examine

it and slowly unwrap it, listening to the crinkling of the foil. They smell it, observe it, and then slowly put it in their mouth, placing it on the tip of their tongue and holding it there for a couple of seconds before slowly eating it." It helps kids learn to concentrate and become more aware of their senses.

If you'd like to keep it ultra simple, try Fury's recommendation: "Set a timer for five minutes—choose a gentle alarm sound—and say to your child, 'Pay attention to your breaths going in and out, and think of something that makes you happy. When you feel your mind wandering, bring it back to the thing that makes you happy.'" Join in on the exercise; you'll both benefit from the focused quiet time.

WALK THE WALK

It's great to teach your kids to be more mindful. But being a more mindful parent is just as important, says Nadia Sabri, MD, founder of The Mindful MD Mom blog. "Mindful parenting empowers mothers and fathers to recognize their role as facilitators to help their kids thrive in their environment, and parenting becomes a loving team approach between the adults and the kids," explains Sabri. Some tips she recommends:

- 1 BE AWARE OF YOUR OWN TRIGGERS** Parenthood can make our childhood and past experiences resurface. By consciously acknowledging our beliefs and limitations, we can respond instead of react to even the most frustrating situations.
- 2 PRACTICE MINDFUL BREATHING** Inhale through the nose and slowly exhale through the mouth. This lowers your heart rate and stress levels, giving a feeling of calm.
- 3 MODEL THE BEHAVIOR YOU WANT** "Kids observe the world around them and respond to the nonverbal cues, like facial expressions and tone and volume of voice," Sabri says. "This is one of the main reasons that yelling at kids really does not work." Instead, get down at their eye level, speak softly and model the desired behavior.
- 4 APOLOGIZE WHEN YOU MESS UP** You can't model negative behavior and expect perfection from your kids, says Sabri.
- 5 RECOGNIZE WHEN YOU'RE NEARING YOUR LIMITS** Even on busy days, try to find some time for self-care, so you don't reach the point of parental burnout.