



A COLLECTION OF MINDFULNESS ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN AGED 3-5 YEARS

The current COVID-19 pandemic has created an intense atmosphere of uncertainty, fear, disrupted routines, and has exacerbated already difficult situations for children and families. These and other factors can contribute to stress and anxiety, especially for the youngest members of our society. Mindfulness activities are one option that can help children and families to calm their anxieties, physically soothe their nervous systems, and better cope with their stress.

Mindfulness is commonly defined as a type of awareness that is cultivated by intentionally paying attention to the present moment in a way that is open, curious, and non-judgmental.¹ Mindfulness practices have been linked to improved social and emotional outcomes, improved academic outcomes, and longer-term success and wellbeing.² The practice of mindfulness helps us to be aware of our thoughts, feelings, and body sensations as they arise, and to notice what we are feeling and thinking, without judgment. Mindful moments can happen every day, at any time, and in any place.

NOTES³:

- Some of the following activities are more advanced than others. Whoever you are - teacher, facilitator, parent or caregiver – please select the ones you think are best for the children you plan to use them with, and adapt them where needed!
- It is best to conduct these mindfulness activities in a quiet place free from distractions. Make sure your instructions are clear and engaging for the children you are working with.
- It may take a few times for children to learn, understand, and be able to practice the mindfulness activities. That is OK! Don't get discouraged if it is difficult for children to focus and practice the activities. Remain calm, open, and non-judgmental. It is called a mindfulness "practice", not a mindfulness "perfection".

¹ Kabat-Zinn J. Mindfulness meditation for everyday life. New York: Hyperion. Kabat-Zinn, J. (2003). Mindfulness-based interventions in context: Past, present, and future. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*. 1994;10:144–156. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/clipsy.bpg016>.

² Schonert-Reichl, K. A., Eva Oberle, Molly Steward Lawlor et al. 2015. "Enhancing Cognitive and Social-Emotional Development through a Simple-to-Administer Mindfulness-Based School Program for Elementary School Children: A Randomized Controlled Trial." *Developmental Psychology* 51 (1): 52-66. <http://doi.org/10.1037/a0038454>.

³ This collection of mindfulness activities has been collated by Kelsey Dalrymple, expert in Early Learning Programmes in Emergencies, for Plan International. It draws together existing open source resources, adapting these for COVID. Contact kelsey.a.dalrymple@gmail.com for more information. Photo courtesy of Plan International Tanzania

Basic Breathing

Invite children to sit or lie down in a comfortable position. Encourage them to place one hand on their stomach and one hand on their chest. Ask the children what happens to their hands when they breathe in and what happens when they breathe out. Ask them to keep focusing on their hands moving along with their breath for a few rounds. Ask the children how it made them feel to focus on their breath.

Adaptation: Rainbow Breathing

When practicing breathing with children, have them put their hands on top of their heads. As they breathe in, they can lift their hands towards the sky and as they breathe out, they can arch their hands down to their sides painting an imaginary rainbow above their heads.

Adaptation: Rain Breathing

When practicing breathing with children, have them put their hands straight out in front of them, parallel to the ground. Tell them to think of themselves as big clouds and when they breathe in, they are taking in lots of water, and when they breathe out, they can wiggle their fingers, imagining that rain is pouring out of them.

Adaptation: Buddy Breathing

Make sure each child has a light object such as a leaf, stick (or soft toy⁴ if you are doing this in the home). Invite the children to lie down and place the object on top of their stomachs. Ask the children what happens to the object when they breathe in and out. Ask them to keep focusing on their breath and the object for a few rounds. Ask the children how the activity made them feel. *(NOTE: If using classroom objects, make sure to clean and disinfect them between each use. Children may have some trouble balancing the items on their stomachs, which will make them laugh and giggle; this is all part of the fun and the children will likely settle after a few rounds of breathing).*

Breathe Like an Animal

Ask the children to think of some animals. Assign an action to do when acting out how the suggested animal's breath. For example, if the animal is an elephant, when breathing out they can hold their arm out to mimic the trunk of an elephant. If the animal is a lion, they can hold their hands up like two paws and breathe out like a roar. After taking a few breaths like one animal, ask the children where in their bodies they felt the breath. Repeat with different animals, taking suggestions from the children about what actions they should do.

Beach (Big) Ball Breathing

Ask the children to bring their attention to their breath. Encourage them to focus on their stomach and chest rising and falling as they breathe naturally. Demonstrate the following with the children: When you breathe in, intertwine your fingers and bring your hands up and around like you have a beach (big) ball between your arms and your tummy (palms facing yourself). When you breathe out, push your arms and hands down, keeping your fingers intertwined (palms facing the ground). As you breathe in, bring your hands over your head, with your fingers still intertwined (palms facing the sky). Then, as you breathe out, unlock your fingers and bring your arms down slowly by your sides. Repeat this with the children all together for a few rounds. Ask the children how they feel after the activity.

⁴ Current recommendations are that soft toys should be removed from pre-schools/childcare during the COVID pandemic because these are hard to wash and disinfect, and so may be a transmission risk if they are shared by several children.

Smile & Shake

This exercise starts by beginning to move your extremities slowly; wiggle your fingers and toes. Then gradually start to bring more movement into more parts of your body; start moving your arms and legs around. Then start maybe moving your head around, and swaying your arms and legs around. Gradually bring a smile to your face as you bring more movement into your full body, maybe jumping up and down a bit, bending up and down, dancing around a little. Then slowly come to a stop and take a deep breath in and a deep breath out. Repeat as many times as desired. Demonstrate this for children and then do it all together for a few rounds. This should be fun and silly. Afterwards, ask the children what physical sensations they are feeling in their bodies.

Mind Jar/Bottle

Fill a bottle or jar with clear water. Then put glitter, dirt, sand, etc. into the bottle or jar. Ask the children to look at the bottle or jar and explain what they see. Then, shake up the bottle or jar. Ask the children what happened and what has changed inside the bottle or jar. Ask the children to focus on what is happening in the jar to see how long it takes for the glitter, dirt, sand, etc. to settle to the bottom. (*NOTE: You do not have to wait until all of the contents in the bottle or jar settle to finish the exercise. The point is to help children focus on something for a minute or two, and think about what they are seeing and how it is making them feel*).

Mindfulness in Nature⁵

Use the following script to lead children in an imagination exercise:

When we go outside we can see and feel so many wonderful things. Things like trees, and the wind, and the clouds, and the sun.

In many ways we are like these beautiful parts of nature, and for this exercise we'll be like the *tree* and the *wind* and the *sun*.

Our body is like a tree. It grows and it is strong.

Our breath is like the wind. It flows in and out.

And the sun is like the part of us that is warm and kind.

So let's lower or close our eyes and sit tall like a tree. We extend our hands way out and stretch our fingers, like branches and leaves. Let's squeeze our fingers together and then let go and feel them wiggle, like they are blowing in the wind.

And now, with the wind blowing, let's be like the wind and take a two big, slow breaths. Breathing in . . . and breathing out, blowing out the wind. Breathing in . . . and breathing out, blowing out the wind.

And now the sun comes out and warms the tree and the wind. As it shines on the tree, we feel our body. Can you feel fingers and feel your toes? What else can you feel—just by noticing?

And as the sun shines on the wind, we feel our body breathing. Can you feel your belly moving up and down? Can you feel the air flowing in and out of your beautiful body?

And with the sun up high in the sky, brightening and warming the whole world, you too can warm the world—with your kindness!

Think of someone who can use a little kindness—like your sister or brother, or a friend, or your teacher. And as you think of them, wish for them, “May you be happy,” imagining them smiling like the sun.

⁵ Citation: Scott Rogers, 2017, <https://www.mindful.org/mindfulness-practice-preschoolers-connects-kids-nature/>

You deserve happiness too. So now wish for yourself, “May I be happy,” and smile like the sun. And as you smile like the sun, feel your body sitting tall like a tree and feel your breath blowing like the wind.

And then gently open your eyes and look around. You are amazing!

Note: Before using, consider whether this exercise might upset or frustrate your children if strong “stay at home” orders are in place in your country, meaning that they are not allowed outside.

Environment Senses

You can do this exercise either inside the learning space, your home, or outside in a safe area (if this is allowed).

Ask the children to focus on the area around them. The children can either be sitting or standing in one place. After a few moments, ask the children what things they can see. Ask if they can each give you an example of something they can see. Next, ask the children to focus on things they can hear: again, ask each to tell you about something they heard. Next, ask the children to focus on things they can smell: once more, ask each to share something they smelled. If safe to do so, ask children to focus on things they can touch – including parts of their own body (not their friend’s!). Finish with them each showing what they touched.

Mindful Listening

Find an object that can make a ringing sound that may continue for some seconds after you finish making the sound (e.g. a chime, a bell, a pot or pan hit with a spoon, a string instrument, etc.). Ask the children to listen carefully as you make a sound with your selected object. Tell the children to put their hands up when they hear the sound that you make with the object, and to put their hands down when they can’t hear the sound anymore.

Adaptation: Mindful Rhythm

Find an object that you can make a rhythmic beat with – for instance a drum, a bucket, a bottle on a table, clapping your hands, etc. Tell the children that when you make the rhythmic beat with your selected object, you would like them to sway slowly from side to side in time with the beat. This can be done sitting down or standing up. You can make the beat faster or slower, encouraging the children to listen carefully so they can match the rhythm and pace of the beat with the rhythm and pace of their body movements. Don’t go too fast or you may make children feel dizzy.