

# Mindfulness for children: how to

Breathing, stillness, focus: techniques that have been shown to ease stress in adults can help kids too, reports Barbara McMahon

The tinkling of a bell reverberates around the classroom as a group of children close their eyes and focus on their breathing. "All your thoughts and feelings ... let them pass through your head like clouds in the sky," says the instructor. There is fidgeting, muffled giggles and a few eyes peek open but some of the children manage to sit still throughout the two-minute exercise. "I felt like moving but I didn't," an 11-year-old girl says triumphantly. The youngsters in the classroom in California are practising mindfulness, which trains the brain to think in the moment and helps to promote physical and mental calm. Sandwiched between spelling tests and arithmetic lessons, mindfulness is proving to be an effective way of helping many youngsters improve

their levels of concentration, manage their emotions and deal with anxiety.

With its roots in Buddhist thinking and meditation practice, mindfulness entered the mainstream thanks largely to the efforts of Jon Kabat-Zinn, a professor of medicine. In the 1970s, he pioneered its use as a secular and cost-effective way of helping some patients deal with chronic pain and depression. Forty years later, a report published this week suggests that mindfulness can produce improvements of up to 20 per cent in symptoms of anxiety and depression. The business world has also embraced it as a way of enhancing innovation and creativity, and helping workers to cope with stress. Google, for example, teaches its employees to "search inside" themselves. Adults practise it at home or in yoga classes — now it is being integrated into education.

Eline Snel, a mother and grandmother who lives in the Netherlands, has been developing mindfulness programmes for children for more than 20 years. She has written *Sitting Still Like a Frog*, published in the UK this week (Shambhala, £16.99, including audio CD), which is full of practices that can help children to calm down, become more focused, fall asleep more easily, alleviate worry and manage anger.

"A lot of children can't sit still for a minute. They react to all kinds of stimuli and that can be a problem," Snel says. "Many are extremely insecure, thinking that they are not cool or good enough. They're also under pressure from parents and teachers to achieve in school, sport and music lessons. Most of them are getting up in the morning with these kinds of worries."

Children's nervous systems and brains are still in the process of developing and are even more sensitive to the negative effects of stress. Mindfulness exercises are suitable for kids aged 5 and up who want to calm the churning thoughts in their heads, learn how to feel and understand their emotions, and improve their concentration, Snel says. "It also helps them to free themselves from behavioural patterns that do not serve them well, such as bullying, being withdrawn, being selfish or trying to please others."

Most mindfulness courses in schools are tailored to different age groups and last from eight to ten weeks. Children under 12 will probably have a half-hour training session a week, while adolescents have an hourly session. "The children learn to pause for a moment, catch their breath and get a sense of what they need at that particular moment in time," Snel says. "The beautiful thing is that they really have a longing for some inner rest and peace. They have a session and immediately they are saying: 'Can we do this again?'" Parents who see their kids becoming more centred and calm want to know how to carry on the practice, which is one of the reasons Snel wrote the book. Other publications, such as *Little Flower Yoga for Kids* by Jennifer Cohen Harper, also teach mindfulness and yoga as a way of helping children improve attention and emotional balance.

Children, explains Kabat-Zinn in the foreword in *Sitting Still Like a Frog*, which was a hit in the US last year, are naturally mindful because they live in the moment and are not overly concerned about the past or the future. "The most important thing we can do is not kill that natural quality of openness and presence, but reinforce it and encourage it to continue to develop,"



Zinn says. A sense of self-discovery and appreciation for one's own mind and body also gives children a sense of wellbeing and belonging, and helps them to develop social skills such as kindness, empathy and compassion.

Snel says that the method has also been shown to reduce bullying. Kindness meditation, in which children are encouraged to be "friends" to themselves, and to be more balanced and open to others, spills over into the playground, making them kinder and less confrontational places.

Each day, the children and their teachers take a few minutes to go over what they have learnt, so that mindfulness sinks in. "It might be as simple as a teacher instructing everyone to eat an apple or an orange in silence, just taking the time for the class to be quiet," Snel says.

Mindfulness, which first emerged in schools about ten years ago, is spreading steadily worldwide. The non-profit Garrison Institute in New York is one of many organisations in the US that has helped train thousands of students and teachers

in mindfulness and contemplative learning. "There's been an explosion of interest around this kind of work," says Adi Fleisher, a director at the institute. He says mindfulness reduces stress and helps children to feel more in charge of their lives. Midge Kinder, a mindfulness yoga teacher, runs an educational consultancy in Pennsylvania that is at the forefront of spreading the message in schools in the US. Children do not have a lot of time to "just be", she says, and have difficulty navigating the multiple and complex stresses they face. "We're helping children to take care of themselves and it is something that they can carry with them into adulthood."

Kinder still remembers fondly a moment during one of her pilot courses. "We were giving children a chance to reflect and one child of 9 or 10 said, 'When I came in, I felt all dark inside,'" she recalls. "She held up her thumb and forefinger and made a little bit of space between them and then she said: 'Now there's only this much darkness inside.' That was very gratifying."

In the UK, the Mindfulness in Schools

# make them calmer and happier

STACEY NEWMAN / GETTY IMAGES



## Meditation exercises for under-12s by Eline Snel

**Sitting Still Like A Frog**  
This is a basic meditation exercise that improves concentration and will help your child to be less impulsive

Sit with your child in a quiet place and introduce the exercise as follows: "A frog is a remarkable creature. It is aware of everything that is happening around it but the frog tends not to react right away. The frog sits still and breathes, preserving its energy instead of getting carried away by all the ideas that keep popping into its head. The frog sits still while it breathes. Its frog tummy rises and falls. Anything a frog can do, you can do too." Encourage your child to just sit and breathe. Children generally like not having to do anything for a while and they will begin to feel relaxed.

### Your Personal Weather Report

This helps your child to understand his or her interior world and to acknowledge both good and bad feelings

Sit your child down comfortably somewhere, tell him or her to close or half-close their eyes and take some time to determine how they are feeling right now. Ask: what is the weather like inside you? Do you feel relaxed and sunny inside? Or does it feel rainy and overcast? Is there a storm raging perhaps? What do you notice?

Once your child has summoned the weather report that best describes his or her feelings, tell them to just let it be ... there is no need to feel or do anything differently. Later the weather will be different again but right now this is how things are. Moods change. They blow over. There is no need to take any action. What a relief.

### Training Your Attention Muscle

This helps to keep the chatter in your child's mind at bay and lets them experience reality without interference

For younger children: on their way to school ask them to remember five things that they see (a tree, a traffic sign, an unusual house, the entrance to your school, the classroom door). What do they look like? Look at the colours, shapes, spots and stripes. By looking without judging whether something is pretty or ugly, tell your child that they will see more of the world around them.

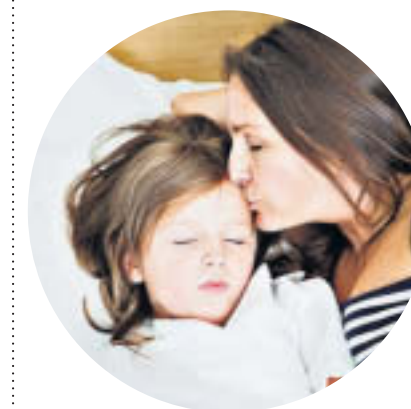
For older children: invite them to pick up a twig and draw it on a piece of paper. Draw exactly what they see and

not what they think they are seeing. Do this a couple of days in a row and they will begin to see more and more of the twig while the drawing is becoming more and more accurate.

### The Little Box of Worries

This is a calming strategy to aid sleep

Before your child turns in for the night, ask if he or she is upset about anything. Thinking about these worries (instead of not thinking about them) will reveal what they are all about. Have a box at hand that might be homemade and nicely decorated. These thoughts can be put into the box. The lid comes off, the worries go in, and the lid goes back on. Your child can look at the little box of worries somewhere on a shelf in the room — from a distance, so the child can see they are no longer in his or her head.



### The Wishing Tree

This is a visualisation technique that introduces children to the process of patience, trust and letting go

Tell your child to sit up straight and comfortably, close their eyes and tune in to their breathing. When they are ready, they can go to a beautiful place in nature. It is nice and quiet in this place, safe and pleasant. They will see an old tree, large and solid, with wide branches and bright green leaves. When they look closely they will see white doves sitting on the branches of the tree. Tell your child to take his or her time and to let a wish surface of its own accord. It can be a feeling or an idea or something they have never talked about. He or she can call out softly, without anyone hearing, for one of the doves and let it sit on their hand. They can tell the dove their heart's desire. It will understand. Watch the dove fly off on its way to fulfil their heart's desire. Not today or tomorrow but in the future. Not exactly the way they wanted it but often better than expected. Tell your child to have faith and let go of the wish. They can open their eyes and remain seated for a while.

A meditation for teenagers

### The Spaghetti Test

This exercise teaches a teenager to relax his or her body like a strand of spaghetti and is particularly useful for those who are about to take a test or an exam

Tell your teenager to choose between sitting on a chair or lying on the floor and to begin to focus on his (or her) body. He should squeeze his eyes tightly shut, clench his jaw and tighten his facial muscles. Then, let them all go so that his face goes soft. When his face is relaxed, he should clench his fists as hard as he can. His hands will feel the tension and so will his arms. Maybe he will notice that he is holding his breath and, as soon as he notices that, tell him to loosen the tension in his arms, loosen up his hands and fingers and to breathe deeply. All the tension will be gone. When his arms and hands are relaxed, he can move his attention to his belly. He should pull it in so that it is completely hard and flat, and tight as a board. As soon as your teenager realises he is holding his breath again, he should relax his belly with a sigh and let it go soft. And when it is soft he will be more aware of his breathing and the gentle movement as he breathes in and breathes out again. He should be able to feel his belly moving up and moving down.

To relax his legs, he can begin by crumpling up his toes and pressing his knees tightly together. He should feel the tension and then let go again. When your teenager's legs are soft and flexible again, his knees unlocked and his toes relaxed, his whole body will be relaxed.

● Consciously relaxing the body is different from relaxing through sports or reading. After all the exercises, encourage your child or teenager not to jump up straight away and instead remain focused on the calmness. Tell him (or her) to remain lying or sitting down, to remain calm just a bit longer until he notices that his body wants to start moving again — without necessarily having to. Without pressure. He will notice that calm and relaxation are nice. It gives him a bit of a break, a chance just to be himself.

Adapted from *Sitting Still like a Frog* (Shambhala Publications, £16.99) by Eline Snel, which comes with a CD of exercises



“We want children to have some degree of control over their inner world”