

Teaching Children Mindfulness is Preparation for Life!

An interview with Marianne Farag, Inner-Peace Specialist

Q: What does mindfulness mean?

Essentially, mindfulness is about giving one's full attention and focus to whatever one is doing in the present moment. With mindfulness there is a single focus at a time; this is the opposite of multi-tasking. It's about cultivating the observer in the self; it's about noticing what is going on in the present moment in terms of what one is experiencing physically, emotionally and mentally.

A big part of mindfulness is observing without judging yourself - i.e., without beating yourself up. I can't stress that enough. It's really about using personal insight to help you make better choices in the future. To become observant without judging one's self, engages one's curiosity regarding what is going on here with one's reactions, responses, moods, and so forth, and then one can consciously choose what to do next.

Q: Can children learn mindfulness?

Absolutely! In fact, if you liken it to learning a language, anyone who has tried to learn a second language knows that it's so much harder to do as an adult. If you are exposed to mindfulness at an early age, you absorb it effortlessly and it becomes your default habit if you will.

Q: Why is it important to expose children to mindfulness?

Exposing children to mindfulness gives them a foundation of skills that will help them throughout their life in three closely inter-related areas: maintaining attention, managing stress, and regulating emotions. When children are taught to focus on one thing, they are less likely to make mistakes, drop or forget things, misinterpret instructions, make incorrect assumptions, all of which contribute to feelings of frustration and anxiety. Teaching children to become aware of what is happening in their bodies and to connect that to their emotions and behaviours enables them to get a better sense of how they are feeling and what they need before things really fall apart for them. When children lack emotional regulation they tend to scream, hit, bite, throw things, or other unhelpful behaviours. Helping them to check-in with their feelings as to what is going on for them teaches them to get curious, and crucially, to choose what to do next.

Q: What would you say are the key features to include in a mindfulness program for children?

I would say first of all, be clear on the objectives of the program and the age group that the program is targeting. Obviously the aims of your program and whether you are

designing it for kindergarten/elementary school age children, junior high or high school children will affect the approach and activities.

Secondly, I think that whoever is teaching mindfulness to the children needs to be at minimum familiar with, and ideally practicing mindfulness. Instead of focussing on wanting to change the behaviour of the children and having that as the agenda behind teaching them mindfulness, you will have a more powerful impact if you let them absorb it by your example of interacting with them mindfully.

The third element, and not least important, is to have fun with mindfulness! When you consider that mindfulness is about exploration, self-discovery, curiosity about your experiences, and ultimately, a practice which builds confidence, self-empowerment, and better skills at understanding consequences and making better choices in the future, there's a lot to get excited about.

Q: How does one teach very young children mindfulness?

Well, here's the good news: the usual range of activities that early childhood educators engage small children in can be adapted to become mindful. You can make mindfulness child-friendly by integrating it into play, games, stories, art, visualization and movement because these are all natural ways children learn and explore their world. There are resources available on teaching children mindfulness from websites to books with all sorts of ideas on activities.

Q: Where is mindfulness being taught to children?

In Canada, for instance, in Toronto and Vancouver, they are teaching mindfulness to children; the UK and U.S. have also been very active in this area including documenting the impacts through numerous studies. The general finding is that teaching mindfulness to children of all ages is an intervention that is not only relatively cheap to incorporate within a teaching environment, but positive results are observed quite quickly.

Closer to home, a Winnipeg child care centre, Dawn and Dusk, has expressed interest in piloting a mindfulness program for the children in their kindergarten program and I am working with them on this initiative which is planned for implementation in the Fall 2017.

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