



Mindfulness is one of the sexiest words out there right now. It is a hot topic at home, in gyms and yoga studios, in schools and workplaces. It even made the cover of *Time* magazine. According to the [Oxford](#) Dictionary, the definition of mindfulness is, “The quality or state of being conscious or aware of something. A mental state achieved by focusing one’s awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting one’s feelings, thoughts and bodily sensations.”

That’s pretty powerful. I think we all hope to achieve mindfulness, and many of us proactively work towards it. We use breathing techniques, recognizing and acknowledging our feelings, practicing awareness of our thoughts, and meditating. Let’s be honest – this is some pretty tough and heady stuff, even for adults.

I hear about mindfulness frequently in childcare and early childhood settings and I think there is something to it. But, I worry that our expectations for children to achieve an adult definition of mindfulness misses the mark. Mindfulness requires a certain level of stillness. It requires us to be able to control our minds and bodies. It requires a level of maturity to control our emotions, to understand the present, to evaluate our thoughts. So, I have to wonder, are we asking too much of young children when we expect them to achieve these same lofty goals? I would say yes.

Instead, let’s meet young children where they are developmentally. Let’s help them construct a strong foundation that will allow them to work towards mindfulness. In that way, we can help them achieve some level of mindfulness, but in a child-friendly way.

My child-centered view of mindfulness was shaped by an experience I had at a local public school a few years ago. I was asked to work with the 2nd grade on mindfulness, with the goal of giving teachers tools to help children increase their social and emotional skills. The school drew from a population traditionally underserved in our community. The faculty struggled with academics and behavior issues, along with a school building in gross disrepair. I arrived at the 2nd grade classroom ready to put a traditional approach to mindfulness into action to help these children and teachers. I was greeted by two boys in a full out fist fight, and it was all I could do to separate them. Immediately, those boys were taken into the hall, sat on the floor and addressed by the counselor. In the meantime, I continued with the task at hand with the group in the classroom. The remaining children were agitated, yelling and moving, unable to find any stillness. We were interrupted by teachers who were also yelling. It was clearly not a situation set up for success.

These children desperately needed mindfulness. They needed to be grounded and in the present, to learn respect for each other and for themselves. But these children needed the foundation that comes *before* mindfulness. Mindfulness requires body control and body awareness, and these children had not established that crucial foundation. When I visited the school, the playground was empty. Behavior problems resulted in children sitting in the hallway in silence. The school didn’t have a gym for PE class. And, the students lived in a play desert, unsafe for outdoor, big body play. These children weren’t moving at school, and they weren’t moving at home. They had not had



the opportunity to build the physical skills and strengths needed to have the body control and awareness that underlies mindfulness. How could they possibly find stillness, or as Oxford says, “calmly acknowledge and accept one’s bodily sensations,” when they hadn’t experienced movement? Instead, children need to use movement to find stillness.

An innovative program at an elementary school in Alexandria, Virginia, provides an alternative approach to leverage children’s natural need to move. Students who are having trouble controlling their bodies are given a Movement Prescription. They can use that Movement Prescription when they need time to reset their bodies. They can either join the PE class in progress or engage in a set of defined movement activities for 20 minutes before returning to class. These activities, such as shooting baskets or juggling a soccer ball, get the child moving in a thoughtful way that requires focus. The activities also emphasize crossing the midline which strengthens cross-hemisphere connections in the brain. After filling the Movement Prescription, the student returns to class with a more-settled brain, ready to be part of the classroom community again.

So, how is this approach better than sitting a child in the hallway? In both cases, the distraction is removed from the classroom so the rest of the class can continue with the school day. However, with the Movement Prescription, the child sent to the gym is given a constructive outlet for channeling behavior. And the teachers have found that when children return to the classroom, they can easily catch up with their peers and their work. More fundamentally, the Movement Prescription takes into account the developmental needs of the child to move, especially when upset or agitated. With movement, the out-of-sorts child can find some solace, allowing executive function to take the wheel back from the primitive brain.

The best part is that, over time, teachers have found that children who have Movement Prescriptions begin to initiate this process themselves. Children start to *recognize* the feelings that trigger the teacher to send them to the gym *before* the teacher can see it. They can ask to go to the gym proactively, rather than being told to go. They learn the coping skills necessary to navigate their feelings because they are given constructive tools that work for their young, active bodies. *This is mindfulness for a young child.*

Young children must move their bodies to learn. They must move their bodies to explore their world and learn what their bodies can do. This early movement builds the strengths, skills and movement patterns that will allow them to sit in a chair, read, hold a pencil and move it across a page. They must move their bodies in order to build synapsis and neural wiring that will help them navigate their world socially and emotionally. They must move their bodies to connect the right and left brain so that complex, creative and critical thinking can develop. They must move their bodies to understand how their bodies feel.

But they don’t move their bodies.

Study after study has shown that children today spend an inordinate amount of time in sedentary activities – approximately 8 hours a day spent in classrooms chairs or in front of screens at home. Studies have also shown an increase in learning and behavior challenges for young children. What is the connection? The lack of those fundamental movement-based skills.

Bottom line: Can children achieve mindfulness? Absolutely. But their mindfulness must start with understanding their bodies and what their bodies feel like. Once they have established strength and control of their bodies, they have made the first steps towards mindfulness. But it is critical we help them build that foundation first. Only then will they be on the road to successful mindfulness.

<https://50million.shapeamerica.org/2017/11/program-proves-more-recess-improves-academic-performance-and-behavior/>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5551109/>

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