

“Mindfulness in the Everyday (Childcare)” by Jessica Smith MA

Mindfulness is becoming increasingly more integrated into our American culture. The Mayo Clinic has several articles about how mindfulness can help everything from our stress reactions to the body’s immune system.¹ But what exactly is mindfulness and how can it be incorporated our lives, specifically in a child care setting?

According to Jon Kabat-Zinn, “Mindfulness is awareness, cultivated by paying attention in a sustained and particular way.”² Throughout history there have been many ways to approach mindfulness, either through use of formal religion (Contemplative Christianity, Buddhism) or through less formal disciplines. The following attitudes are almost always included in the practice of mindfulness:

- Self-awareness
- Self-compassion
- Perseverance

The development of mindfulness often includes a specific period of meditation each day, usually by using a focal point of awareness. Many people use the breath, and when the mind wanders (as it always does!) awareness is brought back to the breath. This helps increase awareness of how many thoughts and feelings we have in each moment. Usually once we come back to the breath, with gentle curiosity rather than judgment, the mind veers off again, into another story.

Meditation allows us to become more centered and present to what’s in front of us. By returning again and again to the breath, we slowly begin to understand that we create a lot of unnecessary drama, simply with our thoughts. We can use the analogy of a clothes washer that has become unbalanced and makes a loud noise. Once we adjust the settings (typically adjusting the center of the basket) it spins in balance and quiets down. For many, meditation helps us to regain balance, by re-centering our focus and allowing us to become more aware of our thoughts and feelings. By becoming aware of ourselves and our thoughts, we can then become aware of the present moment and our reactions. Once we are aware of our reactions, we can begin to pause and then *respond*, rather than react.

This, of course, is easier said than done. We may not even know that our typical reaction to a child spilling her juice is to yell, until we start becoming aware of it. This is where compassion comes in. We may want to beat ourselves up for yelling, or wanting to yell, but instead we look at the reaction with curiosity, possibly thinking, “Oh look, I’m yelling again, let’s notice this and

¹ <http://www.mayoclinic.org/>

² Kabat-Zinn, J. (2012). Mindfulness for Beginners. Sounds True Inc.: Boulder, CO.



sit with it for a moment.” With perseverance of meditation every day and consistent awareness we might start to pause before we yell and in that space we might think, “Oh look, I didn’t yell, but I still want to. What’s another choice?”

Often we do not like some of our reactions because they can be harmful to others, usually emotionally, if not physically. This creates guilt and we become unwilling to sit in meditation, because it feels uncomfortable. However, this is exactly what we need to do, to interrupt the typical pattern we follow. It takes time and patience to cultivate a different way of living, the way of being present to what is, rather than the story about it, but in the end it is worth it.

Once we begin to become aware, pause and breathe we can then allow our world to widen so that we start becoming aware of the children in our care. We start to see that most children react rather than respond. Screaming, hitting, biting and temper tantrums are all reactions to some stimuli. This is a normal part of development, especially for young children. However, we start to understand that we may have been reacting in some situations just like the two or three year olds in our care, even though we are adults. Again, compassion is useful in this instance. We can look at this with kindness and curiosity, over and over again.

Children are small recorders of everything in their environment. Most parents are embarrassed to find that their child has said something they had no idea they said so often. Well, this can be used to the good. Instead of the swear word the child has been exposed to accidentally, maybe the practice of mindfulness might be recorded instead.

Once we begin to change our typical reactions, becoming calmer and more centered adults, this inherently influences the relationships we have with the children in our care. This is also a source of modeling for the children. If they see us pause and breathe while addressing an issue (unless there is an immediate concern of safety of the child) they might start to see that they can do this too.

Mindfulness creates a strong foundation in a childcare, allowing us to be present with the children so there is less stress, worry and reaction in the relationships we are forming with them. However, this does not happen quickly. It takes time and patience.

Pema Chödrön says:

Just as we might practice the piano to cultivate our musical ability or practice a sport to cultivate our athletic ability, we can practice meditation to nurture the natural ability of the mind to be present, to feel loving-kindness, to open beyond fixed opinions and views.³

³ Chödrön, Pema. (2012). Living Beautifully with Uncertainty and Change. Shambhala: Boston & London.

This flexibility of the mind helps us carry mindfulness into all aspects of our day and childcare.

There are often ways of concretely incorporating meditation and mindfulness into daily activities. There are books, art projects and games one can play to do this. However, it is important to remember that the way we present ourselves and relate to the children is more telling than the activities we give them.

In the end mindfulness benefits everyone in the childcare by providing a calm abiding energy as a foundation for relationships. Mindfulness allows space for positive interactions between ourselves, the children and the families we work with and as a result we feel more enjoyment in each aspect of caring for children. We can incorporate this into our lesson plan and talk with parents to help bring this energy into the children's home as well. All of this creates a positive environment in which we can have fun and appreciate our time with the children.

Possible Meditation Activities:

- Read Moody Cow Meditates and make a mind jar.⁴ We can then set aside time each day for a two minute meditation session.
- Practice yoga
- Paint to music
- Focus on the breath when blowing bubbles
- Make different types of scented play dough (using calming scents such as vanilla and lavender)
- Aromatherapy spritzers- use specific scented oils mixed in water in small spray bottles
- Practice sitting and breathing by pretending to blow up "balloons"
- Use stretching and breathing to calm down before napping
- Play different types of soothing music or nature sounds (ocean waves, rain) throughout the day

⁴ MacLean, K. (2009). *Moody Cow Meditates*. Wisdom Publication: Somerville.

