

## CHAPTER 1

# Mindfulness with Elementary-School-Age Children

## *Translating Foundational Practices from the Clinic to the Classroom*

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The outward person is the swinging door;  
the inner person is the still hinge.  
—MEISTER ECKHART (1260–1327)

In this chapter we explore how mindfulness may broadly benefit all children, not only those who may be struggling with anxiety or depression. We review some issues that are unique to working with children in clinics and schools, issues that are common to both settings, and offer suggestions for addressing those factors. We introduce two mindfulness programs for elementary-school-age children in the two distinct settings. The first is a clinic-based group program for treating children with mood and anxiety difficulties: *mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for children* (MBCT-C; Semple & Lee, 2011). The second is a similar model adapted for elementary school classrooms: *Mindfulness Matters!* (MM!; Semple, & Madni, 2013). We explore the common aims of both programs, and describe a few sample activities designed to help children achieve those aims.

## A Unique Time

The period between the ages of 8 and 12 years is a unique developmental time. From the perspective of some therapists, these children are challenging in that they are “too old to play and too young to talk.” Cognitively and emotionally, however, latency-age children are cultivating ways of being and interacting in the world that will persist into adulthood. According to Piaget’s (1962) theory of cognitive development, children at this age are primarily in the stage of concrete operations, during which they are developing the ability to use rational logic and inductive reasoning. During this stage, children’s thought processes begin to mature as they practice solving problems in a more reflective fashion. Specifically, they develop perspective taking and learn to use inductive reasoning. In viewing events from another person’s perspective, children begin to eliminate previously held egocentric beliefs and start to build interpersonal, social, and cultural capabilities such as empathy, compassion, and altruism. They begin to use inductive reasoning, in which inferences are drawn from specific observations in order to make broader generalizations. Thus, 8- to 12-year-olds are at a critical stage; they are ready to develop social-emotional intelligence while opening to a greater understanding of how their inner and outer worlds function. By teaching children constructive ways to interact with themselves and the world, mindfulness training can be instrumental in shaping positive self-perceptions and expectations that carry into adulthood.

Mindful awareness influences how we relate to our own thoughts and feelings (Teasdale, 1999). “Decentering” is a term used to describe the (experientially acquired) insight that thoughts are “just” thoughts, rather than interpreting thoughts as evidence of reality. Decentering may improve a child’s ability to consciously respond (rather than impulsively react) to both internal events (e.g., thoughts, emotions, body sensations), and external events (e.g., situations, interpersonal interactions). For example, before an exam, decentering lets a young student shift her attention from habituated anxious thoughts of not being “good enough” or “smart enough,” which tend to interfere with attention and concentration, to focus on her breath, which helps her calm down and concentrate on responding to the exam questions. Decentering can be one result of cultivating mindfulness. Yet, for us, teaching mindfulness to children does not begin with decentering. Drawn from our work, we outline four foundational skills, three of which may precede the development of decentering. In our teaching, we aim to (1) cultivate present-focused awareness; (2) identify thoughts, feelings, and body sensations; and (3) differentiate judging from noting. Decentering may emerge as a result of developing these skills. Decentering also seems to strengthen the ability to see and expand what we call “choice points,” which are simply moments in which choices can be made. Choices are only ever found in the present moment, so bringing mindful awareness to this moment enhances the mental clarity to

see what choices are present. Seeing clearly offers opportunities to make more skillful choices and to make thoughtful, insightful, and more compassionate behavioral responses to the ever-changing vicissitudes of life. Learning to see choice points is the fourth aim of our programs.

### **Age-Appropriate Mindfulness**

Three key points to consider when working with children are age-related (1) affective and cognitive development, (2) capacity for attention, and (3) interdependence within the family. Latency-age children are learning meta-cognitive awareness. *Metacognition* is awareness of one's own thinking processes. Children must learn to first identify and differentiate their internal experiences, and then label them as thoughts and emotions (Bailey, 2001). Systematically bringing attention to thoughts, feelings, body sensations, the breath, and other sensory experiences supports the development of meta-cognitive awareness. Concepts and activities must be explained in simple, "child-friendly" language. Handouts content and visuals need to be appealing and engage children's interest. Children have less attentional capacity than adults and are less able to engage in extended repetitive activities without becoming bored or restless. So we offer short activities focused on different sensory modes (e.g., sight, taste, sound, smell, hearing, touch, kinesthetics). Practice activities are shorter than in adult programs and offered with creative repetition and variation. Finally, because children are embedded in their families or systems of care, caregivers are integral to the child's home-based mindfulness practices. Caregivers participate in an introductory session before each program begins, review weekly summaries and handouts with their child, and attend a caregiver review session after the child completes the program.

### **Overview of Mindfulness in the Clinic and the Classroom**

Mindful awareness activities can be used to develop essential social-emotional competencies and reduce childhood stress and anxiety. Clinical programs such as MBCT-C are aimed at applying mindfulness skills to reduce anxiety or depression, improve attention, and bolster social-emotional competencies. School-based programs such as MM! teach similar skills in the classroom, thereby offering a cost-efficient way to develop social-emotional resiliency in children who do not have significant emotional or behavioral problems.

### **Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Children**

MBCT-C is a group psychotherapy for children 8–12 years old who suffer anxieties sufficient to interfere with their daily functioning (Semple & Lee,

2011). It is modeled on two evidence-based adult programs: mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn, 1994) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2013). MBCT-C is tailored to suit the developmental and attentional abilities of children. It uses a variety of interventions aimed at reducing anxiety, enhancing attention, and bolstering social-emotional competencies. The course consists of weekly 90-minute sessions for 12 weeks. Groups are small—six to eight children—and facilitated by one or two therapists, so that each child receives appropriate individual attention. The therapist guides and participates in all activities and leads the group discussions. Activities include short breath meditations, experiential sensory-focused activities such as mindful eating, smelling, or touching, interspersed with movement activities (e.g., simple yoga postures). Adults are considered vital to the program (Lee, Semple, Rosa, & Miller, 2008). Caregivers gain opportunities to cultivate their own practices by engaging with their child's activities. Therapists conduct a parental orientation session before the program begins and a review session at the end of the program. Each includes a program overview, experiential activities, and information about home practices that parents can do with their child. A brief overview of MBCT-C that describes session-by-session themes, key points, and in-session practices is shown in Table 1.1.

### ***Mindfulness Matters!***

Adapted from MBCT-C, MM! (Semple et al., 2013) is a school-based mindfulness and social-emotional literacy curriculum for children in grades 3 through 6 (8–12 years of age). The curriculum is facilitated by teachers in the classroom and aimed at teaching children to cultivate mindful awareness in all aspects of their lives. MM! is a 12-week program consisting of two 45-minute lessons per week. Each lesson includes short activities that are taught, then practiced throughout the day. MM! aims to help children enhance present-focused awareness; bolster social-emotional resiliency; increase cognitive flexibility; make more skillful behavioral choices; promote adaptive changes in how they relate to thoughts, emotions, and body sensations; and cultivate acceptance of things that cannot be changed. A brief overview of the week-by-week themes, key points, aims, and activities is shown in Table 1.2.

## **Foundations of Mindfulness**

### ***Four Common Aims***

Mindfulness can be defined as the regulation of attention to cultivate a present-moment awareness that is nonelaborative, curious, open, and accepting (Bishop et al., 2004). MBCT-C and MM! share four common aims: (1) cultivating present-focused awareness; (2) identifying thoughts, feelings

**TABLE 1.1. Overview of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Children**

Session and theme	Key points	In-session practices
1. Being on Autopilot	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We live much of our lives on autopilot.</li> <li>• Mindfulness exists, and it is a different, more helpful way of being in the world.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Getting to Know You</li> <li>• Discovering Awareness in a Cup</li> <li>• What Mindfulness Means to Me</li> <li>• Taking Three Mindful Breaths</li> </ul>
2. Being Mindful Is Simple, but It Is Not Easy!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Living with awareness isn't easy, so why are we doing this anyway?</li> <li>• We give attention to the barriers to practice.</li> <li>• Understanding the importance of practice.</li> <li>• Bringing awareness to the breath and body.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking Three Mindful Breaths</li> <li>• Raisin Mindfulness</li> <li>• Mindfully Moooving Slowly</li> <li>• Taking Three Mindful Breaths</li> </ul>
3. Who Am I?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thoughts arise in the present, but are often about the past or future.</li> <li>• Thoughts may not be accurate relative to the present reality.</li> <li>• Thoughts are not facts.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking Three Mindful Breaths</li> <li>• Mindfulness of the Body</li> <li>• Hey, I Have Thoughts, Feelings, and Body Sensations!</li> <li>• Listening to the Sounds of Silence</li> <li>• Taking Three Mindful Breaths</li> </ul>
4. A Taste of Mindfulness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We have thoughts, feelings, and body sensations, but these are not who we are.</li> <li>• Thoughts, feelings, and body sensations are not exactly the same as the events they describe.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction to 3-Minute Breathing Space</li> <li>• Opening to One Orange</li> <li>• Mindful Yoga Movements</li> <li>• 3-Minute Breathing Space</li> </ul>
5. Music to Our Ears	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thoughts, feelings, and body sensations often color how we experience the world.</li> <li>• With our thoughts, we create individual and unique relationships and experiences.</li> <li>• Awareness holds it all.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3-Minute Breathing Space (at beginning and end of session)</li> <li>• Do You Hear What I Hear?</li> <li>• Mindfulness of the Body</li> <li>• 3-Minute Breathing Space</li> </ul>

*(continued)*

**TABLE 1.1.** (continued)

Session and theme	Key points	In-session practices
6. Sound Expressions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practicing mindful awareness helps us recognize that thoughts, feelings, and body sensations influence how we express ourselves.</li> <li>• We can choose to express ourselves with mindful awareness.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3-Minute Breathing Space (at beginning and end of session)</li> <li>• Sounding Out Emotions—Mindfully</li> <li>• Mindful Yoga Movements</li> <li>• 3-Minute Breathing Space</li> </ul>
7. Practice Looking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Judging is not the same as noting.</li> <li>• If we simply observe experiences rather than judge them, the experience may change.</li> <li>• We can choose to observe or note our experiences instead of judge them.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3-Minute Breathing Space (at beginning and end of session)</li> <li>• Visualizing with Clarity</li> <li>• Mindful Yoga Movements</li> <li>• Seeing What Is in the Mind's Eye</li> <li>• 3-Minute Breathing Space</li> </ul>
8. Strengthening the Muscle of Attention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Judging often changes how we experience the world.</li> <li>• Becoming more aware of judgments may change how we relate to thoughts and feelings.</li> <li>• Discovering choice points.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3-Minute Breathing Space (at beginning and end of session)</li> <li>• Seeing through Illusions</li> <li>• Moving Mindfully</li> <li>• Seeing What Is Not There</li> <li>• 3-Minute Breathing Space</li> </ul>
9. Touching the World with Mindfulness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We have little control over most events that occur.</li> <li>• We do have choices in how we respond to events.</li> <li>• Choice points exist only in the present moment.</li> <li>• Bringing greater awareness to this moment, we may see more choice points.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3-Minute Breathing Space (at beginning and end of session)</li> <li>• Being in Touch</li> <li>• Mindfulness of the Body</li> <li>• 3-Minute Breathing Space</li> </ul>
10. What the Nose Knows	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We often react to events by moving toward things we like or judge as “good” and moving away from things we don’t like or judge as “bad.”</li> <li>• Judging an experience may interfere with seeing clearly what is present in each moment.</li> <li>• We have choices in how we respond to events.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3-Minute Breathing Space (at beginning and end of session)</li> <li>• Judging Stinks!</li> <li>• Mindful Yoga Movements</li> <li>• 3-Minute Breathing Space</li> </ul>

(continued)

**TABLE 1.1.** (continued)

Session and theme	Key points	In-session practices
11. Life Is Not a Rehearsal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mindfulness is available in everyday life.</li> <li>• We can practice mindful awareness using all our senses.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3-Minute Breathing Space (at beginning and end of session)</li> <li>• Thoughts Are Not Facts</li> <li>• Feelings Are Not Facts</li> <li>• Either</li> <li>• Raisin Mindfulness</li> <li>• Mindfulness Is . . .</li> <li>• 3-Minute Breathing Space</li> </ul>
12. Living with Presence, Compassion, and Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mindful awareness can be helpful in our daily lives.</li> <li>• Bringing greater awareness to our lives is a personal choice.</li> <li>• Living with awareness requires commitment, compassion, and continued daily practice.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3-Minute Breathing Space (at beginning and end of session)</li> <li>• Exploring Everyday Mindfulness</li> <li>• Program Evaluation (optional)</li> <li>• 3-Minute Breathing Space</li> <li>• Graduation Ceremony</li> <li>• Graduation Party!</li> <li>• 3-Minute Breathing Space</li> </ul>

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(emotions), and body sensations; (3) differentiating judging from noting; and (4) identifying and acting skillfully upon choice points (moments in which mindful choices can be made). Decentering often develops along with these skills, enabling children to see more clearly and objectively and to act with awareness.

### ***The Role of Decentering***

When practicing mindful awareness, children often discover that thoughts and feelings are not permanent, nor do they necessarily reflect reality. Instead, children begin to experience these internal phenomena as transient events in the mind. Decentering develops slowly, with practice and patience. Rather than conveying these concepts to children didactically, we practice *experiencing* moments of nonjudgmental, present-focused awareness that promotes the development of decentering. For example, children may intentionally bring awareness to their thoughts and feelings following a disagreement with friends. Attending to the “upset” thoughts, feelings, and sensations with a stance of curiosity and openness grants opportunities for choices to be made. Children may choose to be more accepting of their own thoughts and

**TABLE 1.2. Overview of Mindfulness Matters!**

Week and theme	Key points and aims	Session activities
1. Introduction to Mindfulness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We are often on “automatic pilot,” functioning without full awareness of thoughts, feelings, and body sensations.</li> <li>• Mindfulness lets us step out of “automatic pilot” mode.</li> <li>• Bringing mindful awareness to everyday life calls for practice and patience.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Mindfulness is . . .” drawing activity</li> <li>• Mindful breathing</li> <li>• Describing experiences</li> <li>• Why breathe?</li> <li>• Exploring the breath</li> </ul>
2. Mindful Movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Body sensations influence thoughts and emotions, just as thoughts and emotions are expressed in the body.</li> <li>• Each of us brings our own thoughts, beliefs, memories, expectations, and attitudes to the events in our lives. These influence the quality of our life experiences.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Body scan</li> <li>• Learning about judgments</li> <li>• Mindful walking</li> <li>• Describing experiences</li> <li>• 3-Minute Breathing Space</li> </ul>
3. Mindfulness of Taste	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changes occur when an ordinary act is performed slowly with conscious awareness.</li> <li>• Eating is a complex sensory experience, but often done on “automatic pilot.”</li> <li>• Bringing greater awareness to experiences can reduce distress, enhance enjoyment, and increase what we learn from them.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3-Minute Breathing Space</li> <li>• Mindful eating</li> <li>• Describing and charting experiences</li> </ul>
4. Mindfulness of Smells	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changes occur when ordinary actions are done slowly and with conscious attention.</li> <li>• The act of smelling and the process of judging what we smell are not the same.</li> <li>• Thoughts and feelings are part of our experiences.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mindful smelling</li> <li>• Differentiating describing from judging</li> <li>• Describing and charting experiences</li> </ul>
5. Mindful Seeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changes may occur when ordinary actions are done with openness and nonjudgmental awareness.</li> <li>• Bringing attention to sensory perceptions enhances awareness.</li> <li>• Becoming aware of how we judge what we see can enhance our enjoyment of what is present.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drawing what’s in the mind’s eye</li> <li>• Bringing mindfulness to seeing art</li> <li>• Describing and charting experiences</li> </ul>

*(continued)*



**TABLE 1.2.** (continued)

Week and theme	Key points and aims	Session activities
6. Mindfulness of Touch and Hearing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changes occur when an everyday act is performed with nonjudgmental attention.</li> <li>• Sensory experiences and the act of judging those sensory experiences are different activities.</li> <li>• As we observe the judging, we may learn to accept all our experiences just as they are.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mindful touching</li> <li>• Mindful listening</li> <li>• Describing and charting experiences</li> </ul>
7. Mindfulness of Happiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feelings are constantly changing.</li> <li>• Thoughts, beliefs, and expectations influence how we experience the events in our lives.</li> <li>• Habituated responses can be changed when bringing mindful awareness to our experiences.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The wonderful present</li> <li>• Describing and charting experiences</li> <li>• Charting other pleasant experiences</li> </ul>
8. Mindfulness of Frustration and Anger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unrealistic beliefs and expectations can bring up feelings of frustration or anger.</li> <li>• Anger and frustration are usually accompanied by strong body sensations.</li> <li>• Mindfully observing the events, thoughts, and feelings that precede these emotions can help us learn to be better friends with these emotions.</li> <li>• We have <i>choices</i> in how we respond to our feelings.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The impossible crossword</li> <li>• Distinguishing reactions from responses</li> <li>• Visualizations of frustration and anger</li> <li>• Practice seeing choice points</li> </ul>
9. Mindfulness of Sadness and Loss	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sadness is a strong feeling that is often avoided.</li> <li>• It is okay to feel sad and to express sadness.</li> <li>• Memories and expectations can color our interpretations of new experiences.</li> <li>• Bringing mindful awareness to sadness and loss can change the way we experience an event.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Story: <i>Charlotte's Web</i></li> <li>• Journaling with sadness</li> <li>• Describing and charting experiences</li> <li>• Finding choice points that may be helpful to others</li> </ul>
10. Mindfulness of Jealousy and Embarrassment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jealousy stems from <i>wanting</i>. Embarrassment arises when we feel others have seen us do something wrong.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guided imagery: Jealousy</li> <li>• Journaling the jealousy scenario</li> </ul>

(continued)

**TABLE 1.2.** (continued)

Week and Theme	Key points and aims	Session activities
10. Mindfulness of Jealousy and Embarrassment (continued)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thoughts can exacerbate or reduce feelings of jealousy or embarrassment.</li> <li>• The actual experience of getting what we want is often different from what we expect.</li> <li>• Mindfulness lets us accept and enjoy what we already have, and forgive others and ourselves.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guided imagery: Embarrassment</li> <li>• Describing and charting experiences</li> <li>• Seeing choice points that may be helpful to ourselves</li> </ul>
11. Mindfulness of Worry and Anxiety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anxiety is sometimes helpful, but can also interfere with our ability to enjoy what is happening now.</li> <li>• Thoughts and body sensations that accompany anxiety are frequently neglected.</li> <li>• Worrying about the worst thing that might happen is almost never helpful.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guided visualization: Anxiety</li> <li>• Discerning thoughts and body sensations that accompany anxiety</li> <li>• Mindfully coping with stressful situations</li> </ul>
12. Making the Most of Mindfulness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Our experiences can be different when we observe them with mindful awareness.</li> <li>• Thoughts are “just thoughts.” Emotions are “just emotions.”</li> <li>• Mindfulness is accessible in everyday life. Every new moment is another invitation to be present.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thoughts are not facts</li> <li>• Feelings are not facts either</li> <li>• Poem: “Slow Dance”</li> <li>• “Mindfulness is . . .” drawing activity</li> </ul>

feelings and be more compassionate of their friends. They may choose to let the thoughts and feelings go—as they inevitably will anyway. All thoughts and feelings can be experienced as transient, ever-changing internal events, to be explored with curiosity, acceptance, and self-compassion. Essentially, the practice of looking clearly at what is present—without judging what is seen—promotes a nonavoidant relationship with one’s own thoughts and feelings. Decentering enhances clarity of mind, from which children discover opportunities to make more skillful behavioral choices. Together, we practice looking so that we may learn to see.

## Activities to Cultivate Mindfulness with Children

### *Cultivating Present-Focused Awareness*

We begin teaching mindfulness by guiding children through simple, present-focused activities. With repetition of these sensory-focused activities, children learn to attend to actions that are often performed with little awareness,

such as breathing, walking, and eating. They learn that the mind wanders, especially during ordinary, everyday experiences. *Ordinary* does not mean dull or boring. Sensory-focused activities allow children to explore and rediscover the novelty and richness in each moment. We use the word *rediscover* here because, left to their own devices, children often dwell in the present moment. For some, the ordinariness of daily life is extraordinary. Mindfulness is watching a caterpillar inch across a leaf or a hummingbird hover over flowers—watching with wonder and delight. Unfortunately, the capacity to see the extraordinary within the ordinary can become buried. Attention becomes scattered with rapid thoughts flitting between worries about the future, ruminations about the past, and judgments of the present. For both children and adults, the quality of our attention defines our experiences in each moment. Through sensory-focused mindful awareness activities, we teach children to bring a nonlaborative, curious, open, and accepting attention to the present moment. Simple though this may sound, cultivating mindful awareness radically changes lives. As Kabat-Zinn (1990) observed, “It is remarkable how liberating it feels to be able to see that your thoughts are just thoughts and that they are not ‘you’ or ‘reality’” (pp. 69–70).

As children learn to direct attention to the present moment, we remind them that it is completely natural and normal for the mind to wander. We invite children simply to note when they become aware of the mind’s wandering, and then bring attention back to the present moment with kindness. Like training an exuberant puppy, patient repetition and a gentle hand are essential. Subsequently, children cultivate mindfulness by returning the wandering attention back to the present sensory-focused activity—over and over again.

Children develop an experiential understanding that their perceptual experiences influence how they interpret and respond to the world. We help them to recognize both pleasant and unpleasant experiences of which they may not have otherwise been aware. By bringing greater awareness to pleasant experiences, children enjoy them more fully, integrating the myriad sensations that contribute to the experience. On the other hand, bringing greater awareness to unpleasant experiences helps by creating an internal observational “early warning system” that is stable enough to recognize when erroneous interpretations or emotional reactions might be coloring their experiences—and to do so quickly enough to respond to difficult situations with greater wisdom and skill. Two introductory activities that help children grasp the usefulness of mindfulness and enhance their motivation to participate and practice mindful awareness are described next.

### *Activities: Present-Focused Awareness*

Initially, practice activities are very brief. Snow globes can be used to illustrate chaos and clarity in the mind. When the globe is shaken and the snow is agitated, the figure inside the globe is obscured; as the snow quietly settles,

the figure becomes visible. When their minds are clouded by busy thoughts or strong emotions, children can choose to stop for a moment—using the breath to give the mind a chance to settle—becoming calm and clear. The snow globe illustrates both the hectic activity and the clear calmness of the mind (Greenland, 2010). We hand each child a snow globe while it is still and clear. The children shake the snow globe vigorously until the snow clouds the water and obscures the figure inside the globe. This is the mind clouded by thoughts. While the snow globe is cloudy, we ask the children if their minds have ever felt this way—busy and hectic. Most children can relate to the experience of rapid thoughts and intense emotions. Watching carefully, they set down the globe, letting the mind settle with the snow, restoring calmness and clarity. Simply stopping for a moment to see what is present can loosen or release us from the clutches of hectic thoughts or strong emotions.

Another brief activity is “Listening to the Sounds of Silence,” during which we listen for the space of silence between three slow bell tones. A moment of listening can clear the mind while cultivating mindfulness of sounds. “Listening to the Sounds of Silence” is a core activity used throughout both programs. We have found the small Tibetan *tingsha* cymbals to be particularly well suited for this activity because they produce a resonant, long-lasting tone; however, any bell will suffice. We invite the children to take a seated position that is comfortable, but with an erect posture. We might pretend that the head is like a balloon, gently straightening the spine as it floats toward the sky. Children can choose to close their eyes or gaze softly at a fixed point in front of them. We ask them to listen to each ring until they hear the silence, listening for the space between the sounds; we remind them, in soft voices, that it is normal for attention to wander. Whenever they notice that their minds have wandered, they are simply to note that their minds were “wandering” or “thinking” and bring their attention back to the sound—be it the sound of silence or the sound of the bells.

When first introducing the activity, three bell rings may seem inconsequential; however, these moments provide opportunities to see how quickly attention can settle—and how quickly it can become distracted. An important component of these introductory activities is to help children recognize the difficulties (shared by all of us) of holding our attention where we *will* it to be. We invite children to treat the wandering mind like the excited puppy that is best trained with gentleness, compassion, and patient repetition.

One teacher who participated in MM! noted the importance of practicing mindful awareness herself *before* ringing the bell. For her own benefit, she chose to sit at her desk, pick up the *tingsha* bells with slow and deliberate movements, suspend the cymbals by their string in the air until they were still, breathe three times, and then gently tap the bells together. Over time, the simple act of sitting at her desk and then moving slowly and deliberately toward the bells was enough to stop the usual classroom activities. Her students would also become still, better to be present with the first sounds of the

bell. “Listening to the Sounds of Silence” began as a guided mindful awareness activity. Once her students became familiar with it, she repeated it a few times each day. She also invited the children to ring the bell whenever they felt a desire to quiet their own minds, or the classroom as whole, by bringing mindful attention to the sound of the bells.

Snow globes and bells provide concise visual and auditory introductions to the differences between ordinary attention and mindful awareness. The snow globe demonstrates the importance of allowing the mind time to settle. The bells invite the children to open to the richness of simple experience. They learn that a few moments of mindfulness can create a calm space around hectic thoughts or strong emotions. Both activities are used throughout the day to cultivate present-focused attention.

### ***Cultivating Awareness of Thoughts, Feelings, and Body Sensations***

After teaching mindfulness of the breath (“3-Minute Breathing Space”), we shift to sensory-focused activities that are aimed at enhancing awareness of thoughts, emotions, and body sensations as discrete, but related entities. Children strengthen attention by focusing on exploring an experience through a single sense while also observing and noting thoughts, feelings, and body sensations. In these activities, and the guided inquiries that follow each one, children discover the interdependence of thoughts, feelings, and body sensations and how they might be related (or not related) to external events.

We perform many ordinary activities in our lives essentially on “autopilot”—habituated, dulled by repetition—often not fully aware of where we are or what we are doing. We rarely give conscious attention to all the information brought to us by the five senses (i.e., sight, sound, taste, smell, touch). We may continue on autopilot until an experience is so unpleasant or so unusual that it demands our full attention. How often do we observe the myriad colors in the tree growing outside of our door? Are we conscious of the songs of birds or the music of traffic sounds throughout the day? Do we really taste our breakfast, or is the mind so busy thinking about what may lie ahead that we are scarcely aware of what we eat? Wherever we go, the senses gather information. Sense perceptions occur only in the present moment, which makes mindfulness via the senses readily accessible. Becoming more aware of sense perceptions is one way to access mindfulness in everyday life.

Sense perceptions influence our thoughts and emotions, just as thoughts and emotions influence how we interpret what we perceive. Smelling smoke, we may think “There’s a fire here!” and then become fearful, experience heart palpitations, shortness of breath, and muscle tension. Thoughts—often catastrophic, particularly for anxious children—proliferate in an attempt to figure out what might be causing the smell and what to do about it. Thoughts become more real than reality, distorting interpretations and influencing subsequent behaviors. We can be captured by strong thoughts or emotions so

easily that we lose awareness of the information being brought to us by the senses or even awareness of our own body sensations. Mindfulness is a way of turning off mindless, autopilot that blurs experiences. Children learn to observe their internal and external worlds with an open, nonjudgmental, and compassionate attitude. One “mindful seeing” activity is described to illustrate how simple, sensory-focused activities enhance awareness. Most other sensory-focused activities follow a similar format.

### *Activity: Thoughts, Feelings, and Body Sensations*

Sensory-focused activities include mindfulness of the breath, body sensations, and movements, as well as mindful hearing, tasting, smelling, seeing, and touching. After each activity, children are guided through an inquiry to explore and share experiences. The inquiry helps children (1) bring attention to their internal experiences; (2) differentiate thoughts, feelings, and body sensations; (3) explore how thoughts and feelings interact and how they influence felt experiences; (4) understand the subjective nature of their experiences; and (5) explore ways to integrate mindfulness into their lives.

Mindful seeing is simply the practice of seeing with mindful awareness. During this activity, children view two pieces of art. We invite them to explore the images as patterns of lines, shapes, colors, and textures, rather than seeing the entire piece as a whole. Children will sometimes slip into judgments (e.g., “That’s a pretty picture”) or inferences about what they see (e.g., “I see a horse”) rather than simply describing what is seen. An occasional gentle reminder may be needed to remind children to simply *note* any thinking, and then bring their attention back to observing the picture. With a little practice, most children begin to understand how frequently they add expectations, beliefs, judgments, or evaluations to the experience of seeing. Creating stories or getting lost in memories derails the experience of looking with mindful awareness in the present. After they have observed an image for a few minutes, children share their observations while we chart them. The chart separates objective descriptions, thoughts, feelings, and body sensations, and then identifies subjective judgments about the image (see Table 1.3).

We engage in this process of observation and inquiry for each image and then pose questions to explore the subjective nature of experience. For example, we might ask children, “What did it feel like to be limited to sharing only objective observations?” This part of the activity can be difficult for some children who are accustomed to moving quickly beyond objective observations and body sensations to indulge in a habituated *thinking about* an experience. We invite the children to consider how these categories (objective descriptions, thoughts, feelings, body sensations, subjective judgments) relate to each other. We might point out habituated or reactive thoughts or feelings that redefine an experience. For example, we would invite an anxious child

**TABLE 1.3. Mindful Seeing Activity: “Autumn Rhythm” (Jackson Pollock)**

Objective descriptions	Thoughts	Feelings	Body sensations	Subjective judgments
White, black, and gold colors	“It’s complicated.”	Tense, energetic	Heart beating fast	“I like this painting—it makes me hyper.”
Different shades of tan in the background	“It’s messy looking but cool.”	Happy	None noticed	“Awesome and cool.”
Stringy, lots of black blobs	“My baby brother could have painted this.”	Bored	Wrinkled nose	“It’s stupid. I don’t like it at all.”
Bumpy looking and dripping	“I don’t understand what it’s supposed to be.”	Confused	Tight in stomach	“It’s ugly and weird.”
Dark, paint in splatters and spots	“I wish I could have this picture in my room.”	Wanting	Tapping fingers against my pencil	“It’s kind of scary looking, but, really nice.”

to explore ways in which the thought “I’m terrible at math” might influence what he or she sees during math class. We then ask the children to consider, “How was this way of seeing different from how you usually look at things?” In reflecting on how mindful seeing might be different from ordinary seeing, children explore ways to bring mindful seeing into everyday life.

Mindful seeing and the other sensory-focused activities offer children opportunities to explore present-focused awareness in different ways. Doing so, they cultivate awareness of the direct sensory experience (objective noting or describing) along with their internal responses to those stimuli (i.e., thoughts, feelings, and body sensations). They learn to differentiate thoughts that are *descriptive* (objective) from those that are *judgmental* (subjective). Once children have participated in these activities, they continue to foster mindfulness by bringing mindful awareness to activities such as eating, walking, brushing teeth, or doing chores. As Jon Kabat-Zinn reminds us, “The little things? The little moments? They aren’t little.”

### **Cultivating Awareness of Judging versus Noting**

The third aim when facilitating mindfulness with children is differentiating between judging and noting (or describing) experiences. As children increase awareness of the inner world of thoughts, feelings, and body sensations, they may also recognize that judgments frequently attach to experiences.

Judgments end up being projected onto objects, situations, and even people. Mindful awareness helps children learn to observe the experience *as it is*, and notice that the judgment is not the same as the event. Adopting this observational stance is the foundation from which decentering emerges, which in turn can have a profound influence on thoughts, emotional states, speech, and behaviors.

A full range of emotions is ubiquitous to the human experience. Practicing mindful awareness offers children opportunities to experience emotions as “just” emotions, to observe them with compassion, and to open themselves to experiencing emotions just as they are. Some emotions will be “liked” more than others. Multiple emotions can arise simultaneously, blending together like colors on a paint palette. We teach children that there are no “good” or “bad” emotions; happiness and sadness, for example, are simply different experiences. Some emotions may be more comfortable, and some less so. By bringing nonjudgmental awareness to emotions, children experience their transience in a way that sometimes feels like surfing. To stay on the “surfboard” requires considerable attention, balance, and a willingness to follow the natural movement of the wave. Jumping from one wave to another to find a “better” wave or riding a wave after it has crested is not the best way to surf. Emotions can be experienced the same way; some are calm, some are turbulent. All are normal and “okay” to feel, but the main lesson learned is that emotions are transient and often have little relationship to actual events. Embracing the ebb and flow of emotions, particularly uncomfortable or unwanted ones, appears to increase a child’s self-compassion and empathy for others. Practicing kindness to themselves, children become kinder toward others. Teaching acceptance and compassion early may provide a stable foundation for children as they move into what, for some, can be an emotionally turbulent adolescence or adulthood. Mindful smelling is a powerful activity that helps children recognize their habitual, often automatic, judgments while also practicing seeing those judgments as “just” judgments.

### *Activity: Judging versus Noting*

The activity called “Judging Stinks!” demonstrates how quickly and automatically we react to events with judgment. Children learn that their expectations, beliefs, associations, memories, and even current emotional state can radically influence or change the quality of the experience itself. The therapist begins by passing around small containers that hold pungent scents such as camphor, vinegar, chocolate, coffee beans, cinnamon, ginger, or perfumes. Children are invited to explore each with their sense of smell. In silence, they observe and jot down the thoughts, feelings, and body sensations that arise in response to the scent, and write a few words to note how they might describe that scent to someone who has never smelled it before (e.g., a “Martian”).



After six to eight different scents have been explored, the therapist leads a group inquiry while charting the responses (see Table 1.4).

Referring to the table, the therapist might observe that some children had different experiences of the same smell and then discuss what contributed to those differences. The group discussion can explore the nature and quality of differing experiences, consider ways in which thoughts and feelings influence the experience, and ponder how these subjective thoughts and feelings might subsequently affect behavioral responses.

It can be helpful to point out when some children physically move away from scents they don't like, whereas others move toward the ones they like. This observation can support a discussion about the general tendency we all share to move toward things we like and to move away from things that we don't like. Exploring the "judging" words, the therapist might ask if those ideas could help a Martian understand the scent. Children identify which items on the chart are related to memories or expectations (past or future) and which describe the experiences of that present moment. Differentiating judging from noting allows children to focus more on the actual experience without conflating it with their own beliefs or expectations about the way things "should" be. Interactive dialogue and charting during the inquiry offer the children guidance and practice in recognizing when they might be judging versus describing an experience. Practicing this throughout the day, children quickly learn how often these autopilot judgments influence their lives.

**TABLE 1.4. Mindful Smelling Activity**

	Description of scent	Thoughts	Feelings	Body sensations	Judgments
<u>Scent A (vinegar)</u>					
Student 1	Bitter, strong, acidic	"I can't stand this anymore."	Uncomfortable, repulsed	Tingling in nose, pursed lips	"This is the <i>worst</i> smell ever!"
Student 2	Sour, sharp	"This reminds me of French fries."	Open, happy	Stomach growling	"I like this."
<u>Scent B (perfume)</u>					
Student 1	Fruity, sweet, fresh	"This smells like a flower."	Excited	Eyebrows raised, warm feeling in chest	"I love this scent!"
Student 2	Musky and mossy	"This is like a spring day."	Cheerful	Soft and relaxed	"This is very nice."

### ***Cultivating Awareness of Choice Points***

Seeing clearly what is present allows children to decenter from their own thoughts. Decentering, like the snow settling in the globe, increases visibility of whatever choices might be available. This momentary “stepping back” allows a child to see what thoughts or emotions may be influencing his or her perceptions and interpretations of events. Decentering may promote more conscious decision making, inhibit socially inappropriate behaviors, encourage more empathic communication, and improve self-regulation of emotional distress (Scherer-Dickson, 2004). Decentering forms the foundation for the fourth and final aim: cultivating awareness of choice points.

Choice points are only ever found in the present moment. Choices can be made only in the moment between the triggering event and the child’s *reaction* (automatic, unconscious) or *response* (considered, conscious) to that event. Mindful awareness of what choices might be available can lead to decisions that are less reactive and more reflective, skillful, and appropriate. Decentering grants opportunities to see the choice points. Children cultivate awareness of when they might react unthinkingly (are on autopilot), and then choose an appropriate response. One child described this clarity of seeing: “Mindfulness lets me see when I’m about to do something bad and just take three breaths instead.”

We teach children that some things are controllable and others are not. Things over which we have little control include nearly all situations, events, and even interpersonal interactions in our lives. We have no control over the past or the future. However, we can choose *how we respond* to the many situations or events over which we have little or no control. We also teach children that they have choices about how to relate to their own thoughts and emotions. Children learn that they don’t have control over what the school bully might say or do, but they do have control over how they respond to the bullying. They can choose to respond with anger, or indifference, or perhaps even with compassion for the unhappy bully. They can choose to fight back or choose to walk away. They do not have control when it comes to getting a second scoop of ice cream, but they can choose to respond with enjoyment while they eat the first scoop, or alternatively, eat it with irritability or frustration at not being allowed the second helping.

“Choosing to respond differently” might seem contradictory to the practice of acceptance that also underlies mindfulness practice. It is important to consider the relationship between acceptance and choice. Children are first taught simply to explore their internal landscape as a “neutral” observer. There is no attempt to change thoughts or feelings, just repeated practice in noting that thoughts and feelings do change, regardless of our wishes for them to stay or leave. Children learn quickly that the mind itself seems to have a mind of its own. Simply noting what is present is seeing clearly. In this clear space, more skillful choices may also be seen. Without distortions from

habituated thoughts or emotions, opportunities to choose more appropriate behaviors become evident. Decentering supports the child in shifting from automatic reacting to conscious responding. Essentially, mindful awareness helps children separate the subjective from the objective, let go of the things they cannot change, and interact more skillfully with those things that can be changed.

### *Activity: Choice Points*

An activity called “The Impossible Crossword” helps students bring greater awareness to the events that prompt anger or frustration. Children recognize where in their bodies they are feeling anger or frustration, how thoughts influence emotions, and ways that they can choose to respond differently. The teacher begins by passing out a difficult crossword puzzle and telling the class that they only have 3 minutes to complete it. After 3 minutes, the teacher stops the activity, then invites students to share their experiences while preparing a chart (see Table 1.5).

During the postactivity inquiry, the teacher explores any frustration or anger that may have arisen, and gently examines the associated thoughts. Simply bringing mindful awareness to thoughts that may be unrealistic expectations (or “shoulds”) allows children to choose to respond in a different way to their own emotions. Thoughts such as “That wasn’t fair” or “Mr. Jones should have given us more time” are commonly voiced. This activity also reinforces the message that although we often cannot control or change life events, we can choose to respond to them in ways that creates

**TABLE 1.5. Choice Points Chart for “The Impossible Crossword”**

	Event	Thoughts	Feelings	Body sensations	Choice point
Student 1	Trying to complete crossword puzzle.	“I can’t do this!”	Frustrated	Tensed shoulders and jaw	“I can try, and even if I don’t finish, I will be okay.”
Student 2	Trying to complete crossword puzzle.	“Why is the teacher making it so hard?”	Confused, angry	Heart pounding, scowling forehead	“Take three deep breaths. Once I calm down, I can concentrate better.”
Student 3	Trying to complete crossword puzzle.	“This is so easy! I’m so good at crossword puzzles.”	Excited, eager	Smile on face, butterflies in chest	“Remind myself that I have only 3 minutes. Even if I don’t finish this one, it will be still be fun.”

less suffering for ourselves and others. The inquiry discussion highlights the distinction between *reactions* and *responses*. *Reactions* are unexamined, often habitual, autopilot thoughts, speech, and behaviors that may be inappropriate to the current situation. *Responses* are consciously chosen after bringing mindful awareness to relevant internal and external events. Responses tend to be more skillful, more appropriate to the situation, and less likely to lead to negative consequences. Brainstorming specific experiences and outcomes that illustrate reacting versus responding is helpful.

Cultivating present-focused attention; bringing greater awareness to thoughts, feelings, and body sensations; and differentiating between judging and noting can expand children's opportunities and ability to make more appropriate choices. Invariably, we are given many opportunities to make choices throughout each day. The practice discovering choice points supports the realization that we *can* choose to respond in ways that are more helpful to ourselves and others.

### **Special Considerations When Teaching Mindfulness to Children**

Working with children provides each of us, adult facilitators with unique opportunities to access our own "inner child," which can open us to a wealth of creativity, playfulness—and frequently our own vulnerabilities and childhood insecurities.

#### ***Embodying Mindfulness***

Most mindfulness programs for adults or children recommend that the facilitator (therapist or teacher) cultivate his or her own personal mindfulness practice. Simply teaching mindfulness activities from a book without having experienced them oneself is like offering violin lessons without ever having played a violin. Teaching mindfulness requires the facilitator to embody mindfulness in his or her attitude, speech, and behaviors. When the adult embodies mindfulness, children learn these skills in unique and profound ways. Semple and Lee (2011) suggest that mindfulness is best exemplified by demonstrating its elements, such as acceptance, curiosity, and openness to experience, while avoiding criticism or judgmental attitudes and language. One useful approach, for example, is to invite participation rather than calling upon a specific child. Creating a safe, non-threatening ambience allows children to explore at their own pace and express themselves as they wish. Listening quietly and respectfully to each child encourages inward exploration and outward sharing in a safe and supportive environment. Practicing mindfulness is also likely to enhance the facilitator's well-being (Jennings, Snowberg, Coccia, & Greenberg, 2011), self-efficacy (Poulin, Mackenzie, Soloway, & Karayolas, 2008), and work motivation (Jennings, 2011).

***Working in the Clinic***

In MBCT-C, multiple adaptations have been made to meet the needs of children struggling with mood or anxiety problems. For example, groups are kept small: six to eight children with one therapist, or up to a dozen children with two therapists. Each once-weekly session lasts 90 minutes. Children of similar age may vary in their physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development. Keeping each group relatively homogeneous can be useful to maintain a developmentally appropriate pace of teaching. Once a group is established, it is important to create an environment with clear behavioral guidelines and to provide both structure and a safe space for playful exploration and discovery.

***Working in the Classroom***

School settings have their own unique challenges. First, it is important to understand that many school administrators and teachers will not be keen to add another teaching component to an already packed curriculum. Mindfulness is intended to further children's social-emotional development, which some may view as less essential than academic fundamentals such as the reading and math that will be measured by state exams. Addressing teacher concerns about time constraints is essential. MM! is offered as a 12-week after-school program that is conducted by a trained classroom teacher. Two 45-minute lessons each week teach activities that are then incorporated into the classroom in smaller segments throughout the regular school day. Inevitably, circumstances arise in which mindful awareness can be helpful to teacher and students alike, certainly before those statewide exams when teachers and students are often at their most anxious! A year after one MM! program, some children wrote their mindfulness teacher (spellings unchanged from original):

"I know we were in your class last year, but we still want to thank you for teaching us how to be in the present moment and for teaching us how to be mindful. Ever since last year our grades have been going up because of you. Again thank you for making our lives better."

***Concluding Thoughts***

Teaching mindfulness to children can have a profound influence on their ability to focus, to cope with social and emotional demands, and to make proactive, healthy behavioral choices. Working with latency-age children offers unique opportunities, but also requires special considerations in the clinic and classroom. We believe it is important that facilitators have personal

experiences of mindfulness, so that these teachings do not become another tool with which to “fix” a “broken” child or turn into another dull, intellectualized lesson. How much experience or personal practice is “enough” remains an open question. Although bringing in trained mindfulness facilitators or teaching mindfulness in after-school programs is effective, to sustain these practices in the schools, we must weave mindfulness into the threads of the ordinary classroom day, integrating mindful awareness practices into classroom activities as seems appropriate in the moment.

Every child has unique talents, skills, emotional needs, psychological vulnerabilities, and environmental stressors that influence how he or she responds to mindfulness training and subsequently uses these skills. Adults often tell children to pay attention—at home and at school—but rarely do we give them effective tools to do so. Technology and other shifts in our culture provide still more distractions that can interfere with cultivating self-awareness of thoughts, emotions, and body sensations and development of social-emotional resiliency.

We are just beginning to explore the long-term benefits that may accrue from cultivating mindful awareness skills in children. Research is emerging that supports the efficacy of teaching mindfulness to young people in both the clinic and the classroom, but there is virtually no research on the long-term effects of teaching mindfulness to children. Will these children grow up to be mindful adults? Is ongoing mindfulness practice necessary, and if so, how much practice is needed? How might learning these practices improve relationships with peers, siblings, parents, and other adults? Mindfulness is not a panacea to treat all ills, and some may see little or no benefit. We know little about the contraindications that might inform us about when *not* to teach these skills to children.

We do not know what we someday will know about teaching mindfulness to children. As we learn more, we adults can simply do our best to bring our own mindful attention to the complexities and uniqueness of each child we work with. Our personal mindfulness practices guide us in making conscious choices aimed at helping children cultivate skills to become healthy, emotionally resilient adults. In teaching children to bring mindful awareness to their lives, we hope to provide them with essential attentional and social-emotional skills that will free them to experience their lives with awareness, compassion, and joy.

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