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Practical tips for teaching mindfulness to children and adolescents in school-based settings

Mindfulness derives from Buddhist practice and is described as “the process of engaging a full, direct, and active awareness of experienced phenomena that is spiritual in aspect and that is maintained from one moment to the next” (Van Gordon, Shonin, Zangeneh, & Griffiths, 2014). In a previous issue of *Education and Health*, we briefly reviewed research findings and discussed the growing interest amongst educational stakeholders into the applications of mindfulness for improving both the health and learning environment of school-aged children (Shonin, Van Gordon, & Griffiths, 2012). For example, mindfulness has been shown to improve levels of anxiety, depression, somatic distress, self-esteem, and sleep quality in schoolchildren with and without a psychiatric history (Biegel, Brown, Shapiro, & Schubert, 2009; Burke, 2010). Mindfulness has also been shown to improve childrens’ problematic responses to social stress (e.g., thought rumination, intrusive thoughts, emotional arousal, etc.) (Mendelson et al., 2010) as well as teacher-rated classroom social competent behaviours (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). Additionally, there is preliminary evidence to suggest that mindfulness can enhance metacognition and executive functioning in schoolchildren (Flook et al., 2010).

Ten practical tips

Following on from our more research-focussed article, this article provides ten practical tips for the effective teaching of mindfulness by teachers and/or mindfulness tutors to school-aged children.

(1) *Make use of meditative anchors:* Integral to the success of mindfulness programs for schoolchildren is to familiarise children with the

principle and use of meditative anchors. The most commonly taught meditative anchor is that of observing the breath. Full awareness of the in-breath and out-breath helps children to ‘tie their mind’ to the present moment and to regulate thought rumination (Shonin, Van Gordon, & Griffiths, 2013a). Given that concentration capacity is still developing in school-aged children, teaching children to count their breath (i.e., from 1 to 10 and then back again) is normally beneficial. Similarly, children generally find it easier if they are guided using simple and gently spoken phrases such as “breathing in, I am fully aware of my in-breath” and “breathing out, I am fully aware of my out-breath”. Other examples are “breathing in, I am here; breathing out, I am now” and “breathing in, there is nowhere I need to be; breathing out, I am already home”.

(2) *Demonstrate how to breathe correctly:* When using breath awareness as a meditative anchor, it is very important to discourage schoolchildren from forcing their breathing. In other words, the breath should be allowed to follow its natural course and to calm and deepen of its own accord (Shonin, Van Gordon, & Griffiths, 2014). Forced breathing runs contrary to the general principle of meditation which is that tranquillity and wisdom are naturally present in the mind and will arise of their own accord when the correct conditions come about (Dalai Lama, 2001). One of these ‘correct conditions’ is simply observing and nourishing the mind through mindful awareness (Shonin & Van Gordon, 2014). A metaphor that might be used to help explain this principle to schoolchildren is that of a garden fish pond – every time the garden pond is stirred or interfered with, the water becomes muddy and unsettled. However, if a

person sits quietly next to the pond and simply observes it, the water becomes perfectly still and clear again.

(3) *Use appropriate metaphors:* At first glance, many principles relating to meditation might appear to be very complicated and/or abstract – especially to schoolchildren. Indeed, in just the last few years, hundreds of scientific papers have been published attempting to analyse, dissect, and define the mindfulness construct (and mindfulness is in fact only one small aspect of Buddhist meditative practice) (Van Gordon et al., 2014). Despite this, mindfulness (and meditation more generally) is actually a very simple practice that is best understood by utilising a more intuitive rather than academic intelligence. Thus, by applying some imagination, it shouldn't be too difficult to formulate metaphors that are appropriate for schoolchildren. Examples of metaphors that schoolchildren generally respond well to include likening the practice of mindfulness to: (i) the sun that causes the flowers to grow by simply watching and shining on them, (ii) cats that tend to be more careful and deliberate in their movements as opposed to dogs that are often less gentle and composed, (iii) a graceful swan that is confident and elegant in the way it moves and that glides effortlessly through the water without disturbing it too much, (iv) the gatekeeper to a city who lets those with good intentions in (i.e., wholesome thoughts and emotions) but asks troublemakers (i.e., negative/maladaptive thoughts and emotions) to pass on by, and (v) a baby that having just put down a toy or another object, picks it up again a few seconds later and treats it as if it is an entirely new and fresh experience. Of course, a metaphor that is suitable for one group of children may not work well for another group. However, the ability to formulate suitable methods of explanation for schoolchildren will certainly be helped by teaching mindfulness from an experiential standpoint rather than solely from a manual.

(4) *Teach mindfulness from an experiential standpoint:* In our teaching and research of mindfulness and meditation, something that we have continuously observed is that children (and adults too) are sensitive to the extent to which the teacher is able to impart an embodied authentic experience of mindfulness. Put

simply, if the person teaching mindfulness is on some kind of spiritual trip, or their mindfulness experience is limited to information they have derived from reading a handful of books or attending a few mindfulness retreats, then children tend to notice this and become less receptive. Conversely, a teacher who is 'well-soaked' in meditation is able to teach from a more experiential standpoint. They naturally exert a reassuring presence that helps schoolchildren to relax and connect with their own capacity for cultivating meditative awareness.

(5) *Introduce children to mindfulness at an early age:* In our previous mindfulness article in *Education and Health*, we touched upon an ongoing debate amongst scientists regarding the most appropriate age to teach mindfulness to children. For example, some scholars believe that children (from a developmental ability standpoint) can be taught mindfulness from around 7 to 8 years of age. Others are of the opinion that a child's concentration span is too underdeveloped at this age and that mindfulness should not be taught to children until they are in their early teenage years (see Burke, 2010). These different scientific standpoints offer interesting perspectives on the most appropriate time to introduce children to the practice of mindfulness. However, consistent with the pedagogic approach used as part of traditional Buddhist practice, the best time to teach mindfulness to children is right now. In other words, the earlier a child is introduced to mindfulness the better. Rather than the extensive use of instruction manuals, our own view is that the most effective means of introducing schoolchildren to mindfulness is for the teacher to simply be mindful. When a teacher is mindful of their being, when they walk around the classroom and school practicing full awareness of each and every breath and of each and every step, research indicates that the calming presence they emanate helps to improve children's levels of wellbeing and classroom behaviour (Singh, Lancioni, Winton, Karazsia, & Singh, 2013). As a child observes the teacher having time for life and for other people, and not rushing their lives away, it appears that they begin to understand intuitively what it means to live in the present moment. Thus, although there is undoubtedly a

need for children to receive age-appropriate oral and written instructions on how to practice mindfulness, due to teachers 'practicing what they teach' and allowing their own mindful presence to establish an atmosphere of awareness, there may be less of a requirement for mindfulness teaching curricula that are heavily theoretically orientated.

(6) *Focus on the integration of mindfulness into everyday life:* Although it is unquestionably beneficial for children to meet with the mindfulness teacher regularly, emphasis should be placed on empowering children to introduce mindfulness into all aspects of their lives. Many children find a CD of short, guided meditations to be invaluable in this respect. Where a child's living situation allows, another effective life-integration strategy is to work with children's parents and/or caregivers in order to establish a program of at-home mindfulness practice that the entire family can engage with. Our personal preference is to do this on a case-by-case basis (i.e., rather than prescribing a blanket amount of formal meditation practice time for all people), and we generally encourage people to try and adopt a dynamic meditation routine. In this manner, children and their parents are dissuaded from drawing divisions between mindfulness practice during formal seated meditation and practice during everyday activities. The purpose of this is to reduce the likelihood of dependency on the need for formal meditation sessions (Shonin, Van Gordon, & Griffiths, 2013b).

(7) *Use mindfulness reminders:* In addition to the use of a CD and involving parents and/or caregivers, 'mindfulness reminders' are a further strategy for helping children maintain mindful awareness during everyday activities. An example of a mindfulness reminder is an hour chime (e.g., from a wrist-watch or mobile phone), that, upon sounding, can be used as a trigger by children to gently return their awareness to the present moment and to the natural flow of their breathing. Depending on their levels of development, some children are able to cope with (or even prefer) a less sensory reminder such as a simple acronym. For example, in the eight-week secular mindfulness program known as *Meditation Awareness Training* (MAT), children are sometimes taught to use a three-step SOS technique to facilitate

recovery of meditative concentration by 'sending out an SOS' at the point when difficult thoughts and feelings arise (Box 1).

Box 1. The three-step SOS technique

Sending out an SOS	
1.	Stop
2.	Observe the breath
3.	Step-back and watch the mind

(Adapted from Shonin et al., 2013b)

(8) *Encourage children to assume a correct meditation posture:* Although the focus of mindfulness practice should be directed towards its maintenance during everyday activities, short formal daily seated-meditation sessions are an essential aspect of mindfulness training. As part of seated meditation practice, a good physical posture helps to facilitate the cultivation of a good mental posture. The most important aspect of the meditation posture is stability and this can be achieved whether sitting upright on a chair or on a meditation cushion (Shonin et al., 2013b). In the aforementioned eight-week MAT teaching program, the analogy used to explain the most appropriate posture for meditation is that of a mountain; a mountain has a definite presence, it is upright and stable but it is also without tension and does not have to strain to maintain its posture - it is relaxed, content, and deeply-rooted in the earth (Van Gordon, Shonin, Sumich, Sundin, & Griffiths, 2013).

(9) *Make things enjoyable and stimulating:* As with most activities involving schoolchildren, stimulating and enjoyable teaching methods are integral to effective cognitive development and knowledge acquisition. Accordingly, the following exercises - adapted from our work with children using MAT - are examples of how to cultivate an engaging learning environment for mindfulness education:

- (i) Make use of sensory devices such as a meditation gong or singing bowl - the sound can be used to help guide the meditation,
- (ii) If the classroom set-up allows, try a game of "alternative musical chairs" - when the music is paused, children stop wherever they are and take a few conscious breaths (in and out) before

walking slowly and in silence towards an unoccupied chair,

- (iii) Practice mindfulness outside and/or in nature – invite children to be silent and to become aware of and relax into the sights, sounds, and smells around them,
- (iv) Practice walking meditation – invite children to walk silently and at a very slow pace (e.g., 20 steps per minute) whilst paying attention to their breath and bodies, as well as to all of the muscles that are used during the everyday process of putting one foot in front of the other, and
- (v) Don't turn periods of seated meditation into an endurance exercise (i.e., guided meditations of around 2-10 minutes seem to work well for school-age children).

(10) *Encourage teachers to practice mindfulness 'on the job'*: Several of the foregoing practical tips have made reference to the importance of teachers coming to some kind of experiential appreciation of the benefits and subtleties of mindfulness practice. However, from the teacher's perspective, maintaining a regular practice of mindfulness does not have to encroach into busy work schedules. In fact, rather than 'taking time out', mindfulness practice really begins when a person gets up from their meditation cushion (or chair) and continues with work and daily tasks (Shonin et al., 2014). So the practice of mindfulness is less about finding the time to practice, and more about simply remembering to engage a mindful attention-set during whatever activity one happens to be engaged in. For example;

- As you read this article, are you fully aware of your breathing?
- As you breath in and out are you aware of the rise and fall of your chest?
- Can you feel the weight of your body on the chair you are sitting on?
- Do you know how you are sitting – is your posture that of somebody who is awake and fully participating in the world or are you slumped right back in your chair?
- Are you fully present as you read this or is your mind already jumping to whatever you will be doing next?

- In short, are you fully aware of each precious moment of your life as it passes?

Developing childrens' competence in mindfulness requires patience, regular practice, and a teacher with a firmly-embedded and experiential knowledge of mindfulness. With these essential ingredients in place, we believe the above practical suggestions will help to foster a teaching environment conducive to children cultivating aptitude and an authentic understanding of mindfulness practice.

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