**Give Your Child the Gift of Mindfulness**

Originally published in *Yoga Chicago* May, 2018

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The world seems to be abuzz with news about the benefits of mindfulness. We read about using it to reduce stress and improve our health. It has been shown to make us less judgmental and more compassionate. It even increases our creativity. As parents, we wonder how we can help our children learn this skill.

Mindfulness is the act of being present in the moment. Our bodies are hardwired to react to stress with a fight-or-flight response. The critic that lives in our mind is always looking for ways to fix us and, usually, the ego does not say flattering things to us. Buddhists refer to this as the Monkey Mind. It chatters away, all day, about how we are not perfect, with lovely laundry lists of our imperfections. This is why mindfulness is a practice. We need to constantly release the Monkey so we can move onward. Mindfulness can become a habit, the same as brushing your teeth or putting your keys in the same spot every time you enter your home.

Here are some strategies you can use to begin to instill the habit of mindfulness to your child. Begin by teaching one or two techniques at a time. When these practices become routine, add a couple more. Not every one of these strategies “fit” every person, so experiment a little. Most importantly, have fun with it. Mindfulness is supposed to relax you, not stress you out.

For toddlers and preschoolers, get them to practice taking a deep breath and breathing out slowly during routine tasks, such as putting on shoes, combing hair, or zipping their coat. Say “Take a deep breath in. Now, let’s breathe out slowly.” This requires you to slow down a little, too. It only takes a few seconds and gives everyone the added benefit of being a little calmer, which, in my experience, makes it easier to get out the door.

At bedtime, have your child lay on her back with a stuffed animal on her tummy. Have her take slow, deep breaths. Encourage her to give her stuffed animal a ride up and down as she breathes. This also works on the floor or the couch, when things are just getting a little too wound up. My favorite time to do this is before dinner, which in my house is nearly always chaotic due to “hanger.”

For school-age children, plan what mindfulness strategies to use when the “test” shows up. The “test” can be an actual test at school, an athletic competition, or dealing with an uncomfortable situation. I liken mindfulness to a super power. Picture your favorite super hero in his or her day-to-day life. Then imagine them as they get the call to use their power. There is always a moment just before they switch where they become quiet. It is a quick second where the super hero shifts gears from regular to extraordinary. Like super heroes, your child can use that same moment to refocus themselves to move forward with purpose.

Here are two strategies your child can try. The first is to gently put their hands on the side of their face with their wrists together under the chin. They then take a deep breath in thinking “I can...” Then they breathe out slowly finishing the thought, “…do this.”

The other strategy is for them to put a hand on their heart. As they take a deep breath in, have them ask their heart if they can do this or even if it is the right thing to do. Guide them to breathe out slowly. This helps them slow down the body and the “head talk.” A favorite question of mine is “What does your heart say?” With practice, they will begin to hear what their heart has to offer.

Both techniques are practiced discreetly, so they can be used without worrying what someone will think. Your child will be able to use a strategy when needed. Practice these with them. Great times to practice are at the table before a meal and at bedtime as things quiet down for the evening. Ask them to pay attention how they feel after the technique. A bonus is that you will feel calmer also.

Nature offers a tool that families can use every day. Children of any age can benefit. Take a moment to look at the sky or the trees as you leave the house, come home, or when you’re just looking out a window. Share with your child what you notice. Let them tell you what they see. We tend to bustle here and there, always with an end goal ahead of us. Noticing nature is a way to be present in the moment. It is also a gift you give to them by teaching them to be observant of our world. I can still recall moments as a child standing at the picture window in our home talking about the sunset or watching a storm roll in with my father. This is a mindfulness technique I use every single day. On top of that, this is how you learn to look for rainbows.

The key to bringing mindfulness to your child’s life is to practice alongside them. It is like the adage of teaching another to fish. You don’t teach them to fish by giving them a fishing pole and hooks. You teach them to fish by showing them how to find the best fishing holes, explaining which bait to use, and demonstrating how to be quiet and patient while waiting for a nibble.

May you find joy in the gift of intentionally teaching mindfulness to your beautiful child.