



The Family Meditation Session

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By: Sue Shellenbarger

Asking a child to sit still for meditation doesn't sound like a recipe for easing stress. **Yet more families are making a few shared minutes of quiet contemplation a part of their daily routines. When handled with flexibility and a sense of humor, they say, the practice can calm their children, reduce stress and anxiety and help them focus.**

Meditation is increasingly taught in the West as a secular discipline aimed at gaining awareness, or mindfulness—the ability to notice and focus calmly on thoughts and feelings as they arise, without reacting or judging. More than two dozen books on mindfulness training for children and teens have been published in the last three years.

A growing number of schools are teaching mindfulness. A 12-week program of mindfulness training was linked to improvements in children's ability to pay attention and control their emotions, and to reductions in stress, depression symptoms and aggression, according to a controlled study of 99 fourth and fifth-graders published last January in *Developmental Psychology*. The study is one of dozens in the past several years linking mindfulness training to improvements in children's behavior and emotional health.

Luring a squirming youngster into meditation at home can be hard, however, and sticking to it takes flexibility and a sense of humor. Chris and Stephen Barnett decided to try meditating with their 8-year-old daughter Eliza early this year after they noticed she was having trouble paying attention in school. Teachers mentioned her daydreaming in class, and testing at school showed Eliza's performance didn't match her ability, says Ms. Barnett, Garnet Valley, Pa.

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Mr. Barnett, who owns two Clothes Mentor resale stores with his wife, has been meditating several days a week for years, and Ms. Barnett has dabbled in meditation too. After she researched the potential benefits for children, they decided to start meditating sitting quietly with Eliza for 5 to 15 minutes after breakfast each morning.

They had a few false starts. The Barnetts tried breathing and counting exercises, but Eliza turned them into a game. Ms. Barnett looked into a simple practice, gazing at a candle flame, and found the ritual helped Eliza quiet down. “Eliza gets to pick the candle, and we put it in the center of the breakfast table and sit quietly,” backs straight and eyes fixed on the flame, Ms. Barnett says.

“It’s hard not to laugh” when Eliza starts humming sometimes, or makes the candle flame flicker by exhaling deeply, Ms. Barnett says. Eliza loves the time with her parents, Ms. Barnett says. “There’s an intimacy about sitting around the table as a family, in complete silence.” Eliza recently has been reading with more focus, says Ms. Barnett. Her grades have risen and teachers are no longer reporting problems focusing. Also, meditation sometimes lightens Eliza’s mood, Mr. Barnett says, from a little disagreeable to sweet and cooperative.

Teachers caution that children shouldn’t be pressured to meditate. “Keep it playful,” says therapist and mindfulness trainer Eline Snel, author of “Sitting Still Like a Frog,” a book on mindfulness for children.

Preschoolers may not be able to sit still for more than 10 seconds; this is enough for them to learn to take a deep, relaxing breath. Five-year-olds may be able to be fairly quiet for 3 to 5 minutes; 6- or 7-year-olds often can do so for 5 to 15 minutes. Starting around age 8, some teachers say, most children can sit quietly for at least a minute for each year of their age, and their ability grows with practice.

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Showing your child what meditation looks like and setting aside a specific time of day to practice it can spark their interest. “The best teacher is a parent who meditates,” says Angela Stewart, who teaches a meditation class for parents and children at Atisha Kadampa Buddhist Center, Providence, R.I. “Children will naturally want to try, because they’ll see you doing it and getting benefits from it.” Although meditation is part of the Buddhist tradition, its benefits can be experienced by anyone.

Amy Wright Glenn, who meditates regularly, says her son Taber sometimes imitated her when he was a toddler, sitting beside her with legs folded, saying, “Mommy, I meditate too.” Taber, now 4, sometimes initiates meditation sessions when Ms. Glenn and her husband sit on their porch in the evening. They light a candle and Taber takes the lead, saying, “Now, let me teach you today. Close your eyes. If you hear sounds, that is OK, just breathe,” says Ms. Glenn, a Pompano Beach, Fla., yoga teacher, author and blogger at PhillyVoice.com. Candle-gazing can cultivate the ability to concentrate, teachers say.

Mark Muesse, an associate professor of religious studies at Rhodes College, Memphis, Tenn., who also teaches meditation, plays a game with children using a resonant Tibetan singing bowl, which vibrates with a prolonged, haunting ring, telling them, “raise your hand when you can no longer hear the bell,” he says. Small children learn to extend their attention without realizing they’re doing so, he says. Parents at home can use any kind of resonant bell or chime.

Listening to guided meditations help children pay attention longer. Ms. Snel’s book includes a CD with 11 meditations including a 4-minute track for children as young as 4, “The Little Frog,” which encourages users to imitate a frog at rest—being keenly aware of sights and sounds, but sitting completely still.

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Other exercises help children anchor their attention by focusing on their breathing, a basic practice for beginners. Ms. Snel encourages children to “lower their attention from their heads to their bellies, like a small spider on a thread,” and notice the calm movement of their breath. She advises against using a timer for such exercises because it tends to “bring all kinds of other thoughts into your mind, such as, ‘When is the end?’” she says.

Parents also can have children lie faceup on the floor, place a bean bag or stuffed animal on their stomachs, watch the object rise and fall with their breaths, and notice their heart rate declining as their breathing slows, says Maria Hersey, director of education and training for MindUP, a Miami, Fla.-based nonprofit that develops mindfulness programs for schools.

Children who can’t sit still can still take part. The goal of meditation is to calm and stabilize the mind, not to sit still, says Dr. Stewart, a clinical psychologist. In her class for children 5 and up, “many are able to hold a traditional meditation posture, but others might be pulling their sweatshirts over their heads to block out distractions,” she says. “They’re going to get urges to wiggle.”

She urges them to “try your best to keep bringing your attention back to your breath, until you notice a calm, peaceful feeling inside your heart. Then, shift your attention and stay with this feeling.” Many children also need to look around during meditation, says Ms. Snel, founder and director of the Academy for Mindful Teaching, a Leusden, Netherlands, training organization. Most learn to sit quite still after practicing for a while. Setting a predictable routine, with certain activities leading to meditation exercises, can help children prepare to settle down, Dr. Stewart says.

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