



National Center on
Health, Behavioral Health, and Safety

Mindfulness in Head Start Settings

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Why Mindfulness? Why Now?

We see you. If you are a Head Start educator—or directing a Head Start center—your work day is already very full. You are responsible for the care and safety of young children from early morning until early evening, five days a week. You are also responsible for making sure their first experience of “school” is a warm and inviting one, and that they’re prepared—academically and socially—for kindergarten and beyond. You support families through challenging circumstances, so they have the resources they need to support their children. And you collect data, conduct screenings, and complete the paperwork to demonstrate that all of this important work is happening.

Even if it feels like you don’t have time for one more thing, read on . . .

What does mindfulness offer you as an early childhood educator or leader?

FIRST: The definition

Mindfulness is being aware of what you’re sensing and feeling, without judging those feelings.

Example: There’s been an argument over a toy, which ended when someone threw a block. Both of the children involved are angry and on the verge of tears. You can feel yourself getting stressed. You take a moment to calm yourself before you go to offer comfort and help in problem-solving. When you’re with the children, you’re fully focused on this interaction and compassionate to both of their needs and feelings. That’s mindfulness.





SECOND: There's no right or wrong way to practice mindfulness.

Dominique Charlot-Swilley, PhD, Assistant Professor at Georgetown University, notes: "Mindfulness is an opportunity to engage in loving kindness, loving awareness. It is that opportunity to pause with intention. . . It is not about perfection. . . It could occur wherever and whenever."

THIRD: Mindfulness is a practice.

Why "practice"? If you want to make mindful responses automatic when you're stressed—for example, not losing your cool when a child is having a meltdown—it helps to practice that skill in a less-stressful situation. (This is similar to the way a basketball player trains—working on dribbling, passing, and shooting from various places on the court so that they're ready when they need any of these skills in an actual game.) What's important is using these strategies regularly so they become your "go-to" during challenging moments.

FINALLY: Research suggests mindfulness training can improve outcomes for teachers *and* young children.

Studies show that mindfulness training that is specific, ongoing, and led by an expert can:

- improve staff morale;
- strengthen preschool teachers' ability to manage emotional distress; and
- improve teachers' sense of self-compassion, emotional regulation, and feelings of well being.



Teacher mindfulness training can have an effect on students as well. In one study, students in classroom settings where teachers received mindfulness training were found to have improved self-regulation skills. (Keleynikov, Benatov, and Berger, 2022; Carvalho, et. al, 2021.)

Children can also benefit from mindfulness training, which helps with self-regulation and engagement with learning. Here's what the research suggests:

- Mindfulness training can help preschoolers improve their social skills, like sharing. (12-week Mindfulness-Based Kindness curriculum in Flook, et. al, 2015.)
- Mindfulness training can improve self-regulation and reduce hyperactivity in kindergarteners. (6-week program: 20 minutes, 3 times a week in Vigalis & Perlman, 2018.)
- Yoga and mindfulness practices can improve self-regulation and executive function in preschoolers, with best results when practices are taught for at least six weeks. Children with lower social-emotional functioning showed greatest improvements. (Sun, Y., et. al, 2021.)

TRAUMA-SENSITIVE MINDFULNESS

Some mindfulness practices can be challenging for trauma survivors or those coping with extreme stress. It's important to keep this in mind and offer ways to help ensure mindfulness offerings at your workplace are safe and inclusive. This might include encouraging participants to adapt practices so that they're comfortable—for example, keeping their eyes open, standing instead of sitting, or choosing to practice alone, rather than with a group. Mindfulness practice should also never be mandatory for staff. To learn more about mindfulness and trauma, visit davidtreleaven.com.

Start Small

The easiest way to bring mindfulness to your workplace is through your own mindfulness practice. You can begin by trying a practice for a minute or two a day. As with any habit you're trying to build, identify a time and place that works for you, and keep at it. No judgments if you skip a day. No judgments if it feels awkward at first. People who practice mindfulness say there's no "right" or "wrong" way to do it.

You can dive into the research or just find a YouTube video and begin.

Need suggestions?

- Check out the Head Start resources here: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/search/eclkc?q=Mindfulness>
- Sign up for an in-person class or try an online introduction to mindfulness:
 - (Free) Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) at palousemindfulness.com
 - [Mindful Self Compassion \(MSC\)](#)
 - [Compassion Cultivation Training](#)
- Explore free apps offering guided meditations:
 - [Calm](#)
 - [Insight Timer](#)
 - [10% Happier](#)
 - [Mindful Guided Meditation](#)
 - [UCLA Health Guided Meditations](#)
- Check these websites for self-compassion practices:
 - From **Edutopia**: *How Mindfulness Can Benefit Preschool Teachers* by Meghan Robles <https://www.edutopia.org/article/how-mindfulness-can-benefit-preschool-teachers/>
 - From the **Greater Good Science Center**: *Army Psychiatrist Elizabeth Guinto Tries Taking a "Self-Compassion Break"* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AyQdeYjXUhE>

Think Big

There's power in practicing mindfulness as a shared activity. Head Start communities that have embraced mindfulness advise starting small and thinking big.

Tips:

- **Pair up.** Find a colleague to join you as you begin your own practice. You can participate in mindfulness activities together or encourage each other to take this time for yourself.
- **Speak out.** Identify a few mindfulness “champions” in your organization who can lead mindfulness activities and teach others. Mindfulness should be optional for staff who are interested.
- **Build it in.** Make mindfulness a part of your organization’s culture. For example, set aside time for monthly mindfulness practices and invite *all* staff to participate—administrators, teachers, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, custodians.
- **Notice what works.** Change what *doesn't* work. For example, one Head Start center found that a monthly mindfulness practice was difficult for many to attend and created a resource library for those who wanted to explore on their own.
- **Practice together.** Model mindful transitions by beginning or ending meetings with a mindfulness practice.
- **Share the benefits.** Encourage those who are practicing mindfulness in their classrooms to share their experiences.
- **Partner with families.** Talk to the Family Council at your program to share more about mindfulness practices as a tool families can use to support self-regulation skills.



Building a mindfulness practice in your early childhood setting offers an opportunity to deepen relationships, improve classroom management, and build self-regulation skills in young children. Mindfulness is a promising tool for reducing burnout and turnover, and for increasing wellness among Head Start staff. We encourage you to try the activities offered here, and thank you for all you do to prepare our youngest children for a bright future.

Below, you'll find ideas for using mindfulness throughout the day. Use the index to jump to additional mindfulness practices.

Using Mindfulness in your Head Start Setting



STRESS REDUCTION: An early morning practice helps you start the day feeling calm and centered.

TRY THIS:

Tune in to your body.

1. Take a few deep breaths into your belly and focus your attention on the feeling of your feet grounded on the floor, or on the feeling of the chair supporting your body.
2. Notice all the places your body is touching the floor or chair, and how you are being held and supported. You might even imagine the whole planet is under your feet holding you up.
3. Take another few deep breaths before you move on.



SELF-REGULATION: Give yourself time to pause before reacting.

Self-regulation is the ability to understand and manage your emotions and reactions during times of stress. When we are regulated, we're able to pause and choose a response, rather than react (or over-react) too quickly—whether we're with children, colleagues, or families.

TRY THIS:

Need to respond to a child who needs your help? Even one deep breath gives you a chance to pause and consider your options before you react. Try one of the breathing practices below when you have a little more time.

- **Take slow, steady breaths.** Slow rhythmic breathing activates your parasympathetic nervous system, which can calm your body down. For this practice, the length of the breath is not really the focus. Try to bring an even, steady rhythm to the four parts of the breath. Here's how to do it:
- **Breathe in as you count to four.** (If counting to four feels like too much, try starting with a count of two or three. The important part is to slow down.)
- **Hold that breath as you count to four.**
- **Breathe out as you count to four.**
- **Hold as you count to four.**

Once you've completed a few rounds of slow, rhythmic breathing, return to a resting breath. Pause to notice any changes in how you feel.

CO-REGULATION: Share your calm.

Self-regulation typically begins to develop between the ages of four and five, and isn't fully developed until young adulthood. Young children need help from the adults in their lives to manage their emotions, often called co-regulation. Your sense of calm provides a model for children who are still learning to regulate their own big feelings.

You can teach preschoolers simple mindfulness practices during circle time. By modeling calming tools in this way, you are teaching the child how to regulate their emotions. You can also model the use of slow breathing when a child is feeling stressed or frustrated. Showing families how to use these practices at home is a great way to strengthen home-school connections as well.

TRY THIS:

- **Smell the Flower, Blow Out the Candle.** Ask children to hold their finger an inch or two in front of their lips. Show them how to inhale slowly as if they were smelling a flower, then exhale as if they were blowing out a birthday candle. As you do this together, say, "Smell the flower. Blow out the candle." Repeat three times.

- **Balloon Breath:** Pairing a body movement with our breathing helps us slow down, focus, and return to the present moment. In this practice we use deep breathing and movement together to settle our mind. Here's how to do it:
 1. Sitting or standing, place both hands on top of your head. As you breathe in, slowly and deeply, model for children how to raise your hands above your head like you are blowing up a balloon. When you get to the top of your inhale breath, your arms should look like a big, round balloon above your head.
 2. As you exhale, slowly bring your hands back toward your head, matching the movement to your breath.
 3. Continue with this breath and arm movement 2-4 more times.

- **Starfish breathing** also focuses on teaching children a tool for practicing calm, steady breathing.
 1. Help children extend one hand with their palm down and fingers spread widely – like a starfish.
 2. Help children use the pointer finger from their other hand to trace each finger (the starfish) as they breathe. Begin at the thumb. As the child breathes in, they can trace their thumb up to the nail. Do this slowly and carefully. Match the finger tracing to the breath.
 3. Now, with your "out" breath, trace down the other side of the thumb.

4. Repeat with your remaining fingers. Move slowly and pay attention to keeping the breath and movement together. As you breathe and trace, notice the feelings of movement in your body.
5. When you finish tracing your pinky finger, rest for a moment. Notice how you are feeling. Then switch hands and do the practice one more time.

MANAGING TRANSITIONS: Help children move from one activity to another.

Planning for and following a routine is one of the best ways that early care providers can create mindful transitions between activities. You can use a mindfulness practice to help children recognize that one activity is ending and another one is beginning. Sound, songs, and music are wonderful ways to bring beauty and rhythm into the daily schedule. These elements can also ease the feelings of loss or disappointment that happen when children have to give up an activity they're enjoying and move on to another.



TRY THIS:

- **Sounds as signals.** Use a soft ringing bell or tinkling wind chime to get children's attention, provide a few moments of a shared pleasant experience, and signal it is time to move between spaces and activities. The bell/chime is interesting to children and they'll all want a turn at ringing the bell. If you introduce it with a sense of wonder and reverence, your students will pick up on your respect for this practice and will have respect for it themselves.
- **Joyful greeting.** Create a joyful morning greeting with a song as children arrive: "Awake, awake, awake, the sun has come and the moon has gone, we greet this day with our morning song. We are thankful for another day. We are thankful for another day."
- **Call and response.** Welcome students to circle time with call and response that includes a special acknowledgement to each child: "Hello, Billy, how are you? Stand up tall and we'll clap for you!" Once the student stands, the group claps for them.



SELF-COMPASSION: Remind yourself you're only human.

Mindful self-compassion is the act of showing yourself the compassion that you would show a friend. Self-compassion means that you can acknowledge your feelings in the midst of a stressful moment (frustration, anger, disappointment, etc.), recognize that everyone has moments when they're not perfect, and send yourself some loving care. You are human and you deserve the same care and consideration that you provide to the children, families, and colleagues that you work with.

TRY THIS:

- **Imagine someone who gives you comfort.** Think of someone—a family member, teacher, mentor, friend, or beloved pet. Imagine they are there with you, with a warm smile or comforting touch, sending you wishes for well-being. Feel their presence, their care and love for you. Spend a few minutes with that feeling of comfort and love.

- **Supportive touch.** Take a mini break to regroup when you're struggling. Think about ways you might "give yourself a hug"—a gentle touch that would be soothing and supportive. See what works best for you:
 - Place one or two hands on your cheek(s) and gently stroke your face.
 - Cross your arms over your chest and move down your arms with gentle strokes or firmer squeezes - whichever feels most comforting.
 - Place your hands on the tops of your thighs, lengthen your spine up and inhale deeply into your chest as you press down with your hands. Soften and release the pressure as you exhale.
 - Briskly rub your palms together to create some heat in the hands and then place your hands somewhere on the body (face, shoulders or back of neck) where the heat might feel nice.
 - Using a circular motion with your thumb and pointer finger, rub the outer edges of your ears, starting from the top and moving down to the ear lobe. This action stimulates the ear's nerve endings, increases blood flow, and can give you a little boost of energy.

WORK/LIFE BALANCE: Pause and reset.

When you care about the children and families you work with, it can be a struggle to leave your professional life behind at the end of the day. A mindfulness practice can make it easier to move on to the next part of your day. Building in a moment of calm helps you set the tone for whatever comes next.



TRY THIS:

- **Connect with nature.** Take time as you walk from the bus stop or return to your car to notice the world around you. Pay close attention to the colors, textures, smells, and sounds. See if you can find something new to notice each day, like the smell of the air after it rains, or the many different shades of green as you walk through the park.
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- **Five senses practice.** This practice can help you connect to your surroundings on your trip home, or as you get ready for bed after a long day.
 - **See.** Look around you, notice and name *five things that you can see*. As you do this, appreciate your sense of sight.
 - **Feel.** Notice *four things you can feel*. Notice and describe the texture of four things you can touch. Appreciate your skin and all that it takes in.
 - **Listen.** Notice *three things you can hear*. Listen carefully, notice and name three sounds you hear in your environment. Appreciate your sense of hearing.
 - **Smell.** Notice *two things you can smell*. Name these or just tune into the sensation of air in the nostrils. Appreciate your nose.
 - **Taste.** Notice *one thing you can taste*. Focus on the sensations in your mouth, like your teeth or tongue. Or just notice the taste in your mouth.
 - End the practice with gratitude for these 5 senses.

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