

Mindfulness with Children: Working with Difficult Emotions

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“Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore, only kindness that ties your shoes. . . only kindness that raises its head from the crowd of the world to say it is I you have been looking for, and then goes with you every where like a shadow or a friend.”

- Naomi Shehab Nye

Introduction

In Buddhist psychology, difficult emotions are defined as forces that visit the mind. Imagine that your mind is like water in a pot and your emotions are the wind. When the wind blows, the water ripples on the surface and the still water below is hidden from view. If you were to gaze at the water’s surface your reflection would be obscured by ripples. Damaging emotions make it especially difficult to see the water’s surface clearly; they make waves, and in the ensuing turbulence you may feel upset and confused. Mindfulness practice helps you see and calm the emotional turbulence, allowing your mind to be clearly reflected on the surface of the water. This is one way we talk to children about their feelings.

In this chapter we discuss mindfulness as a way to help children understand their emotional pain. We present a method that we dub *scram* to help children loosen the grip of their difficult emotions and respond more mindfully to them. We choose this acronym because children and mentors (therapists, teachers, parents, and others working with children) often want to *scram* - or quickly leave - when faced with difficult emotions. *scram* is a step-by-step approach toward a mindful resolution of a painful emotion or experience: *Stop* or slow down; *Calm* your body; *Remember* to look at what is happening both inside and out; and only after completing the first three steps, take mindful *Action* with kindness or *Metta*.¹

This chapter is a collaboration between two writers with different perspectives. Trudy Goodman (Trudy) co-founded the Institute for Meditation and Psychotherapy in 1995, and founded InsightLA in 2002, a not-for-profit organization for the teaching of mindfulness. Trudy, a psychotherapist for 25 years, has worked with children and mindfulness in

¹ Metta - Pali for friendly.

a variety of therapeutic settings and family mindfulness programs. Susan Kaiser Greenland (Susan) co-founded *InnerKids* in 2000, which brings mindful awareness practices to children in pre-kindergarten through high school. In collaboration with educators and therapists, she adapts traditional mindfulness practices so that they are developmentally appropriate for children/teens and suitable for use in a secular setting. We hope that by bringing together insight from mindfulness, psychotherapy and classroom experience, this article will contribute to the emerging body of knowledge regarding the secular practice of mindful awareness with children.

Background

The traditional objective of mindfulness is both practical and therapeutic; by viewing experience with clarity and discernment at the moment it occurs, it is possible to free the mind from emotional suffering. This process, in and of itself, trains attention, promotes emotional balance, and cultivates compassion². It is well suited to children because the approach can be playful, experimental and is always experiential; we invite children to “come and see, to try this for yourself.”

“What is unique about mindfulness-oriented child therapy (or education) is the enhanced ability to return to the present moment again and again, with openhearted, nonjudgmental attention to both the experience of the child and to one’s own experience.” (Goodman, 2005.). The objective of practicing mindfulness with children is to develop and strengthen their ability “to pay attention to their inner and outer experience, with curiosity and kindness”(Kaiser-Greenland, In Press) in a variety of ways consistent with their level of development. Through this process children are encouraged to become gently introspective, to look a little closer at life experience as it is happening. As a result, they learn to objectively see: (a) internal processes, how they tend to act and react; (b) external interactions, how they interact with others including setting boundaries and managing conflict; and (c) connections between themselves, others and the environment. (Kaiser-Greenland, In Press.) This letter from Eliot, one of Susan’s fifth grade students, illustrates this process:

“I get mad easily and [mindfulness] helped me calm down. On the test, I got mad at some questions and got out of concentration. [Focusing on my breath] got me back on track. I just let the monkeys go.” (Monkeys refer to the colloquial Buddhist term “monkey mind,” where thoughts and emotions swing through the mind like monkeys in a jungle, swinging through the trees.)

Through the practice of mindfulness, Eliot observed his internal processes (he gets mad easily), external interactions (he lost his concentration on the test), then made a connection between his inner experience, outer experience and mindfulness (breath awareness got him back on track by helping him calm down and focus).

² *InnerKids* programs refer to attention, balance, and compassion as the *New ABCs* of learning.

Attention

Mindfulness is a word that has come to mean many different things to many different people, but in Buddhism mindfulness, or bare attention, is in the very first perception – a fleeting moment of open awareness, before the conceptual, thinking mind takes over. From Sarah Doering: “Mindfulness is the observing power of the mind, the active aspect of awareness. It is present in a moment of seeing that’s nonverbal, pre-verbal. It’s seeing with very great clarity and no thought. The object noticed is not yet separated out, but is simply part of the whole flow of the process of life.” (Sarah Doering, 2003.) This is the realm of mindfulness. Whatever is happening is accurately reflected, as if in a clear mirror. It simply reflects, without passion or prejudice, what is here.

There is overlap between the quality of attention fundamental to mindfulness and executive function (the mental capacity to control and purposefully apply one’s own mental skills). In what may seem to be a tautology, mindfulness strengthens executive function while executive function strengthens mindfulness. Pilot studies suggest that this may be true for teens and children as young as four years old. The Mindful Awareness Research Center at UCLA recently completed two pilot programs studying the effect of mindfulness on attention in teens and pre-school children. A small pilot study in ADHD teens, found improved performance on selected executive function tests (specifically, tests measuring inhibition or conflict attention) and reduced self-report symptoms of ADHD (Zylowska et al., 2006). In a larger randomized and controlled study conducted at UCLA’s Early Child-care Center, pilot data shows that pre-school children’s participation in an InnerKids mindfulness program that Susan developed, was associated with improvements in executive function specifically working memory, planning and organization, global executive functioning and emergent metacognition (thinking about thinking). (Smalley and colleagues, 2007.) While this data is preliminary and requires further investigation, the results are promising.

Robust executive function in and of itself does not constitute mindfulness, however. The quality of attention, or one’s perspective, is critical. Susan describes this mindset to children as one of curiosity and kindness. Dr. Jeffrey Schwartz has adopted the more formal term “impartial spectator” to describe this stance: “the part of your mind that has the ability to become aware of the difference between “me” (the watcher/observer) and “my brain” (the thought or feeling)” (Schwartz, 1998). When practicing mindfulness with children Susan refers to this perspective as one of a *friendly and impartial spectator*, combining both the concepts of kindness and of impartiality into a single phrase. This view helps children differentiate between identifying with an emotion (“I am angry”) and observing the emotion (“I know this angry feeling”). By making a clear distinction between identification and observation, a child can begin to understand that an emotion does not necessarily reflect who she is, it only reflects how she’s feeling right *now* about what’s happening right *now*. Viewing emotions as a from the perspective of a *friendly and impartial spectator* is not meant to take children out of their experience, nor does it mean becoming dissociated. Rather, it is a way to help them develop confidence in their capacity to stand fully in their experience

and observe it for what it is, seeing it clearly and as completely as possible given their developmental stage.

A child in the grip of frightening or overwhelming emotions is frequently unable to attend to the task at hand. An example of this emerged from Susan's work with one of her students, Sara. Here is the way Susan's work in the classroom unfolds:

In mindfulness class we use secular and age appropriate exercises and games to promote awareness of inner experience (thoughts, emotions and physical sensations), outer experience (other people's thoughts, emotions and physical sensations) and both together without blending the two. The program consists of 8-12 consecutive weekly sessions with each session broken down into three standard sequences: the first and last sequences contain introspective practices and the middle sequence contains activities and games that promote each week's learning objective. The program is designed to expose children to progressively longer periods of introspective practices each week. This is accomplished by gradually extending the duration of the first sequence (which includes a brief period of sitting introspection) and the third sequence (which includes a modified body scan or concentration practice while lying down). As the duration of the first and last sequences increase, the duration of the second sequence containing more goal directed (as opposed to introspective) practices decreases. This dynamic course structure permits the length of time students engage in introspective practice to increase gradually and organically, through the course of the program.

Recently Susan taught an *InnerKids* mindful awareness program in a public school (pre-k through middle) located in a shelter for moms and children who are victims of domestic violence. Sara is a 10-year-old student who was enrolled in one of Susan's classes.

Quiet and studious, Sara was always one of the first to participate in class discussions and enthusiastically engage in mindfulness activities and games. Sara was a leader within the shelter and frequently helped younger students on the playground and at home. It was hard to imagine she was the victim of extreme physical and sexual abuse.

Sara was not able to participate in the last sequence of mindfulness class because she was too frightened to lie on the floor in the presence of other people. Her understandable fear of lying down in public paralyzed her so that she was unable to focus on anything else. Sara's experience is not uncommon in this setting and demonstrates clearly how painful emotions can interfere with even the most basic activities.

The first challenge when working with Sara was to help her identify her fear and view it - even for a fleeting moment - from the perspective of a *friendly and impartial spectator*. Over a period of several weeks Susan integrated the mindful process scam into her work with Sara. First, Susan encouraged Sara to simply notice the fear when it occurred by *stopping* doing whatever she was doing when it happened. Period. There was no expectation that she lie down or engage in another, less frightening, introspective practice. It was enough for Sara to make the connection that her fear was triggered by lying on the classroom floor.

Eventually Sara made that connection and was able to *calm* her body and quiet her mind with breath awareness practices. Once she felt calmer, she could *remember* that these emotions occurred every time the class practiced introspection while lying down. By the end of the 12-week course,

Sara was able to *act* mindfully and cautiously lie down with the rest of the class with *metta* or kindness toward herself by understanding her feelings. Sara was never able to close her eyes during the body scan, nor was she able to physically relax. But she overcame her fear and lay on the floor with her peers. Sara discovered the courage to do so by practicing mindfulness and *metta*.

The case of Sara illustrates an important caveat about working with children suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder. The potential for flooding, especially in classroom situations, must be taken seriously and mentors must be trained in recognizing signs that flooding may be imminent. Safety and flexibility are most important in clinical settings, as well. When attention is destabilized by traumatic memories and strong emotions, the mentor can support a child by helping turn their attention *away* from awareness of inner feelings and toward awareness of the outer world.

Emotions Are Viewed as Visitors

To a child, a difficult emotion sometimes feels strong and solid, particularly in the early years when children are concrete thinkers. Children can get stuck in painful emotional states because they believe them to be permanent and an inherent aspect of who they are. Children often become so caught up in a feeling that they immediately act on it, unable to imagine that there could be a more objective perspective. We have found the Buddhist teaching of impermanence, that everything changes and nothing stays the same, an extremely useful concept that children can easily recognize and understand when embodied by their mentors. Mentors with a visceral understanding of impermanence will model how to relate to emotions as impermanent states, inside and out. Practicing mindfulness, children and their mentors see together how emotions arise with each moment of experience, in a continuously flowing, changing stream. Through relationship with a mentor who sees through the lens of impermanence, children can learn to experience difficult emotions as transient and situational, rather than a permanent condition intrinsic to them.

One way that emotions are described in Buddhist psychology is as passing, or adventitious, visitors to the heart. Emotions are viewed as healthy (leading to wise actions and happiness) or unhealthy (leading to unwise expressions that bring unhappiness in their wake). We recognize that this view of emotions is a simplification and propose it only as a practical and therapeutic way of approaching complex emotional processes with children who often find it easier to view psychological pain more clearly if they personify the emotion.

Negative emotions that naturally accompany the inevitable painful aspects of relational life can get blown out of proportion and become damaging when children are left alone with them, or if their mentors get frightened or angry when they don't know how to help. Then both children and mentor naturally try to avoid the emotions (to *scram*); thus giving them an authority they don't have. From the perspective of *scram*, it doesn't matter whether emotions are positive or negative, we work with both in the same mindful way as. Simply the integrative, dynamic activity of the mind, an expression of being alive. But when emotions are blown out of proportion, they obscure awareness of both clear mind and its objects.

Personifying difficult emotions and the problems they cause as visitors, albeit unwelcome ones, allows children and their mentors to consider many aspects of mood, emotion and the possibility of their transformation by:

- Talking about emotions as impermanent, like guests who visit and then leave. We cannot overemphasize the compassionate role of the mindful mentor in helping children gently slow into their experience so they can begin to identify their emotions, to stop themselves from acting them out, and to see how they change.
- Experimenting with purposeful attention in the company of a mentor, children may see that it is possible to have some control over how they respond to their emotions. While children cannot choose their feelings, with guidance and support, they can learn and practice new ways of responding to them.
- Acknowledging we have a choice about how to entertain our visitors; a child may not be able to prevent them from arriving, but with help, she may choose whether to invite them to stay. This may open new possibilities. Together with her mentor, a child can reflect about how long she is willing to stay with this particular guest. For the time of a play date? A sleepover? Does she let them move in, take over and cause problems? Or even get in the way of growing up?
- Recognizing times when she is not bothered by unwelcome guests, where she is able to relax and be herself. Acknowledging those times with her mentor, even celebrating them together. These moments when nothing else seems to be happening can be an opportunity for quiet non-verbal sharing of attention and connection.

The quiet nonverbal sharing mentioned above describes an important way of teaching mindfulness, without necessarily saying a word. Through attentive, quiet presence, a mentor can *embody* mindfulness and model how *scram* can be used in real-life relationships. Embodied mindfulness may also be an effective means by which a mentor becomes better attuned with (or “felt by”) a child. From Dan Siegel, “As this joining evolves, we begin to resonate with each other’s states and become changed by our connection. Attunement can be seen as the heart of therapeutic change.” Attunement is expressed in the safety, comfort, and relief a child may feel when seen through a mentor’s eyes, as being whole and complete just as she is. By accompanying, by staying with the child as all the child’s “visitors” come and go, the mentor embodies trust in the child’s underlying, inherent clarity and wisdom. As trust and attunement with the mentor deepen, a child may be better able to integrate the mentor’s positive view and make it her own.

In the following example, Trudy models mindfulness in her response to a boy’s provocative actions.

A 7-year-old boy, Xavier, was referred to psychotherapy for being oppositional with teachers and fighting at school. Xavier was a perfectionist who would angrily destroy his work if he made the slightest mistake. He came to therapy clutching his after-school snack, a big box of Fruity Pebbles cereal. He was bright and presented himself as friendly and playful. But the fun play immediately broke down when he couldn’t have his way. He would regress and become furious, expressing intense self-hatred. Inevitably, Xavier would lose control and the cereal would suddenly fly all over the room. The first

time it happened, he and Trudy both stopped, stunned. They looked at the rug covered in multi-colored tiny pieces of cereal. Xavier was visibly frightened by the aggression in his act of flinging the cereal around Trudy office. He became defiant and hostile, daring her to get mad.

Just stopping and looking at the therapeutic space bedecked in colorful fruity pebbles, Trudy understood why this tightly controlled little boy, an only child who lived in an environment where no misstep went unnoticed or unpunished, needed to let his precious snack fly all over the space. Suddenly it was funny, the office was a mess! It became a *scram* practice when the cereal flew; they *stopped*, saw what was happening at the moment it happened, and *calmed* down to *remember* that the mess was not a big deal. After taking these first three steps, Xavier was able to *act* mindfully as they swept up the cereal together with an attitude of kindness, understanding why Xavier acted as he did.

Trudy's stance of mindfulness and kindness allowed Xavier to feel safe enough to talk about the beatings he received when he was "bad." Trudy and his school counselor found help for his mother and a therapy group for Xavier, where he could work on improving relationships with peers and develop self-regulating behaviors. This was a case where a mentor's compassion, mindfulness and humor allowed a frightened, angry boy to express his truth.

We understand that limits may need to be set for children to keep them and their peers safe. By embodying mindfulness the mentor can both establish boundaries, and convey empathic attunement of a child just the way she is, without needing to fix, rescue or change her. Together mentor and child can use *scram* to help build the child's capacity for self-compassion and understanding.

Because children are deeply embedded in a *family system*, it is not surprising that the degree to which a child benefits from mindfulness-based therapy is highly associated with the amount of parental involvement. (Semple et al., 2006.) A parent's capacity to reflect on her inner life, and the inner life of her child, can also be a significant predictor of the child's security of attachment to the parent (Fonagy & Target, 1977). Thus it is important to look at practicing mindfulness with children from a systems perspective and, whenever possible, involve parents from the outset. In keeping with this approach a pilot pediatric obesity study currently underway at University of California, San Francisco, is delivered to the child through the adult caregiver (whether overweight or not). The pilot intervention extends MB-EAT³ (Kristeller & Hallett, 1999) to children and parents, using *MB-EAT* and *InnerKids* programs adapted for this population. It is deliberately focused on preadolescent children who are embedded in the family unit. Michele Meitrus-Snyder, lead investigator of the study, is persuaded from limited pilot experience that the mutual understanding gleaned through the shared mindfulness experience, fosters improved connections between parent and child that may be as important as any other facet of the intervention. (Mietus-Snyder et al., 2007).

³ MB-EAT is a mindfulness-based intervention for adults with binge eating disorders. It was developed by Jean L. Kristeller, Department of Psychology, Indiana State University, Ruth Quillian-Wolever, Center for Integrative Medicine, Duke University and their colleagues.

While the application of *scram* is simple and can be taught to the entire family, the embodiment of this steady, gentle way of being is not easy. From Buddhist meditation teacher and psychologist Jack Kornfield: “An important part of mindfulness practice is being conscious of and taking responsibility for *embodying* mindfulness through our own thoughts, feelings and actions” (Kornfield, 2007). Taking responsibility for your own mindfulness, learning to walk-the-walk, is the most effective way to transmit compassionate mindfulness skills to children.

If you are not already a practitioner, we recommend you gently introduce yourself to mindfulness practice in order to get a felt sense of the experience. Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, who first taught and researched clinical applications of mindfulness, says:

First, we become receptive to actually feeling the subtly changing sensations in our bodies, so often overlooked in our daily lives. We become aware of our physical location and movements, thereby bringing the mind and body to the same place at the same time. It can be surprising to see how rarely the mind is where the body is, here, in the present, instead of thinking about something or somewhere else. Literally *embodying* mindfulness, we observe direct sensory experience, opening all the senses – “sensing” – the non-verbal world of touch, sound, sensation, smell, sight etc.”

(Kabat-Zinn, 2005)

These techniques that enhance sensory awareness, build the skills of mindfulness through actually being mindful. As mentioned earlier, mindfulness is both the means and the end of our practice; what strengthens mindfulness the most is the practice of mindfulness itself! For those new to this way of working, here are some guidelines:

- Recognize that there is a learning curve. Mindfulness takes practice; insight and compassion are experiences that cannot be forced.
- Your credibility comes from knowing first-hand the clarity and gentleness that come from doing this practice patiently, over and over again.
- As you continue in your own practice of mindfulness meditation, insights about the children with whom you work will likely occur quite spontaneously. You may find that your intuition becomes sharper and you become more willing to trust it.
- The more you become acquainted with this process, the more you may be able to creatively introduce it in appropriate ways to the children with whom you work.
- Learn as much as you can from others who have done pioneering work in the field.

Using *Scram* in Psychotherapy

A 12-year-old girl named Manouj was suffering from constant anxiety and panic. Manouj’s family had emigrated to the USA shortly after her father was released from prison, three years before. He was a political prisoner for months, taken at gunpoint from their home while Manouj was at school. Shortly before entering therapy with Trudy she had been visiting cousins in the Middle East, and the war between northern Israel and Hezbollah broke out. This triggered intense terror in Manouj.

Manouj, told Trudy in tears, that she's afraid to fall asleep because there might be spiders in her bed, she's afraid to eat lunch with her friends because the taco might be poisonous, she can't eat outside because an insect might fall into her food. Salad reminds her of a poisonous plant and she might die if she touches it. Even the food her mother has cooked for her might be bad. The little spot on her T-shirt could be dangerous. . . She is sobbing as she tells all this, in Arabic, with her mother as interpreter.

Trudy enters her world through mindful attunement to her feelings of fear and sadness. Trudy names fear as a visitor who got its foot in the door when her father was taken to prison.

Together, they practice *scram* when fear arrives: *Stop* and slow down, calmly breathe through the fear, and remember fear is visiting. Wordlessly, through her willingness to just come and be open, Manouj can attune to her therapist and begin to act mindfully to change her relationship to fear.

Trudy shifts into an active internal practice of mindfulness and metta: her attention is attuned to her experience and Manouj's simultaneously. Trudy deliberately suffuses the atmosphere with kindness, "holding" Manouj in her stable presence. A mindful mentor can lend the strength of her ability to be present with experience to the child; Manouj can begin to see how fear can be there, she can feel anxious, without losing her own capacity to be mindful. Fear doesn't have to be in charge of her thoughts, feelings, and choices. *Calmly* she can recover her balance and confidence.

As we sit and talk, Trudy checks in with Manouj; she reflects, in English now: "The more I talk about it, the more fear goes away and the better I feel." Her voice is calmer, lower, and she is not crying anymore. Manouj is relaxed now, body draped across her mom's lap, her head resting on the arm of the couch. Her mother, a sensitive meditator and attuned parent, is quietly holding her. The room is peaceful and still. Trudy encourages her mother to act with metta by holding Manouj and being silent, "as if you are meditating." Sitting still, they are all quiet together. Manouj seems to be soaking up the peace that is palpable in the room. The session ends this way.

A tear-stained and angry Manouj arrives at the next meeting, reluctant to come in, hiding behind her mother. Manouj is upset, afraid that coming to talk about her fears will make them come back, when she's actually been feeling less scared this past week. She despairs that it would happen again from seeing Trudy and is angry with her mother for bringing her.

Fear was not around for much of her weekend. When it came back, her mother remembered *scram* and brought Manouj on to her lap while she sat quietly. Manouj feel asleep, held in the arms of her mother's mindfulness meditation, and, the next morning woke up free of fear again.

Trudy *reflects* aloud if fear might be trying to protect her from present dangers - could fear be trying to protect her from growing up too fast? She nods. From having to go to high school? From having her body change and mature? Manouj tells her mother that she wishes she could just stop the world, go somewhere for a while and then get back on.

Trudy teaches Manouj mindfulness meditation at this point, as a way to stop and be very grounded in the present moment, able to observe fear's comings and goings. Manouj learns to be aware of her body sitting, of her breath flowing rhythmically, in and out. When thoughts go through her mind, Manouj can bring her attention gently back to the movement of the breath.

They sit together for 8 minutes, and Manouj gives a thumbs-up when finished. She was able to notice when her mind wandered away from what she was doing, and to relax and feel peaceful as she practiced being mindful of her breathing. Smiling and rosy, Manouj looks genuinely happy for the first time.

Manouj arrives at our next meeting, glad to see Trudy and asks her mother to go out for a walk, so they can be alone together. This is new. Being held in her mother's attuned mindfulness, with the guidance of her mentor, Manouj is learning to hold and calm herself, too.

In the next session, Manouj imagines empathetically how difficult it must have been for her parents when she was in so much emotional pain. She describes how she is healing the past terror and loss of her childhood home. "Moving to Los Angeles was a big shock for me. The story behind it and the story after it makes me realize how strong I have become. If you get hurt, you will heal, . . . as you realize what's here and what's there, your mind will be strong, and become healthy, that alone will heal the wound. That is how I got through (my fears), back to my real world."

At the end of the session, Manouj acts mindfully! She stands on her head, using her arms for support. It's a wonderful metaphor for learning how to handle her world being turned upside down with balance, self-efficacy and confidence.

For over a year, Manouj was free from fear and anxiety. After around 18 months, Manouj became mildly anxious and Trudy saw her again. Her parents felt Manouj's anxiety was an internal problem of her own. They are not yet willing to acknowledge how much their family's past trauma and losses still affect their relationships, to one another and to their new life. Until they find a way to do this, Manouj may continue to be vulnerable to fear.

Guidelines for Working with Children

- *Mentoring and Embodiment*
 - Children learn to build their own mindfulness skills more effectively when the adult *embodies* mindfulness. Having and maintaining an established mindfulness practice is a prerequisite for this work.
 - It is critical that the mentor has experience with the specific mindfulness practices that are being taught. Many have blown on a pinwheel to teach children breath awareness, but to use the practice effectively you must know how to apply it to different learning objectives - how do you use the pinwheel to train focused attention? wide-open awareness? to soothe the body? When used skillfully this one practices can be used to help a child feel the experience of each of these qualities - concentration, awareness, and calming.
 - Mindfulness is relational, attuned, and connected. Sharing attention and caring may strengthen both mentor and child's capacity to access a calm and clear state-of-mind.
 - The benefits of practicing mindfulness take time and are not always obvious. Patience is the heart of the process and developed by focusing on the practice itself rather than a specific goal or end point. From Lonnie Zeltzer: "It is precisely the moving away from the need to have

results that often contributes to a lessening of the child's suffering" (Zeltzer, 2005).

- *Practices*

- Mindfulness teaches children to note and label emotions. Noting is an effective tool for becoming aware of emotions and being able to see them as occasional visitors.
- Mindfulness games and activities can be framed in ways that are appropriate to various ages and developmental abilities, from pre-school through adulthood.
- Because children often have relatively short attention spans and, depending on their age, their memory may not be completely developed, we engage in reflective practices for periods of short duration and repeat them frequently.
- *Fun* is a key concept when practicing mindfulness with children. If the activities are not fun and playful young children will resist them.
- Practicing mindful awareness may not be for everyone and it is not skillful to insist that a child engage in introspective practices if she is not comfortable doing so.
- Breath awareness alone is an extremely valuable tool for all ages, and if taught correctly, it is in and of itself a practice of mindfulness.
- In a classroom setting it is virtually never appropriate for children to drop into deep states of meditation or introspection. The mentor must take care to monitor the students. If it appears that a child is having a difficult time sitting still or is becoming sad, it is appropriate to gently ease out of a reflective practice into a more active one.

- *Metta*

- The use of mindfulness techniques to train children in attention is complemented by training in kindness and caring (*metta*), and learning how to include both oneself and others in a circle of compassion.
- Through compassion for self and others *embodied* by the mentor, a child is shown a process through which she can develop a new relationship to her difficult emotions, built upon insight and courage.

- *Family Systems*

- It is important that parents are informed about every aspect of your work and are integrated as much as possible. We recommend a parent meeting before and after mindfulness skills are taught to children. We often give children prompts (or homework) at the end of a session and it is helpful if parents participate in the home practice.

Conclusion

The playful acronym *scram* takes breath awareness further than calming the body and mind. It charts a step-by-step mindfulness-based process to help children free themselves from the often complex webs of tangled and difficult emotions that are a natural part of growing up. *Scram* invites children to *stop*, *calm* their bodies/quiet their minds, and *remember* to be mindful when

a painful emotion arises. Using this process, children *act* only after taking a moment to *reflect* on and viscerally sense their inner and outer experience. *Scram* reminds them to do so with kindness or *metta*.

Scram is most effectively taught through a combination of verbal and non-verbal methods; with one’s own mindfulness practice as a fundamental prerequisite of this work. How long must one practice mindfulness before being qualified to teach children? This is the subject of vigorous debate in the field and there is no definitive answer. We know, however, that in order to *embody* or model *scram* one must viscerally understand how the work is rooted in mindfulness, and that the intention of mindfulness-oriented work with children is education, healing and service. In the drawing of the *InnerKids* tree, with roots deep in awareness practice, service is represented by the trunk of the tree, which underlies and quietly supports the work with children in families, schools and clinical or community settings. For the work to be authentically transmitted, it must remain connected to its trunk and roots – connected to the intention of service with deep roots in the practice of mindfulness.



The Sanskrit root of the word *sati*, mindfulness (in Pali), means “to remember.” In our work we remind children “remember! – Remember to notice, to pay attention to what’s happening within you and around you, from moment to moment to moment.” It’s easy to overlook the first moments of mindful awareness, which can be so fleeting. By teaching children to remember to notice, we are helping them value and extend moments of pre-verbal attention that come naturally, but so often are unnoticed or forgotten.

Remembering to practice mindfulness over and over again can be as transformative for the mentor as for the child, by giving, the mentor an opportunity to viscerally understand the child’s experience and the child an opportunity to feel deeply seen and understood. This nonconceptual way of knowing has a profound effect on all those who experience it,

inherent in which is Mindful the potential to change the way that children and mentors relate to their emotions, their relationships, and their world.

We do not have a magic bullet to alleviate the suffering of children faced with painful emotional experiences, but we've seen even the most basic mindfulness practice have a remarkable impact on the life of a child. As with many things, this is best summed up by a child:

I learned one thing about mindfulness. I learned that when you don't feel so well, maybe you can breathe, In-then-out, that is what I learned.

InnerKids' Second Grade Student, Lucy

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