

The Importance of Mindfulness In Children by Carolyn Gregoire

In the growing conversation around mindfulness, we're constantly hearing about meditation in the workplace and tech CEOs who swear by the practice. But less attention is being paid to the quietly growing movement for mindfulness in the family, and the use of meditation to optimize the health, well-being and happiness of children.

It's not just adults that can stand to benefit from cultivating a focused awareness on the present moment. Research is beginning to shed light on the power of mindfulness as an intervention for a number of behavioral challenges that children face. We're also starting to recognize that mindfulness practices could be beneficial for children for the same reasons it helps adults, contributing to reduced stress, improved sleep quality and heightened focus.

At increasingly younger ages, kids are facing higher levels of stress, and it may be taking a significant toll on their health. Stressful events in childhood can increase the risk of developing health problems as an adult, but the impact may hit much earlier. A recent University of Florida study found that stressful events can impact a child's health and well-being almost immediately, and can contribute to the development of physical and mental health problems and learning disabilities.

Sonia Sequeira, Ph.D., a clinical researcher specialized in Investigational Therapies and director of the Institute for Meditation Sciences, has been practicing yoga and meditation for nearly 20 years, and has practiced with her own children for years. Now in her work as a mindfulness researcher, she's brought contemplative practices to children ages 3-18 who are struggling with autism, cancer, and other physical and mental health problems. Currently, she's using meditation and chanting to help relieve pain in children with cancer.

It may seem like a tall order to ask your kid to meditate -- given that it can be a struggle just to get a child to sit down or eat breakfast -- but Sequeira insists that in her years of working with children, she's found just the opposite.

"There's an initial resistance, which I think is cultural, and usually it occurs in the presence of the parent," Sequeira told The Huffington Post. "But it extinguishes very quickly. Teaching mindfulness to children has always been the easiest for me because there's no set patterns, or at least they're not set in stone yet. With adults it's much more difficult."

Learning mindfulness practices -- including meditation, breathing exercises, yogaasana (postures) and chanting -- can have a significant long-term affect on a child's

development.

"[In my research], what really mattered was finding practical tools that were not an on-off or intermittent practice for children, but something they could really grow with and that could affect their physiology as they grow from their young childhood into adolescence," says Sequeira.

Here's proof that children need mindfulness just as much as adults do.

Mindfulness can help kids to thrive at school.

Most of the research on mindfulness for children has been conducted in the school setting. Recent studies have shown school mindfulness programs to be effective in reducing symptoms of depression, stress and anxiety among secondary-school children for up to six months after the program. Such programs can also help students focus during exams, as well as reducing stress and boosting happiness among high school students.

Susan Kaiser Greenland, author of *The Mindful Child*, is one of increasingly many parents fighting for a "mindful revolution in education," explaining mindfulness programs can aid kids in developing good habits that will help make them happier and more compassionate.

More and more of these programs are beginning to crop up. The Mindful Moment program in Maryland high schools has students start and end each day with a 15-minute yoga and meditation session, and provides a mindfulness room available for personal use throughout the day. The program aims to reduce stress among students and teachers, and to increase four-year graduation rates.

It can be an effective intervention for autism.

Recent research, conducted by Sequeira and colleagues and published in the journal *Autism Research and Treatment*, has suggested that meditation has a great deal of potential as a treatment option for children with autism.

"Meditation is one of a few interventions that have been shown to effectively strengthen self-control and character development simultaneously," the researchers write in a report. "There is much to be gained by exploring meditation as a strategy to override impaired brain synchronicity and debilitating symptoms arising in early years of persons with autism."

In autism and many other psychological imbalances, the connecting thread is a lack of rhythm, says Sequeira. There's a challenge of balancing the inner and outer world, and this can distort relationships and interactions with others. In the case of autism, environmental cues become so augmented that the child shuts down from the world to protect themselves. Mantra meditation in particular (a type of meditation that involves the repetition of a word or sound) can help restore a sense of rhythm.

"When you create internal rhythm, there's a harmonizing and balancing effect," explains Sequeira. "It facilitates communication, incubation of thoughts... it tells you that you're in a safe environment and there's no threat." "It truly is a top-to-bottom response, and with the children, it restores a natural ability to respond inside to rhythm."

Children with autism respond well to mantra because it facilitates response, she says.

It can help kids with ADD and ADHD.

Being mindful is, at its core, the ability to sustain a focused awareness on the present moment, and practicing mindfulness has been proven to help boost our powers of focus and attention. And it may be just as effective for children as it is for adults.

A 2011 study published in the *Journal of Child and Family Studies* demonstrated the effectiveness of an eight-week mindfulness program for children ages 8-12 with ADHD, along with a mindful parenting program for their parents. The researchers found that the program reduced parent-reported ADHD behavior. It also increased mindful awareness among both parents and children, and reduced parental stress.

Such programs may be a highly effective intervention either alongside or in the place of traditional ADD and ADHD medications, which come with side effects and may lose their effectiveness over time.

"There are no long-term, lasting benefits from taking A.D.H.D. medications," James M. Swanson, a psychologist at the University of California, Irvine, told the *New York Times*. "But mindfulness seems to be training the same areas of the brain that have reduced activity in A.D.H.D... "That's why mindfulness might be so important. It seems to get at the causes."

It can help children with cancer and other serious health conditions.

Sequeira has been hard at work for over a year now on a pilot program bringing mantra meditation to children with cancer as a way to reduce pain. While the study is still underway and the results have not yet been finalized, she's seen an overwhelming positive reaction from both the children and their parents.

"Frequently the children remark that they want to continue beyond the time that's scheduled, even beyond the point where they had heightened pain," says Sequeira. "They wanted us to stay there chanting with them for a while. Parents from all over the world speaking different languages are united by mantra that doesn't have a language meaning but that touches their heart. They felt an enormous sense of peace and did feel that they were contributing to the healing of their children."

The kids Sequeira works with at Sloan-Kettering also use what she calls a "worrywart waste basket," in which they make a practice of writing down their concerns on a piece of paper and throwing them away. "They know to do that, and to chant and resolve some of the tension that arises," says Sequeira.

A mindful family upbringing encourages children to self-actualize.

Mindful parenting, as defined by Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction founder Jon Kabat-Zinn, consists of "paying attention to your child and your parenting in a particular way: intentionally, here and now, and non-judgmentally." As Sequeira puts it, creating a mindful family is about "healing the environment and healing the relationships."

To begin to create a more mindful family and incorporate mindfulness into their children's lives, parents can start with a daily meditation, yoga or breathing practice. Family dinners can also become mindful by not allowing phones at the table and

having a moment of gratitude for the food. Even simple things like positive affirmations and encouraging children to think before they speak can foster an environment of calmness, presence and compassion.

"A child is imprinted with many influences... and all of this shapes a personality" says Sequeira. "When there's a mindfulness approach to living, it ultimately becomes the personality of the child to truly manifest and become who they are -- not trying to become a doctor or a lawyer, but trying to discover their gifts. At the same time, it allows the parents to wean themselves from this very analytical, competitive, linear thinking in life, trying to carry children towards certain goals, which ultimately is stressful for the parent."

This "group healing," says Sequeira, will hopefully one day become the basis for a more mindful society.