

Sumi Loundon Kim

Mindful Parenting: Nurturing an Intentional, Compassionate Family

Week Two: Introducing Mindfulness to Children

August 11, 2019



Welcome to our second week on mindful parenting. My name is Sumi Loundon Kim, and this week we're going to learn about a few simple, gentle ways to introduce mindfulness to our children.

Since we don't have much time as parents, I'm always looking for the easiest way to do things. One of the easiest ways to bring mindfulness to our children is through reading storybooks. Many of us are already reading to our children in the evening before bedtime, so it's an easy integration to bring in a few books on mindful lessons for children.

Ten years ago when my children were young, there weren't that many books for children in the pre-reading age. But ten years on, I'm happy to say there are dozens and dozens of wonderful books with great illustrations and storylines.

For example, *Moody Cow Meditates* has an excellent narrative about a cow who's "having a cow" as we might say—a very bad day. His grandfather teaches him how to practice meditation with a "calm-down jar." At the end of the story there are instructions on how to make a calm-down jar. You can imagine having your young one snuggled up against you as you're reading this story. It's all about this cow's experience and how he benefits from meditation. When you finish the story, there's a craft project. Your child will be excited to make that craft and try that meditation.

There are a couple of benefits to beginning with storybooks on mindfulness. One is that our children get to come physically close to us and snuggle up against us as we're reading. This allows them to build a very positive association of love, warmth, and togetherness with mindfulness lessons learned from these books. Another benefit is related to the fact that as parents we are often telling our children things throughout the day; we're highly directive. We're telling them, "Do this. Don't do that. Stop doing that. Go get that. Put that away." If we're also trying to incorporate some lessons or teaching around mindfulness, it might inadvertently get bundled together with the directive and disciplinary parenting stuff that we do. Our children might begin to associate mindfulness with either control or judgment when it comes from us. To prevent that, reading storybooks offers a third voice—the voice of a teacher that is not our voice.

I hope you're excited to try this out. If you're looking for a list of titles, you can visit MindfulFamilies.net where you'll find a very complete bibliography. If you see all these titles and think, "Oh, I can't possibly afford all these books," don't despair, because many public

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libraries carry these books. You can borrow them directly from your library or through the interlibrary loan system.

The second way that we can introduce mindfulness to our children with very little effort is through music. Children love songs, and now there are quite a few good songs that share mindfulness or the values we hope to impart to our children, such as generosity, kindness, or caring for the earth. The beauty of music is that it gives children another way to joyfully engage in these topics, and allow some of that learning to sink into their minds at a different level.

If you'd like a list of songs related to these topics, you can go to the MindfulFamilies.net website. On the songs page, you'll find links for either listening to or downloading many of these songs. Create a playlist and play them on car rides, while you're cooking or while the children are playing. Please bear in mind, you're going to hate these songs! Who likes children's songs when they first hear them? They will be irritating to you, but they are going to grow on you and before long you'll be humming along with them.

For our older kids—our tweens and teens—music and storybooks aren't quite right for them, so we take a different approach. These days there are quite a few apps that provide guided meditations for teenagers, and even for children. I know quite a few families whose teenagers are using these apps, particularly at bedtime or before an exam, and they say that it's really helping them.

One thing to bear in mind about tweens and teens is that they are much less inclined than younger children to learn mindfulness or meditation from their parents. This is a time of life where they're individuating, so it's very important for them to learn and practice with their peers, and from another teacher. There are quite a few teen retreats, workshop series, and mindfulness events available. If do a Google search in your local area, you might be surprised by what comes up. Local libraries often offer workshops, as do local universities. Sometimes mindfulness is being offered in school classrooms.

I highly recommend that teenagers take a mindfulness retreat. There are quite a few offered throughout the country. One organization called IBME, Inward Bound Mindfulness Education, provides wonderful retreats in the wilderness for teenagers.

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Bedtime is this beautiful transition between the busyness of the day and quiet rest at night. Many families have built-in routines and rituals to help children transition from day to night. We can draw on this progression by inserting a short period of meditation. You could do mindfulness meditation, but I would also suggest lovingkindness meditation. Children love lovingkindness meditation. Many families that I've known have included a short lovingkindness meditation at their children's bedtime and reported that their children absolutely love this practice and request it every night. My children did this when they were younger.

Lovingkindness meditation uses several simple phrases that help direct our attention towards generating a loving and kind intention. We use simple phrases, such as "May you be happy, may you be healthy, and may you be safe and protected." We can direct these phrases towards a series of categories. In the Buddhist tradition, we begin with ourselves: "May I be happy." Then we offer lovingkindness to someone we love: "May you be happy." Then we extend this lovingkindness to people we don't know, and next to our enemies or difficult people. Finally, we extend lovingkindness to all beings everywhere.

With children we need to simplify the practice a little bit. The phrases I've used with my children are, "May I be happy, may I be healthy," but then we use the phrase, "May I be safe and cozy." There's something about using the word "cozy" along with bedtime and blankets that works. For our categories, we offer lovingkindness to ourselves, and then to a babysitter, grandma, or teacher—somebody close to us. We then offer lovingkindness to something in nature, such as a rainforest or panda bears, and then finally we offer lovingkindness to all beings everywhere. Before the meditation begins, I ask my children to pick one person and one thing from nature that they'd like to practice lovingkindness for. Then we start our meditation.

I would tuck my children in—fortunately, they were both in the same room for many years—and then I would lay down somewhere. We had a nightlight so there was some light, and then I would have my children take a few deep breaths in and exhale, "Ah" loudly. They love that part.

I would ease them into the meditation with a script such as, "Snuggling into our blankets, letting our bodies melt into the mattress, just letting go of all the worries of the day, becoming soft, heavy, and relaxed, now we begin our lovingkindness meditation. We think of ourselves and our inner goodness and the ways in which we were kind today. We wish for ourselves: May I be happy, may I truly be happy, I wish for myself all the happiness in the world."

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Then we would extend the practice to good health, “May I be healthy and may I be safe and cozy.” Then we would continue with the next category, “May grandma be happy,” “May all the rainforests be happy,” and then, “May all beings be happy.” It would take maybe three to four minutes and they slept so well after that meditation.

In review, today we’ve learned about the benefits of storybooks and songs for introducing mindfulness to our children. We’ve also learned that for tweens and teens we can use apps, peer groups, workshops, and retreats. We’ve learned that we can integrate lovingkindness meditation at bedtime, particularly for our younger children.

I hope you’re excited to try a few of these in the week to come. Please join me next week where we’ll look at how we can bring mindfulness practices to parenting on the spot.