

Mindfulness in early childhood learning environments cultivates self-awareness, emotional regulation, and cognitive focus, fostering a conducive atmosphere for social-emotional development and academic readiness.

Embedding Mindfulness Into Early Childhood Classroom Routines

A Practical Strategy for Teachers

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Ms. Nina has been teaching addition in her inclusive 1st-grade classroom. One morning, just five minutes into the activity, she notices that Ravi has lost interest and is chatting with his peers and that Molly is playing with her pencil. Ms. Nina has been observing similar behaviors since the new school year started a month ago. She understands that children need time and support when adjusting to the classroom routine and she is committed to promoting meaningful classroom engagement in order to ensure the mental well-being of the children in her classroom and of herself as their educator.

While Ms. Nina makes adjustments to include more fun activities, she observes that many children still find it challenging to concentrate on activities that need more attention, such as math or reading. Ms. Nina already



teaches an individualized lesson to two children with disabilities while the other students do their individual work. She decides to add in time to focus on children who lose attention during reading or math activities. However, she finds that she cannot complete her lesson plan for the day and is stressed about how the children's learning is being impacted by such attention issues.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Ms. Nina had joined an online mindfulness course that helped her manage her anxiety and stress. She found many benefits to these practices for herself and decides to incorporate mindfulness in her classroom. As some adult mindfulness practices would not be appropriate for her students, she adapts them to accommodate children and to incorporate them into her existing lessons.

She begins by introducing meditation to the children, modeling the activity first. She dims the light, plays calming music, and asks the children to close their eyes for five minutes and focus on the music. After five minutes, the children are calm and ready to start the reading activity. Ms. Nina consciously invites children who she anticipated might struggle with this new routine to sit with her so that she can help them if needed. In the afternoon session, Ms. Nina sees that the energy of the children is ebbing, so she asks everyone to stretch for two minutes before starting the math session. Again, she starts by modeling the activity.

Ms. Nina tries different activities for one month and organizes the most effective mindfulness activities into a Mindful Activity Chart designed for her

classroom. Now as she plans her lessons, she embeds mindfulness activities. She selects the activity according to the time of day, the typical needs of children in her classroom, and the type of activity that will follow. Ms. Nina realizes that these mindfulness breaks have been excellent for the children's mental health as well as her own. The breaks support the children's concentration and also meet her own self-care needs. She is excited to see that many of the children are practicing mindfulness on their own when they become frustrated or sad or get into disagreements with peers.

Early childhood classrooms demand considerable emotional and physical engagement from both educators and children throughout the day. At times, this can lead to stress, anxiety, restlessness, and fatigue.

According to transactional theory,¹ a reciprocal relationship exists between teachers and children in the classroom. Teachers' mental health and well-being directly impact children's mental health and well-being, and vice versa. This interconnectedness emphasizes the urgent need to address the mental health needs of both educators and children. Mindfulness practices can be employed as an effective tool for doing so.

The Impact of Mindfulness on Early Childhood Education

Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as a conscious act of paying non-judgmental attention moment by moment by living in the present.² Mindfulness practice has a significant impact, yielding positive health outcomes by alleviating chronic stress both



in the body and mind.³ When embraced within the early childhood education context, mindfulness is a powerful tool for nurturing physical and emotional well-being by quieting the mind's wandering and relieving muscle tension, anxiety, and stress.

Mindfulness emerges as an excellent tool for sharpening focus and concentration on the present moment, making it a valuable asset for teachers and children within the classroom environment. By cultivating mindfulness, educators and students can significantly enhance their ability to concentrate on classroom activities, thereby sustaining the efficiency of teaching and learning in early childhood educational settings.⁴

The influence of mindfulness also extends to interpersonal dynamics within the classroom. It equips educators with the capacity to be fully present in their interactions,⁵ deepening their connections with the children in their classrooms and helping to regulate children's emotional states.⁶ Early childhood educators who embrace mindfulness report better-quality educator-child relationships in their classrooms.⁷ Mindfulness practices in the classroom foster a nurturing learning environment and cultivate an atmosphere in which children flourish.

In early childhood education, children often face stress from diverse sources, including: digital media engagement; difficulty grasping early mathematical and linguistic concepts; grade transitions; and separation from parents, siblings, peers, and friends. Mindfulness emerges as an effective practice for strengthening children's mental health and well-being amid these stressors. Embedding a mindfulness approach serves as a guiding practice, amplifying children's happiness, fostering playfulness, and infusing liveliness into early childhood education settings.⁸

Embedding Mindfulness Into Classroom Activities

Traditionally, the emphasis on mindfulness and well-being practices has centered on teachers, sometimes adding to their already demanding workload. Teachers understandably may feel overwhelmed, perceiving mindfulness as an additional task. However, it is crucial to recognize that this concern can be effectively addressed, and, more importantly, the mental health needs of children can be attended



to through the incorporation of mindfulness into classroom activities.

The embedding mindfulness approach introduces small, frequent mindfulness activities within classroom activities without disrupting major curricular elements. This approach aims to make mindfulness an organic and integral part of classroom routines rather than an isolated practice. By weaving mindfulness into everyday learning activities, teachers can create an environment that enhances children's well-being and allows them to develop effective and practical mindfulness skills as a natural extension of their academic growth. The focus shifts from mindfulness as an added burden for teachers to a holistic strategy for nurturing the mental and emotional well-being of both educators and children within the educational setting.

Benefits of Embedding Mindfulness Into Classroom Activities

Embedding mindfulness activities into young students' daily routines can be a powerful tool for improving children's cognitive and emotional development, particularly by working on children's self-regulation skills.⁹ These embedded mindfulness activities typically require only two to five minutes and can be incorporated into natural classroom transitions. A brief duration aligns seamlessly with the limited attention span characteristic of young children, making mindfulness a feasible, practical, and effective addition to early childhood education.

As early childhood educators incorporate mindfulness practices into their daily routines, immediate benefits become apparent through enhanced child attention and concentration during classroom activities.¹⁰ When integrating mindfulness activities into classroom routines, teachers are able to tailor the activities to the unique needs of the children in their

classroom. The Mindfulness Activity Chart presented in Figure 1 offers a diverse range of mindfulness activities from which to choose. Educators can exercise creativity and adaptability by crafting their own sets of activities while formulating daily lesson plans. This flexible approach enhances children's cognitive and emotional

well-being and also offers teachers a brief yet invaluable break during the mindful transitions between classroom activities. By embracing the embedding mindfulness approach, educators can cultivate a harmonious and productive classroom environment that nurtures their children's academic and emotional growth.

Figure 1: Mindfulness Activity Chart to Guide Embedding Mindfulness Into Classroom Routines.

Physical-Focused Activities

Silent Walk (minimal guidance required)

- Upon completing any task, children can opt for a peaceful, silent walk within the classroom, ensuring they do not disrupt others.
- This time can be used by teachers to assist children who need additional support or prepare the next classroom activity.

Yoga/Stretching Exercises (minimal guidance required)

- After extended periods of sitting, reading, or writing, children can engage in a brief two-minute yoga or stretching session.
- Yoga/stretching can help reenergize children and prepare them for upcoming classroom activities.
- Teachers can use this time to support children or participate themselves in yoga/stretching.

Breathing Exercises (continuous guidance is essential)

- Guided breathing exercises conducted by the teacher with the entire class is best.
- These exercises serve as a valuable transition mindfulness activity, especially after intense physical activities, allowing children to relax and recharge their minds and bodies for the next classroom routine.

Mind-Focused Activities

Doodling (minimal guidance required)

- A doodling activity can be provided to children at any time.
- It is a good activity to use when children are feeling stressed, less attentive, or unhappy with peers.
- A doodling spot can be created in the classroom with small boards/drawing papers and colorful chalks/pencils.

One-Word Reflection (minimal guidance required)

- Upon completing current tasks, children can reflect on their emotions and express them with a single word, along with a brief explanation if desired.

Journal Writing (some guidance required)

- Teachers can provide a list of journal writing topics, such as writing about the day, friends, animals, or current emotions.
- Children who are not proficient in writing can express their feelings through drawings in journals.

Quiet Mindfulness Activities

Calming Music (some guidance required)

- A designated music listening area can be established in the classroom (music device with headphones/speakers).
- Children can have the opportunity, especially after physically or mentally demanding activities, to listen to calming music before transitioning to the next classroom activity.

Silent Contemplation (some guidance required)

- Children can take a five-minute silent break, particularly after physical activities, to calm their minds and bodies before proceeding to the next activity.
- Teachers can join in this mindfulness activity alongside children, benefiting from its calming effects as they prepare for the next activity.

Meditation (guidance is necessary)

- A designated meditation spot, possibly within the reading section of the classroom, can be created.
- Children can be guided and offered the opportunity to meditate during transitions or when facing individually stressful situations.



Recommendations for Practical Implementation of Embedding Mindfulness Approach

The Mindfulness Activity Chart encompasses a diverse array of mindfulness activities, along with considerations for application in the classroom setting. The primary objective is to assist educators in identifying a variety of mindfulness activities that can cater to the specific needs of the children in their class.

- **Physical-focused activities**, such as *silent walks*, *yoga/stretching exercises*, and *breathing exercises*, are particularly effective during moments when children's energy levels are dropping, as can happen after extended periods of sitting. These activities serve to reenergize children and prepare them for subsequent tasks. They offer a spectrum of engagement levels, from minimal guidance to continuous support, allowing educators and children the flexibility to select activities based on their interests and needs. For instance, guided breathing exercises can be effortlessly integrated if a teacher seeks a collective, mindful transition to the next activity for the entire class. Alternatives like

silent walking can accommodate children who have already completed an activity while the teacher attends to others who require support.

- **Mind-focused activities** can be introduced whenever educators sense the need for a mindful pause for children or themselves before a transition. These activities, which include *chalk doodling*, *one-word reflections*, or *journal writing*, require minimal guidance and are equally accessible to children whenever they experience stress, sadness, or diminished attentiveness. Additionally, they are well-suited for transitions that require moderate concentration, such as group projects.
- **Quiet mindfulness activities**, such as *meditation*, *silent contemplation*, or *listening to calming music*, find their niche in activities that demand heightened attention and focus, such as writing assignments or assessments. By incorporating these practices, children and educators can effectively calm and relax their minds and bodies, thus preparing themselves for subsequent classroom activities that demand sustained attention and continuous mindful engagement.

Educators can adapt existing mindfulness practices or incorporate new ones into their personalized Mindfulness Activity Chart, customizing their approach to align with the unique needs and dynamics of their classrooms. Abundant online

resources are available to support educators in their pursuit of embedding mindfulness into early childhood settings. Table 1 enumerates a few evidence-based mindfulness resources for further exploration.

Table 1. Web-Based Mindfulness Resources for Early Childhood Education Settings.

Resource	Weblink	Description
A Toolkit for Early Childhood Organizations	www.zerotothree.org/resource/getting-started-with-mindfulness-a-toolkit-for-early-childhood-organizations	This toolkit provides guidance on integrating mindfulness techniques into the daily routines and organizational culture of early childhood professionals. It highlights the importance of practical mindfulness strategies.
Focused Kids	focusedkids.org	This program has created a mindfulness curriculum tailored for children age 3-8, which includes activities like breathing exercises, movement, and sensory awareness. It is designed for both parents and teachers to implement.
Mindful Schools	mindfulschools.org	This website offers valuable resources for school communities, promoting connectivity, healing, and thriving, all in the pursuit of collective well-being.
Mindfulness in Schools Project (MiSP)	mindfulnessinschools.org	The project's website offers a range of resources aimed at fostering mindfulness among educators and young children, with the goal of promoting their well-being.
MindUP For Schools	mindup.org/mindup-for-schools	Crafted to cater to all types of classrooms, this program offers evidence-based resources that enhance pro-social behavior and academic performance.
Smiling Mind	smilingmind.com.au	This is a no-cost website linked to a complementary app that offers free online programs and resources to anyone dedicated to enhancing the well-being of children.
Center for Healthy Minds: The Kindness Curriculum	centerhealthyminds.org/join-the-movement/lessons-from-creating-a-kindness-curriculum	The curriculum was designed by the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin-Madison with the aim of helping children improve their abilities in kindness, attention, and emotional regulation.
Wellness Works in Schools	wellnessworksinschools.com	This website offers training and curriculum materials designed to promote wellness among both educators and students in schools. In addition, it offers free access to a variety of blogs that present diverse mindfulness strategies for implementation within educational institutions.

Key Points to Consider Before Embedding Mindfulness

Figure 2 provides a comprehensive list that educators can follow when integrating mindfulness into daily classroom routines. A fundamental recommendation is that educators should personally embrace and proficiently practice any mindfulness activity they intend to introduce to children. This proactive engagement ensures that educators are not only well-versed but also able to tailor these practices to suit the unique needs of children in their classrooms.¹¹ It is crucial that the selected mindfulness activities align with the classroom's specific environment. For instance, activities like meditation and focused breathing necessitate a serene and

quiet atmosphere conducive to inner reflection. In contrast, activities such as stretching exercises may require more energetic instruction and movement.

By practicing mindfulness alongside the children in their classroom, educators serve as living examples as they demonstrate the value of these practices in real time. Yet educators should never impose mindfulness activities upon children. Instead, they should respect and be attuned to each child's individual readiness and willingness to engage with these practices, fostering an environment of consent and comfort.

It is also recommended that educators adapt mindfulness practices to cater to the diverse needs and abilities of the children. Adaptation of mindfulness practices

Figure 2: Checklist to Support Educators in Embedding Mindfulness Into Classroom Routines.

Familiarize Yourself With Mindfulness Techniques:

- Prior to introducing mindfulness into the classroom, become proficient and comfortable with the techniques.
- Be open to modifying, changing, or discontinuing mindfulness activities based on students' interests and engagement responses.

Demonstrate Mindfulness Activities:

- Modeling mindfulness activities is essential, particularly during the initial phase of implementation. As students become familiar with them, it may become less necessary.

Provide Optional Participation:

- Make mindfulness activities optional; educators should model and offer opportunities, but participation should not be mandatory.

Adapt Mindfulness Activities:

- Personalize and adapt mindfulness activities to suit the unique needs of students, recognizing that different students may prefer different activities even within the same classroom.

Ensure Necessary Resources and Appropriate Environment:

- Ensure the availability of required resources before planning any mindfulness activity.
- Plan mindfulness activities with consideration of the classroom environment.

Collaborate With Other Stakeholders:

- Collaborate with various stakeholders in early childhood education, including special education teachers, occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech-language pathologists, and community/family members.

Reflect and Review Mindfulness Activities:

- Implement a monthly reflection and review process to assess the impact of embedding mindfulness activities on students' and educators' overall well-being.



necessitates collaboration with a spectrum of professionals, including classroom teachers, special education teachers, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and families. This collective effort ensures that mindfulness is inclusive and accessible to all children, regardless of their unique capabilities and challenges, thereby promoting a supportive and equitable learning environment.

Conclusion

Early childhood settings are vibrant hubs of learning and teaching, where stress and distractions are a part of the landscape. Cultivating skills that enhance attention, focus, and calmness can significantly benefit both children and educators. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of mental health and well-being; therefore, there has never been a more opportune moment to integrate mindfulness practices into early childhood education. This embedding mindfulness approach aids in retaining educators by equipping them with stress-management tools and allows attention to mental health issues in early childhood education, facilitating the evolution of early childhood settings into more nurturing environments that foster academic growth while supporting the emotional and mental well-being of both children and educators.

Notes:

¹ Sameroff, A. (1975). Transactional models in early social relations. *Human Development*, 18(1-2), 65-79.

² Kabat-Zinn, J. (1990). *Using the wisdom of your body and mind to face stress, pain, and illness*. Random House.

³ Hartigan, B. F. (2017). Mindfulness in teacher education: A constructivist approach to stress reduction for teacher candidates and their students. *Childhood Education*, 93(2), 153-158.

⁴ Beers Dewhirst, C., & Goldman, J. (2020). Launching motivation for mindfulness: Introducing mindfulness to early childhood preservice teachers. *Early Child Development and Care*, 190(8), 1299-1312.

⁵ Trube, B. (2017). Mindfulness practices in mentoring and teaching. *Childhood Education*, 93(2), 159-167.

⁶ Duncan, L. G., Coatsworth, J. D., & Greenberg, M. T. (2009). A model of mindful parenting: Implications for parent-child relationships and prevention research. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 12(3), 255-270.

⁷ Becker, B. D., Gallagher, K. C., & Whitaker, R. C. (2017). Teachers' dispositional mindfulness and the quality of their relationships with children in Head Start classrooms. *Journal of School Psychology*, 65, 40-53.

⁸ Lee, R. L. T., Lane, S. J., Tang, A. C. Y., Leung, C., Kwok, S. W. H., Louie, L. H. T., Browne, G., & Chan, S. W. C. (2020). Effects of an unstructured free play and mindfulness intervention on well-being in kindergarten students. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(15), 5382.

⁹ Janz, P., Dawe, S., & Wyllie, M. (2019). Mindfulness-based program embedded within the existing curriculum improves executive functioning and behavior in young children: A waitlist controlled trial. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 2052.

¹⁰ Routhier-Martin, K., Roberts, S. K., & Blanch, N. (2017). Exploring mindfulness and meditation for the elementary classroom: Intersections across current multidisciplinary research. *Childhood Education*, 93(2), 168-175.

¹¹ Lederer, S. H. (2018). Mindful attention activities to support shared book reading. *Young Exceptional Children*, 21(4), 216-227.

Disclosure Statement:

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