

PARENT RESOURCE

Mindfulness With Young Children

Even very little kids can have big feelings! When they have big feelings we can often see it in their whole body. In moments of excitement or happiness they may seem to bounce with energy. In moments of sadness, they may show it by crying, but also by scrunching their face and tensing their body. This becomes especially obvious when we see them calm down and their whole body relaxes. This teaches us that our feelings live not only in our brain, but also in our bodies.

We often think it is our brain that tells us to calm down, but interestingly, it is often the other way around! Relaxing our body can help tell our brain to calm down. This is why we suggest activities like breathing or mindfulness games – by relaxing our body it helps us feel calmer and less overwhelmed with our big feelings.

Toddlers and young children need our help with this! They are just learning how to calm down. When we help our children calm their body and mind we call this “co-regulation” - in other words, they regulate with our help. Over time little people learn how to calm their own body and mind (“self-regulation”) by being co-regulated by their parents, teachers, and other important adults in their life. When we help young children co-regulate we are helping them learn how to be even better at self-regulating. It takes practice!

Of course, even as grown up “big people” – we also feel our feelings in our bodies, and we know that sometimes we all need help calming down. In other words, we all need people in our life who help us co-regulate at times. The wonderful fact is that learning how to help your young child calm can also help you to feel calmer, too, and you both have a chance to practice and strengthen this skill.

Like everything else, it is easier to use this skill if you have practiced it before. Mindfulness is almost like an “emotional muscle.” When we use it more often it grows stronger, and then it is easier to use it when we really need it. So, it is a great idea to practice mindfulness games when everyone is feeling calm and regulated. Then, when your child is distressed, you can remind them about this game, and they might be better able to use it to calm themselves in those moments of big feelings.

Sometimes helping your child calm can be as simple as helping them take breaths that fill their belly and blow all the air out! They could lie on their belly with a favorite stuffed

animal on top and practice using breathing to make it go up and down. Or blow a pinwheel. Taking a walk in nature is very calming for most children and adults, and you can allow your attention to wander, looking at stones, plants, bugs, the clouds, and anything that catches your eye. Even very little babies are often captivated by nature, so a walk outside may be just the thing for both of you!

If you want some more ideas, here you can find a set of fun activity cards to “play” with your child when they are calm, and then use the same strategies to help them calm down when they have big feelings later. These are located at: <https://zerotothrive.org/resources/> under the “Mindfulness Activities for Children”. They are also listed in this document. For example, you might practice “squirrel square breathing” with your child. Then when your child is having big feelings, you can say, “let’s play our squirrel game, remember?” Practicing makes this easier to do in the ‘big feelings’ moment.

Notice that many of these activities might also be what YOU need! Maybe you want to try to STOP like a sloth, or focus like a flamingo, and then figure out how you want to help your child.

Notice too that many of these activities involve paying attention to what is around you, and to focusing on breathing. That is because those two things really help create a mindful space, and to regulate your body (breathe) and mind (attend).



S.T.O.P. Like a Sloth

S. Stop. Whatever you are doing, take a break.

T. Take a breath. Take a deep breath in and out.

O. Observe. Notice what is happening around you. What are you doing? How does your body feel? What do you see? What do you hear? What are you feeling?

P. Proceed. Now that you've had a moment to slow down you can proceed more mindfully.

Breathe Like a Bear

Sit up in a comfortable way. Close your eyes. Notice your breathing as you breathe in and out. Can you feel the place where the air tickles your nostrils?

Pay close attention to how the breath gently moves your body. Can you notice your belly or your chest moving?

Sit for a few minutes, just paying attention to your gentle breathing. See how relaxed you can feel just sitting, breathing in and out.

When your mind starts to wander and think about something else, gently bring your attention back to your breathing.

Relax Like a Rabbit

Sit quietly or lie down. Close your eyes and breathe.

Now think about the top of your head. In your mind, tell your body to relax the muscles in your head.

Next turn your attention to your shoulders, then down your arms. Soften and relax.

Continue with this through your body, replacing it with a sense of calm. When you are ready, wiggle your toes and fingers, open your eyes, and stretch out gently.

Enjoy the sense of peace and calm.

Squirrel Square Breathing

Before you get started, make sure you are sitting comfortably in a quiet environment.

Slowly breathe out through your mouth...

Hold your breath for a count of four.

Slowly breathe in through your nose...

Hold your breath for a count of four.

Repeat until you feel more relaxed.



Roar Like a Lion

Get on the floor on all fours.

Take a deep breath through your nose.

Open your mouth as big as you can.

ROAR like a lion!

Focus Like a Flamingo

Sit quietly and pay attention to what is happening right now, in the moment.

Notice 5 things you can see.

Notice 4 things you can feel.

Notice 3 things you can hear.

Notice 2 things you can smell.

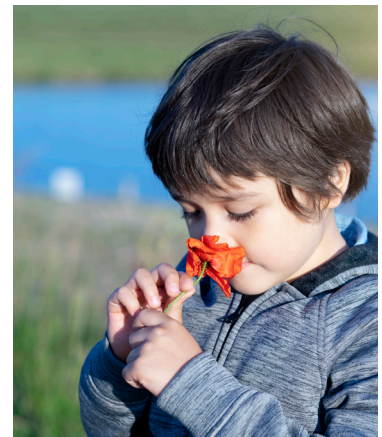
Notice 1 thing you can taste.

Tuck Into Your Turtle Shell

We all have our own home of feelings inside, like a shell we can tuck into when needed.

Move slowly like a turtle around the room. After a moment, curl up into your shell.

Pay attention to the thoughts and feelings you have in your shell. How do you feel curled up?



Go for a Rainbow Walk

Go on a walk and try to find something in every color of the rainbow. Find something that is red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. Notice the colors. This is a mindful rainbow walk.

Zen Like a Zebra

There are a lot of activities you can do to help you become 'zen' or calm.

Color a picture, read a book, practice yoga, go for a walk, or write a story.

Make your own list of relaxing activities you can do for times when you want to feel more calm.