

See, Hear, Feel, Ubuntu

Merging preschool curriculum with mindfulness instruction

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First Ideas

Imagine a preschool classroom organized so as to weave and infuse mindfulness instruction throughout the ever-changing curricula that flow and go with the children's interests. What could it look like for such a classroom to educate *mindful children*?

The first thing to clarify is what we mean by a "mindful child." I'd hope we mean something like this:

- *A child who is learning attentional skills, powerfully connecting with the senses*
- *A child who is learning why and how to make peaceful choices*

If we then asked why it's good to teach children about mindfulness skills from an early age, we might come up with reasons including:

- *So they can better soothe themselves*
- *So they can learn impulse control*
- *So they can better understand themselves*
- *So they can interact with peers and grown-ups more kindly and skillfully*
- *So they can develop concentration*
- *So they can develop sensory acuity*

And we would be quite right. So then, when we think of “mindfulness instruction” for children, what first comes to mind?

- *Sitting still, with eyes closed?*
- *Bell sounds, quiet music, perhaps a calm voice guiding meditation?*
- *Deep breathing?*
- *Five minutes at circle time of a mindfulness activity, followed by business as usual?*

Clearly I’m trying to highlight some common assumptions about what mindfulness practice looks like, both in general and in a classroom context. Of course, all of the practices above are perfectly appropriate and productive, and there are places for them. But what’s needed is a deeper and more comprehensive approach to mindfulness instruction for children in a preschool classroom. And if these are the *only* practices or teaching methods that we know how to recognize, then we risk missing out on some key differences between how we grown-ups usually learn about awareness practice, and how children might.

Your Kids Are More Mindful Than You Are

Let’s begin by acknowledging the attentional prowess that children routinely demonstrate. They start out very mindful indeed! Consider all the fascinating ways in which they get fascinated. Everyone has seen this, and the mysterious part to us grown-ups is how often it can be with such mundane things...

- *A child spends all morning stirring soap bubbles in a bowl of water with a whisk...*
- *A child traces her hand over and over, and then traces everyone’s hand who’ll allow her to...*
- *A child explores a small patch of mud for thirty minutes...*
- *A child is surrounded by a small circle of track, staring intently at the same handful of train cars he’s been shoving around for an hour...*

And in briefer moments, it’s also clear to see how often children get spontaneously absorbed. Passing trucks, tiny bugs, bodily touches, another child’s act, or any of a billion other things jumbling along right now are all likely to grab and grip their attention for a short spell.

The key thing to notice is the children’s built-in readiness and aptitude for entering into absorbed (i.e., highly concentrated) states of awareness, *regardless of how long a given absorption may last*. For lack of understanding, we grown-ups often oversimplify the several dimensions of attention down to just attention *span*, or *how long* you can concentrate. (And by this standard alone, we see that children often perform quite well.) But if we’re only worried about length of time, then we’re short-changing children’s skills along critical dimensions of attentional *depth*.

Take a three-year-old who can’t yet remain focused for long enough to sit through circle time, and imagine life from his perspective: Many moments that look from the outside like “distractions” are really dives into delicious new sensory absorptions. And the concentration is delicious *simply because it’s concentrated*. We all know how good it feels to be in the zone with

some activity or experience, even if we can only stay there for a few minutes or seconds, right? Well, what would it be like to get in the zone for a few seconds at a time, *with one arbitrary little thing after another?*

In fact, this is the main model I use for teaching mindfulness to grown-ups. We spend three quarters of the Mindful Parents course learning to get in the zone for a few seconds at a time, with one thing after another. It's called noting practice and it is the closest thing I know to a superpower.

So when you see a child's fascination emerge, what you're actually watching are *mindfulness skills teaching themselves*. The child's concentration produces pleasure that feeds the child's fascination, which induces more concentration, which enhances the pleasure, and so forth.

There are occasions when you need to interrupt their fascination with inappropriate stuff, for sure. But when you don't need to do that, it's nice to know that as far as your mindfulness instruction responsibilities are concerned, all you have to do right now is to run interference. Try to stand back and guard their focus with a protective bubble, so they can remain as uninterrupted as possible! In so much as you are a child's mindfulness instructor, there's often a whole lot you *don't* have to do.

Input/Output

Let's review and dig deeper into the working definition of a "mindful child" from above.

The first half said:

- *A child who is learning attentional skills, powerfully connecting with the senses*

This is about **awareness of sensory input**.

The second half said:

- *A child who is learning why and how to make peaceful choices*

This is about **awareness of sensorimotor/behavioral output**.

Comprehensive mindfulness instruction for children should encompass both of these sides at every stage of the game. As we stay on the hunt for opportunities to challenge and enhance children's awareness, we remember that their attentional skills benefit not only themselves, but also and at all times the people with whom they interact.

When you watch a bird with a child, and practice making your bodies utterly still so that you can watch it without frightening it away, *you are teaching mindfulness*. And when you point out the contagiously happy fact that the picture a child just drew for her peer caused that child to smile and dance, *you are also teaching mindfulness*.

When you ring a bell and ask a child to wait until he can no longer hear its sound to raise his hand, *you are teaching mindfulness*. And when you intervene between two children who are both grabbing the same toy at once and unable to come to words about what to do next, *you are also teaching mindfulness*.

When you coach children through physical pain, or when you try to help them experience and describe their emotions with clarity, *you are teaching mindfulness*. And when you teach them how to take a deep breath when they're pissed, so as not to hit the person they're pissed at, *you are most certainly teaching mindfulness*.

The **input/output** balance behind our definition of the "mindful child" contains a pattern for optimizing a school's culture in the directions of both *quality* and *frequency* of opportunities for practicing and discussing awareness power. So now let's return to the original dream: a preschool classroom "organized so as to weave and infuse mindfulness instruction throughout the ever-changing curricula."

See, Hear, Feel...

The salient point about children's sensory absorptions is that they're sensory. Children lose themselves over and over in what they see-and-imagine, hear-and-say, touch-smell-taste-and-emote. So it makes sense to focus on the senses themselves as one's starting point when planning a classroom's weekly menus of activities.

The human senses break down into three strands: visual (external sights, mental images), auditory (external sounds, mental talk), and somatic (physical touches in the body including taste and smell, emotional sensations). So a natural way to break out a lesson planning cycle would be to focus one at a time on these sensory themes which, for short, we'll call **See Hear Feel**.

Week 1: See

Circle time (aka whole-group) activities focused on visual awareness, such as...

- "I spy" games
- Recognizing letters/numbers by sight
- Guided visualization practice
- Visual memory games
- Color sensitization activities
- Practicing eye contact
- Learning how the eye/brain relationship works
- Learning about visual extenders like microscopes, magnifying glasses, or telescopes
- Practicing visual recognition of emotional states in others
- Closely observing natural phenomena like clouds, animals, or plants

Week 2: Hear

Circle time activities focused on auditory awareness...

- Silence/bell games
- Recognizing letters/numbers by sound
- Chant practice (e.g., The Clean-up Chant: *Find it, get it, pick it up, put it away...*)
- Listening memory games
- Singing melodies
- Matching rhythms
- Learning how the ear/brain relationship works
- Hearing how sounds blend to make words
- Learning to recognize the calls/sounds of different animals
- Practicing listening to/repeating other people's words

Week 3: Feel

Circle time activities focused on body awareness...

- Balanced walking games
- Recognizing letters/numbers by touch
- Blindfolded taste- or smell-testing games
- Blindfolded tactile recognition games
- Dancing
- Yoga
- Breathing
- Learning to recognize emotions in the body
- Running/calisthenics
- Learning to recognize sensations of hunger/eating/fullness

Clearly these lists are just starting points; one could come up with endless ideas around all three sensory themes. Go for it! There are also countless possibilities for integrating the sensory theme of the week with whatever content the children are into right now. So if you're studying oceanography and it happens to be **Hear** week, spend some time listening to whale calls or learning how sonar works. If you're studying outer space and it's **Feel** week, spend some time jumping off things or lifting/pushing heavy weights to test out the body's relationship with gravity, and walk in circles while spinning around to experience what orbits and rotation around an axis feel like for a planet. If you're studying jazz music and it's **See** week, watch videos of trios or quartets and ask questions like, *What do their instruments look like?* or *How does it look like they are playing their instruments?* or *When do they make eye contact with each other?*

The **See Hear Feel** framework is adaptable to any content area, and in no way limits the activities you might like to try out with children. Also, the week's sensory emphases are flexible and non-exclusive; that is, there will of course be plenty of music for children to listen to and sand in the sensory bin for them to touch even during "See Week," and so forth. The goal is not

that the study of awareness is *limited to* one sensory strand per week, but rather that each strand is *carefully emphasized* per week.

The 1:12 Learning Ratio

If you are with me so far, then let's look back for a second at how far we've already progressed. The few stereotypical assumptions about what mindfulness instruction looks like in a preschool classroom we began with were:

- *Sitting still, with eyes closed*
- *Bell sounds, quiet music, perhaps a calm voice guiding meditation*
- *Deep breathing*
- *Five minutes at circle time of a mindfulness activity, followed by business as usual*

From these admirable beginnings, we're approaching a pedagogy of mindfulness instruction which is more *comprehensive* in that it starts by design from the children's inherent attentional strengths, and allows for maximum flexibility across any content areas the children/teachers may wish to pursue.

But hold on a second. Isn't there a catch here? If we say that everything from birdwatching to oceanography to conflict resolution interventions can count as *mindfulness instruction*, then haven't we made the term useless/meaningless? What about those good old-fashioned "lessons" like a dedicated session of belly breathing, or bell/silence games, or whatnot? Don't we need to maintain some core of the curriculum in the form of, shall we say, *ceremonious* mindfulness practice with the children?

Maybe so. But let's ask the same question in another way: At a given moment when wearing the "I am the child's mindfulness instructor" hat on my head, where am I balanced between these two poles?

- *Mindfulness **isolated** as special lessons/activities/practices*
- *Mindfulness **infused** into momentary teaching opportunities, curricula, and social/emotional coaching*

Obviously, this polarity implies a whole spectrum of teaching opportunities. No spot along the continuum of mindfulness instruction from "isolated" to "infused" is more or less valuable than another, as long as we grown-ups know how to optimize as many chances to teach and discuss awareness as we appropriately can, regardless of the context. Is it circle time, or a physical duel over a silly toy? Whenever you don the hat of the preschool awareness guru, you will find yourself teaching to the best of your ability...*somewhere along that line*.

Now another fact about children's learning becomes relevant. Although my numeration is far from scientific, I like to think of it as the **1:12 learning ratio** of the preschooler's mind and body.

Here's the principle: Any time a preschool-aged child appears to be learning one thing, they're actually learning twelve. The number twelve is strictly my intuitive guess, and an obvious oversimplification. But my drift should be obvious: *They are always learning lots of things all at once.*

This "learning ratio" concept gives us two handy implications for mindfulness instruction in a preschool classroom:

- **1:12**...When you teach a lesson purely about mindfulness, rest assured that the children are also busy learning a bunch of separate things, either as part of or in addition to your lesson. *Fortune cookie version: You teach the One, and Twelve things are learned.*
- **12:1**...When you see a child that's obviously learning 12 things at once, you can try to make sure that one of those things is how awareness power applies to what they're experiencing. *Fortune cookie version: In the midst of Twelve, you teach the One.*

Remembering that **1:12** (or 12:1) idea helps us stay grounded and realistic about what we're actually doing here as mindfulness educators, and also lights up countless opportunities to bring mindful awareness into conversation which we might have otherwise missed. This is a more child-centric view of the "isolated/infused" axis of mindfulness instruction. As such, it's just as useful as our **input/output** idea was earlier. Speaking of which, we haven't fully addressed that topic yet.

...Ubuntu

The "U" in our school stands for **ubuntu**, a term which to my mind means that the individual and the group make each other possible, and take care of each other.

Our weeks of **See Hear Feel** emphasis were all about sensory **input**, about "learning attentional skills" and "powerfully connecting with the senses." Great...But where's the sensorimotor/behavioral **output** part? The whys and hows of making "peaceful choices"?

After three weeks of **See Hear Feel** and for a final week before the cycle starts over, we emphasize the powers of awareness to make us into kinder and kinder people, carefully noticing that when we do our best to make friendly and respectful choices, we can make ourselves feel better and others feel better.

Here too there's a parallel with our Mindful Parents course. The last practices the grown-ups learn are about actively re-building the self into more positive emotional, behavioral, and cognitive patterns. We can use a concerted mindful effort to bring our most positive self to the moment, so others can benefit.

Week 4: Ubuntu

Circle time activities focused on doing our best, for ourselves and others...

- Role playing scenarios about asking for a turn, for an object, for attention, for more space, to join a game/building project, and so forth
- Practicing school routines/transitions
- Taking care of the school environment
- Practicing gratitude and the art of saying “thank you”
- Show & tell + listen & ask
- Telling “Ubuntu stories” about acts of respect/kindness observed in the course of the day
- Learning about and sharing our families and cultures
- Learning about respect for the natural environment

I hasten to add that **ubuntu** education (aka peace education) happens all week every week, not just in the 4th of the monthly cycle. Every morning afternoon and evening, when we coach children’s communication abilities through their myriad downs and ups, we are teaching the part of the mindful child who is aware of their behavioral **output**, and its interconnectedness with others. Whenever we dust a shelf with a child, or prepare a snack for friends, or water the plants, we can help that child practice the **ubuntu** side of mindfulness. Hopefully we’re capitalizing on chances to do that kind of coaching as often as we feasibly can. (Lord knows, there are plenty of chances.) Once again, it’s not that this is the only week when we talk about **ubuntu**, it’s the time when it returns to the center, *carefully emphasized*.

Rinse & Repeat

So there you have it: a four-week pattern for planning activities in a preschool classroom optimized so that ongoing daily mindfulness instruction has a built-in, complementary relationship with the children’s current areas of inquiry, and with their social/emotional learning. You can get through about eight cycles of **See Hear Feel Ubuntu** per year. (And about four cycles of the Mindful Parents course, which is eight weeks long.) In our first passes through this planning cycle in our 3/4 classroom, it’s been doing a good job helping us engage and cultivate all the children’s senses, while encouraging respectful and kind choice-making. For us, it’s a useful tool; something that will help us continue to develop the education we deliver in more mindful directions.