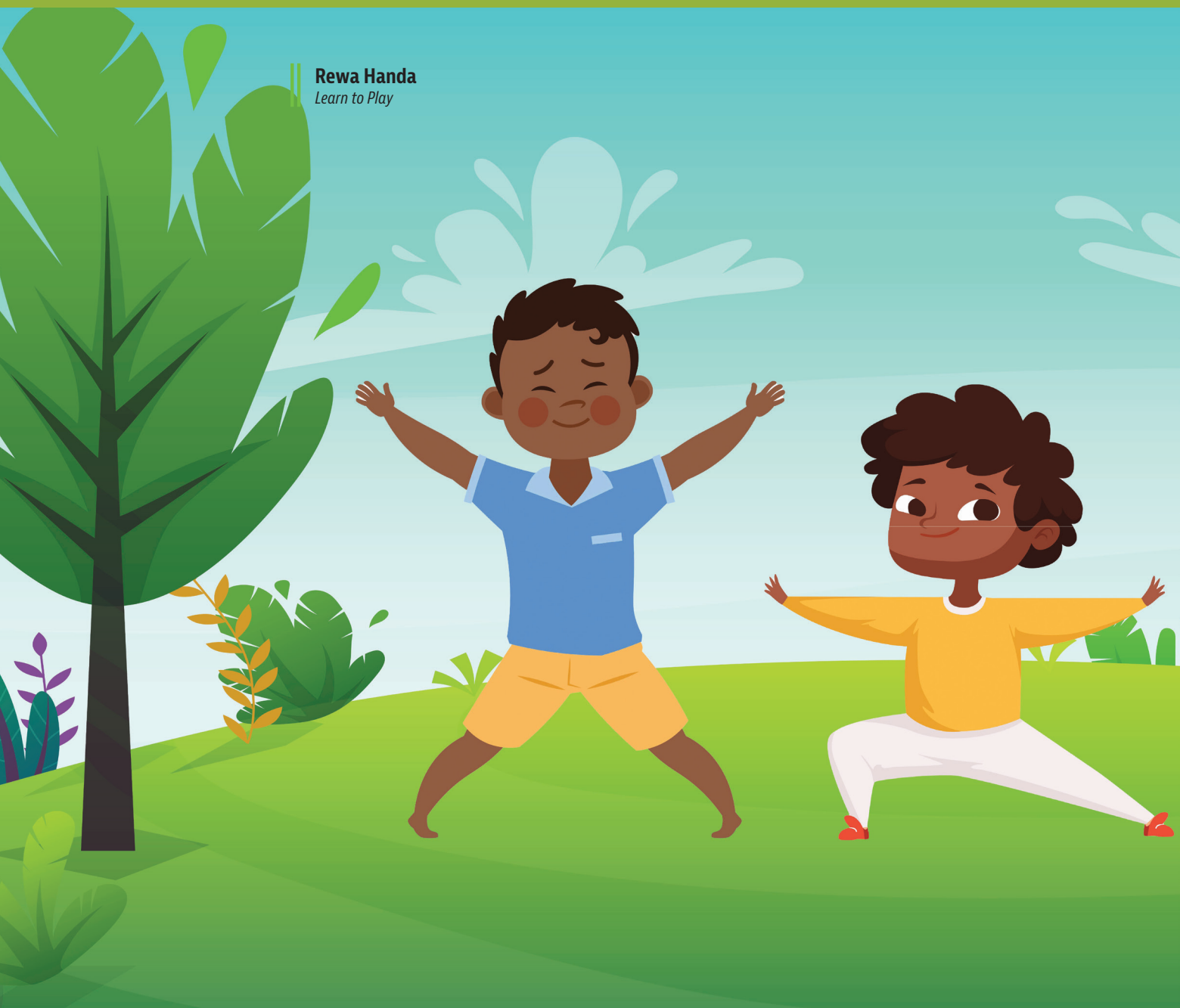


Movement is important for mindfulness activities with young children because it helps them stay engaged, release energy, and develop body awareness, making it easier to connect with the present moment.

The Mindful Way

Rethinking Mindfulness for the Way Children Learn

Rewa Handa
Learn to Play



“My child spent 2 years at Learn to Play and during that time, he learnt so much, he is now at primary school. I am thankful for the exposure Learn To Play has provided me. Especially activities like yoga and mindfulness as they benefit both us and our children. We are able to manage ours and our children’s emotions and we have less stress and behaviour problems.”

—Learn To Play playgroup parent

We often teach mindfulness to children the way we teach adults—through structured breathing exercises, sitting still, and focusing inward. But behavioral science suggests that children learn best through movement, interaction, and sensory exploration. The way children’s brains develop shows that learning is an active process, not a passive one. To truly nurture mindfulness in young children, we must align our methods with how they naturally learn—through play.


How Children Learn: The Science Behind Play-Based Learning

Children are born to learn through play. It is not just an activity they enjoy—it is the primary way they develop cognitive, emotional, and social skills. Studies from Harvard University’s Center on the Developing Child¹ emphasize that early experiences shape brain architecture, laying the foundation for all future learning. During early years, children form and strengthen neural connections at an astonishing rate of over one million new connections per second. These connections are reinforced when children actively engage with their environment, experiment with new ideas, and interact with caregivers and peers. Unlike passive learning methods, play requires children to make decisions, respond to challenges, and interact dynamically with their surroundings. Research from The LEGO Foundation² identifies “actively engaging” experiences as an essential element of effective learning through play. Children learn best when they are immersed in experiences that are meaningful, joyful, and iterative—when they can explore, fail, adjust, and try again.

Why Learn To Play Developed The Mindful Way

This understanding is at the heart of The Mindful Way, a program designed by Learn to Play to cultivate mindfulness through movement, breathing, and sensory-rich





activities. The program was developed in response to the specific needs of the children and families Learn to Play works with—many of whom face economic hardships, high levels of stress, and limited access to early childhood education resources.

Traditional mindfulness approaches, often borrowed from adult practices, require children to sit still, close their eyes, and focus inward. But for young children, especially those living in challenging environments, this can feel unnatural or even inaccessible. Many of the children Learn to Play serve come from backgrounds where survival and resilience are daily realities. Expecting them to engage in stillness-based mindfulness exercises overlooks the ways they instinctively self-regulate—through movement, sensory play, and social connection.

The Mindful Way shifts the focus from mindfulness as a static exercise to mindfulness as an active skill that children practice naturally in their daily interactions. Through guided playgroups, storytelling, and interactive movement, children develop emotional awareness, resilience, and self-regulation in ways that feel intuitive and engaging. This approach ensures that mindfulness is not something children are told to “do” but rather something they experience through play.

The Link Between Play, Wellbeing, and Mindfulness

Children learn best when they are happy and engaged. This principle is supported by global research on wellbeing and education, including findings from HundrED’s Spotlight on Wellbeing in Schools, which recognized The Mindful Way as one of the most effective and scalable innovations for children’s wellbeing.

HundrED’s report highlights the critical role of wellbeing in education, emphasizing that student wellbeing is a prerequisite for learning. It argues that schools must move beyond purely academic outcomes and instead foster a culture of wellbeing that prioritizes students’ emotional and psychological health. The report, informed by research from institutions like the Wellbeing Research Centre at Oxford University and the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University, identifies key barriers to student wellbeing, including academic pressure, socio-economic challenges, and the need for a clear, universally understood definition of wellbeing.

One of the report’s main recommendations is that wellbeing initiatives should be rooted in evidence-based approaches and tailored to local



Children engaging in a mindfulness activity at the Pandamatenga Playgroup in Botswana—creating space for stillness, focus, and emotional awareness through play. © Learn to Play





contexts—principles that align with Learn To Play’s *Mindful Way* program. By integrating mindfulness into play rather than treating it as a rigid, sit-down exercise, *The Mindful Way* reflects the report’s emphasis on holistic, scalable solutions that prioritize the whole child.

Making Mindfulness a Playful Habit

The *Mindful Way* incorporates movement-based activities that naturally cultivate mindfulness. For example:

- **Breath and Movement Games:** Children engage in playful breathing exercises that incorporate movement, such as pretending to blow up a balloon (deep belly breathing) or “blowing bubbles” with their breath.
- **Sensory Play:** Activities like walking barefoot on different textures, or mindful finger-painting help children become more aware of their senses and emotions.
- **Storytelling With Mindful Reflection:** Guided stories help children explore emotions, resilience, and empathy in a way that feels immersive and meaningful.

**Mindful
play
training
with the
Duara team
in Kenya.**

© Learn
to Play



- **Interactive Group Activities:**

Games like yoga, mirroring movements, mindful stretching, or rhythm-based exercises foster connection and self-awareness.

These activities align with how children’s brains learn best—through play, exploration, and joyful engagement. Over time, such practices help children develop skills that contribute to long-term mental wellbeing, including impulse control, emotional regulation, and social awareness.

Importantly, this approach is also showing measurable improvements in social and emotional learning outcomes. In 2023, just 30% of children attending Learn to Play playgroups were meeting their social and emotional learning milestones. Since the implementation of *The Mindful Way* in 2024, that number has increased to an impressive 92%. This dramatic shift highlights how integrating mindfulness into playful, developmentally appropriate experiences can have a transformative effect on a child’s ability to navigate their emotional world and relate to others.

A Glimpse Inside The Mindful Way Curriculum

One of the core strengths of *The Mindful Way* is its ability to seamlessly integrate mindfulness into everyday learning. Take, for example, our Positive Affirmations activity—an exercise designed to nurture self-esteem through playful interaction. In this activity, children cut out affirmations and place them around a mirror. As they look at their reflection, they are encouraged to say these affirmations aloud, reinforcing positive self-talk in a simple yet powerful way. For many children, this practice transforms their relationship with themselves, helping them build confidence and self-awareness in an engaging, accessible manner.

learn to play The mindful way



ALL ABOUT ME

12a

Positive Affirmations

SEL COMPETENCIES

Self-esteem

MATERIALS

Mirror
Prestik/stick tape
Positive affirmation tokens on next page

1

Cut the positive affirmations out and stick them around a mirror.

2

Have children look in the mirror and say one of these aloud. They may need help doing this.

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Example



A snippet from The Mindful Way inviting children to look into a mirror and speak positive affirmations aloud to build self-awareness and confidence. © Learn to Play



Voices From the Field

The impact of The Mindful Way is evident in the voices of those who have experienced it firsthand. Across diverse settings, from refugee settlements to homes and classrooms, educators, parents, and children alike have recognized the profound benefits of mindfulness through play.

A parent in Bontleng shared:

“My daughter has grown from timid and shy, to a confident young girl. I have seen changes in her that I never knew were possible. Before Learn To Play, she was just sitting at home. Now she is learning and growing. I always tell other parents about Learn to Play and advised my neighbour to enroll her child as well. I am very grateful that my daughter gets to go to this playgroup.”

Similarly, a child in Kutupalong, Bangladesh shared,

“After the breathing activities, there is peace in my mind, I forget all the troubles in my mind and I live in a peaceful environment.”

Learn To Play’s training sessions are also making a tangible impact, with organizations across different contexts recognizing the power of play-based mindfulness. Most recently, the Duara team in Kenya experienced firsthand how The Mindful Way can transform early childhood education. Following an immersive, week-long training led by Learn To Play, Duara educators expressed their enthusiasm for integrating mindfulness into their schools. “The playful nature of the training sessions provided us with invaluable insights and growth,” they shared, adding that they now feel confident in bringing these practices into their classrooms.

The experience also strengthened the collaborative spirit between Learn To Play and Duara, with both teams recognizing their shared vision for community

uplifting. As their Founder Victoria Peill reflected, “It felt incredibly connecting to experience our shared vision for a loving foundation for all children. True impact requires collaboration, and in Learn To Play, we found true partners on this journey.”

Whether in classrooms, homes, or refugee camps, The Mindful Way is proving that mindfulness is not just something to be taught; it is something to be felt, experienced, and lived through play.

Conclusion

By embracing play as the foundation for mindfulness, The Mindful Way is reshaping how we nurture children’s emotional and cognitive wellbeing. This approach goes beyond traditional mindfulness techniques, meeting children where they are—active, engaged, and full of curiosity. As educators, caregivers, and communities continue to integrate these playful

practices, we move toward a future where mindfulness is not an obligation but rather a natural part of every child’s daily life. The evidence is clear: when children play, they learn, grow, and thrive. It’s time we fully recognize play as the powerful, transformative force that it is.

Notes:

¹ <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/InBrief-The-Science-of-Early-Childhood-Development2.pdf#%3A~%3Atext%3Dbefore%20birth%20and%20continues%20into%2Cthat%20brain%20circuits%20become%20more>

² <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/InBrief-The-Science-of-Early-Childhood-Development2.pdf#%3A~%3Atext%3Dbefore%20birth%20and%20continues%20into%2Cthat%20brain%20circuits%20become%20more>

Disclosure Statement:

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Active Mindfulness

Active mindfulness is a great way to help children stay engaged while developing awareness, emotional regulation, and focus. Here are several fun and effective mindfulness activities for children:

Five Senses Walk

Go on a walk and have the child name:

- 5 things they see
- 4 things they hear
- 3 things they feel
- 2 things they smell
- 1 thing they taste (optional and safe)

Mindfulness Focus: Sensory grounding and present-moment awareness.

Sound Safari

Sit quietly and identify as many different sounds as possible for 1-2 minutes.

Mindfulness Focus: Heightens auditory attention and concentration.

Mindful Eating (e.g., Raisin Exercise)

Slowly eat a small food item (like a raisin or piece of fruit), noticing texture, smell, taste, and how it feels to chew.

Mindfulness Focus: Builds awareness of the senses and slows down eating habits.



Body Scan With Movement

Lie down or stand and guide attention through each part of the body while wiggling or tensing and relaxing each part.

Mindfulness Focus: Enhances body awareness and self-regulation.

Mindful Dance

Play music and ask kids to move however they feel, then pause the music and have them freeze and notice how their body feels.

Mindfulness Focus: Promotes emotional expression and reflection through movement.

Gratitude Jumps

With each jump or hop, say one thing they’re grateful for.

Mindfulness Focus: Combines physical activity with positive emotional focus.