

Focusing and Calming Games for Children

Mindfulness Strategies and Activities to Help
Children Relax, Concentrate and Take Control

Deborah M. Plummer

Illustrated by Jane Serrurier



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Acknowledgements

This book is one of a series based on the use of games to enhance social and emotional well-being (see *Self-Esteem Games for Children*, *Anger Management Games for Children*, *Helping Children to Cope with Change, Stress and Anxiety* and *Social Skills Games for Children*, all published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers). As with previous books, the games and activities in Part Two have been selected from several sources. Most have been collected or devised during 20 years or more of working as a therapist with children with speech, language and communication needs; some are adaptations of games contributed by children themselves during participation in therapy groups. There are also versions of activities that I have learnt on various training courses. My thanks therefore go to all the facilitators, teachers, therapists and children who have shared their ideas with me.

In researching appropriate games for this series, I have also found books by Penny Warner (*Kids' Party Games and Activities*), Mildred Mashedor (*Let's Play Together*), Donna Brandes and Howard Phillips (*Gamesters' Handbook*), Arnold Arnold (*The World Book of Games*) and Marian Liebmann (*Art Therapy for Groups*) to be particularly useful, and for this book in particular I have used *Let's Play Asian Games* (Dunn 1978) as a source of ideas. This book, first published in 1978 by the Asian Cultural Centre for UNESCO, outlines several variations of different games and, in so doing, illustrates the universality of games of skill and imagination.

Thank you also to Doctor Roshan Rai, lecturer at De Montfort University, for his helpful comments on the section regarding developmental aspects of attention and concentration.

Note: The pronouns 'he' and 'she' have been used alternately throughout the book to refer to a child of either gender.

Part One

Theoretical and Practical Background



Introduction: Meeting Children with Mindfulness

Focusing and Calming Games for Children brings together a selection of games and ideas aimed at promoting a child's capacities to focus his attention, sustain concentration and calm himself both physically and mentally.

The book is based on the child-centred principles of the previous titles in this series (*Self-Esteem Games for Children*, *Anger Management Games for Children* and *Social Skills Games for Children*, all published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers). It draws together the principles of childhood well-being and mindful interactions outlined in these earlier books and crystallises them into a model of interaction that I have termed Mindfulness Play. This approach advocates mindfulness as a way of interaction in everyday life. It is an approach that involves heightening our own self-awareness and ability to be fully 'present' from moment to moment as well as nurturing this capacity in children.

Sogyal Rinpoche describes the practice of mindfulness as 'bringing the scattered mind home, and so of bringing the different aspects of our being into focus... In that settling we begin to understand ourselves more...' In mindfulness we view emotions and thoughts 'with an acceptance and generosity that are as open and spacious as possible' (Rinpoche 1995 p.61). In other words, mindfulness is about being open to whatever we encounter in this awakened relationship with ourselves and others.

Mindfulness Play has at its heart the idea that self-awareness and awareness of others does not need to be hard work, but that the attitude with which we engage in these games and activities and the context in which we undertake them are of paramount importance. A child's ability to attend to (be mindful of) his inner world of images and ideas is as important for his well-being as his ability to pay attention to the outer world. Similarly, we can be most effective in nurturing a child's well-being if we also have the ability to be attentive, patient and self-aware in our interactions. We may not always get it right, but the invaluable outcome of working in this way will be that children will learn to respect themselves, to trust their feelings and to believe in their abilities in ways that teaching specific skills and strategies alone will rarely achieve.

Games provide a fun way of learning serious ideas and important life skills. When they are facilitated by adults, they should always be played mindfully and with integrity. We need to be fully aware of why we are playing the games that we have chosen, fully conscious of the possible effects that playing such games might have and fully 'present' with the children in order to understand their ways of responding and interacting with each other and to appreciate their many, and often extraordinary, insights.

Being mindful in our interactions and developing our understanding of the child's perspective doesn't mean that we need to enter his world so fully that we lose sight of our role as mentor, facilitator or teacher, however. Neither should we remain attentive observers from a distance – a scientific stance that could all too easily lead us to judge a child's behaviour from our own viewpoint and perhaps urge us to teach him how he 'ought' to behave, think and feel in accordance with our adult understanding of life, or perhaps even in accordance with our knowledge of child development ('He *ought* to be able to do this/know this by now!').

There are, however, many opportunities open to us for joining with the children in our care in shared activities which bridge the diverse worlds of adults and children. It is often in those very special, almost magical moments of shared attention that insight and change take place (for children and adults alike), allowing children to become more autonomous and effective in their thinking and behaviour, and more in touch with life's joys and wonders.

The context of the games and activities described in this book is therefore the creation of this special meeting place, where the foundation elements for well-being and the skills involved in focusing and calming can develop and flourish in Mindfulness Play.

A meeting of such importance in shared territory can be fun but also a little daunting and potentially chaotic. Chapter 2 – 'Understanding Attention and Concentration' – therefore gives a brief theoretical perspective, outlining what we currently know about the developmental and neurocognitive aspects of attention control. Chapter 3 – 'Mindfulness Play' – sets the context for the games and activities, revisiting the importance of learning through play and of enhancing children's capacity to imagine. The suggestions in Chapter 4 – 'Structuring the Emotional Environment for Mindfulness Play' – highlight the need for careful consideration of how we interact with children during adult-directed play.

Having established the general layout of the territory, Chapter 5 – 'Mindfulness Play and Well-Being' – and Chapter 6 – 'Control, Adaptability and Effectiveness' – show how focusing, concentrating and self-calming are vital to well-being and how we can use specific strategies to enhance these components of our lives.

In Part Two (Chapters 7–12) the games and activities are divided into topic sections: choosing groups, pairs, leaders and order of play; warm-ups; focusing; concentrating; self-calming; and celebrating. Whilst the division of topics in this way will aid the process of evaluating and adapting ideas to suit specific needs, many of the games and activities could in fact be placed in more than one section, and I would urge you not to feel restricted by this division in choosing appropriate activities once you have become familiar with the general format.

Part Two includes a selection of activities based on well-known mindfulness meditation exercises, but the book is not by any means a course in meditation for children (there are many excellent books which focus solely on this area¹). The mindfulness of Mindfulness Play is also not an approach to academic learning or a way of ‘doing something’ with children that will teach them how to be calm and attentive. It is a way of ‘being’ for both adults and children that extends into all the games and activities and ultimately into everyday life. I would, therefore, strongly recommend that you try out the ‘Body focus’ exercise on p.96 and the ‘Mindfulness of breathing’ activity on p.121 before using the games and activities in this book with children. This will give you a heightened awareness of how it is possible to develop mindfulness during simple focusing activities.²

I am only too aware of how little time most of us have in our busy lives to read about theory and its relevance to our work or to everyday interactions with our own children, and yet this is such a vital starting point. I am certain that using the ideas in Part Two of this book without putting them into the context of any theory at all would still have some beneficial outcomes for some children, particularly those who are already developing a healthy degree of emotional resilience and insight. But I am even more certain that it is possible to create negative outcomes by embarking on games and activities from an erroneous perspective (e.g. ‘This game will teach children how to increase their attention span’). Some of the theory may already be familiar to you or you may feel that certain chapters are more useful for your particular needs than others. Whichever way you choose to use the material, my hope is that it will both confirm to you what you already know and that it will encourage you to meet more and more children in the wonderfully magic territory between our two worlds, carrying a few extra tools in your toolbox.

1 See, for example, *Teaching Children to Meditate* by David Fontana and Ingrid Slack (2007). Fontana and Slack are psychologists who have extensive experience of meditation and child psychology.

2 For further exploration of mindfulness in everyday life I recommend Charles Tart’s book ‘Living the Mindful Life’

How the games and activities are structured

Each game/activity has been marked with a set of symbols to aid in the selection of the most appropriate ones for different groups of children:

⑤	This gives an indication of the suggested <i>youngest</i> age for playing the basic game (unadapted). No upper age limit is given.
⌚ 10 minutes	An approximate time is suggested for the length of the game (excluding the discussion time). This will, of course, vary according to the size of the group and the ability of the players.
♂ ♂ ♂	Indicates that the game is suitable for larger groups (eight or more).
♂ ♂	The game is suitable for small groups.
☞ ☞ ☞	The game involves a lot of speaking unless it is adapted.
☞ ☞	A moderate amount of speaking is required by players.
☞	The game is primarily a non-verbal game or one requiring minimal speech.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> self-awareness (E)	This gives an indication of a foundation element (E), ability (A) or specific skill (S) used or developed by playing this game.

For each activity I have given one suggestion for foundation elements, abilities and specific skills that might be targeted during different games and activities, but the potential usage is, of course, much greater (see Chapters 5 and 6 for further explanations of *elements*, *abilities* and *skills*). There is therefore space for you to add other possibilities relevant to your own focus of work. By familiarising yourself with this framework, the interplay of the levels will soon become apparent and, undoubtedly, the more often that you engage in each activity, the more you will want to add to the lists.

Adaptations

Ideas for adaptations are offered as a spur to encourage you to be imaginatively creative in a way that suits your personal style and the developmental levels and learning needs of the children with whom you work. The ways in which the games are adapted and incorporated into family life and into educational and therapy approaches can and should vary according to the setting and according to the needs, strengths and experiences of the children. Each adult who facilitates games will naturally bring his or her own personality, imagination, expertise and knowledge to the games and create something new from the basic format. Also, because of the nature of group dynamics, the same game played with a different group will inevitably have a different feel to it and

probably have different outcomes for the participants. In this way, playing with the process of playing becomes an integral part of our own learning.

In my own work, some spontaneous adaptations of activities have occurred when I have made a mistake and the children have laughed at the absurdities that have resulted. Although my mistakes were not originally deliberate, I soon realised the importance of tapping into a child's ability to understand and tolerate ambiguity and contradiction – an important aspect of creative thinking. Sharing moments of laughter, problem solving and creativity during games can be rewarding and reaffirming for everyone concerned.

I have also found Bob Eberle's work (e.g. Eberle 2008) in relation to creative ideas to be a useful tool when thinking about how to adapt activities to suit children at different ages and stages and how to create new games.

Based on original ideas by Alex Osborn (1953), Eberle uses SCAMPER as an acronym for strategies that can be used to make changes to existing ideas: Substitute, Combine, Adapt, Modify, Put to another use, Eliminate, Reverse. SCAMPER can be used to formulate questions you might ask yourself in relation to the games and activities presented in Part Two.

1. *Substitute*. Explore what might happen if you substitute one element for another. Can the game be played with different equipment? Can the rules of the game be changed? What happens if you change one part of the game? What if you played it in a different place and with different-sized groups? What if two children were leaders together?
2. *Combine*. What happens if you combine elements? What materials could be combined? Can you combine elements of two different games to make a third option? Can you bring two different groups of children together?
3. *Adapt*. How can you adjust a game/activity to suit different levels of ability/learning styles? Do you know of another game/activity that has similar learning aims? Can you adjust the discussions after the game to suit particular topics?
4. *Modify*. What can be modified, magnified or minified? Can you change the colours, shapes, number, size of the equipment being used? Can you increase/decrease the number of turns that each leader has?
5. *Put to another use*. What can you use this game for, other than its most obvious use?