

Mindfulness in the Classroom

Part 2: Alternative Practices

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Mindfulness practices prime the brain, mind, and body for healthy learning and development. In [Part 1](#) of this two-part series, *Mindfulness in The Classroom*, you learned how some commonly implemented teaching strategies promote mindfulness.

Since then, you may have explored teaching the two components of mindfulness: focal attention and openness and receptivity. You may have also guided children in paying attention, on purpose, with non-judgment, compassion, and loving-kindness. Hopefully you also witnessed how these mindfulness strategies shifted children's behaviors and, perhaps, your behavior as well!

Part 2 of this series includes additional mindfulness practices for the early childhood classroom, and exciting alternatives to typical child guidance procedures.

Mindfulness strategies support brain development in several key ways:

1. **Promote integration - differentiation and linkage:** developing all parts of the brain and building connections, or linking, the various parts. When our brains are both differentiated and linked, they are integrated, a state which supports physical and mental well-being.
2. **Develop executive function skills:** the ability to plan, initiate, organize and carry out tasks while regulating emotions, resolving conflicts, shifting gears when necessary and tracking efforts to do so. Focal attention is a primary driver for developing these "school readiness" skills.
3. **Engage intrapersonal attunement:** tuning into one's interior landscape, including thoughts, feelings, sensations, all mental activity. Noticing "what's inside."

4. **Engage interpersonal attunement:** tuning into another’s interior landscape. Noticing “what’s there.”
5. **Develop important functions in the prefrontal cortex:** most notably, attuned communication, fear modulation, physical regulation, emotional regulation, response flexibility, insight, empathy, intuition, morality, and decision making.

Consider the following **mindfulness strategies** that engage **focal attention**, promote **openness and receptivity**, and their brain benefits:

Strategy	Description and Examples	Brain Benefits
<p>Create Embedded Learning Opportunities</p>	<p>Embedding mindfulness strategies allows children to predict what is expected in the classroom, navigate their play with rules and expectations in mind, and receive positive, descriptive acknowledgement.</p> <p>Every classroom has rules, but others also have expectations connected to those rules. Rules are “<i>what</i>” you want children to do and the expectations are “<i>why</i>” they are doing them. For example, “We walk in the classroom (rule) because we are safe (expectation).”</p> <p>Pairing expectations such as non-judgmental, compassionate, and loving kindness with safe, friendly, and respectful rules helps children learn the open and receptive qualities associated with mindfulness.</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “We take turns with toys because we are non-judgmental/loving/kind/compassionate.” ● “We solve problems together because we are non-judgmental/loving/kind/compassionate.” <p>When children are following the rules and meeting expectations, you acknowledge them in the moment (e.g., “Josh, you are sharing the toys. You are being respectful.”). This helps engage their focal attention, promotes mindful awareness, and stimulates an open, receptive state of mind.</p>	<p>Integration: children learn their strengths (differentiation) and how those strengths impact others (linkage) for integration within relationships. They are also strengthening both the left and right hemispheres of the brain as well as the connection between the two when they reflect upon the outcome of their actions.</p> <p>Executive function skills: having clear rules and expectations helps children with all EF skills, setting a foundation for the “how” of play that supports the “what.”</p> <p>Intrapersonal attunement: the expectations teach children about the character traits they are developing, giving them a sense of self-knowing, or auto-noesis.</p> <p>Interpersonal attunement: hearing the teacher acknowledge a child following the rules and expectations helps children learn about one another.</p> <p>Prefrontal cortex functions: besides attunement and focal attention, insight may grow as children reflect upon their positive actions, empathy as they focus on the positive actions of others and even morality as they tie behavior to the greater good of the classroom community.</p>

<p>Mindfulness Monitor</p>	<p>Having an ongoing project, such as the Mindfulness Monitor, keeps the children actively engaging focal attention to notice what is going well in the classroom.</p> <p>A classroom that promotes mindful awareness sets the tone for children to feel safe, connected, satisfied, and thus open and receptive.</p> <p>Start by choosing two or three children who are invited to “catch” people who are being kind, compassionate, friendly, non-judgmental, loving or respectful.</p> <p>Next, generate a way to track these moments, perhaps with a “Mindfulness Tree” with “leaves” teachers cut out in advance.</p> <p>When the children spot a moment, they dictate what they noticed to the teacher, and it is written on a leaf.</p> <p>The children can then hang the leaves on the tree, and teachers encourage children to show the leaves to their families, and to return to them throughout the day to reflect upon those moments.</p>	<p>Integration: children learn their strengths (differentiation) and how those strengths impact others (linkage) promoting integration in relationships. The Mindfulness Monitor accesses all parts of her brain to observe other children’s behavior in context and label that behavior as kind, compassionate, etc. And the child receiving the acknowledgement also strengthens the connections in all parts of his brain taking in words that describe his actions and may link these to a “felt sense” in the body, heart and mind of what his behavior means to himself and others.</p> <p>Executive function skills: making positive behavior visible in this way helps children track their efforts, plan for future actions, and may motivate them to continue such efforts.</p> <p>Attunement: when children are involved in creating a leaf for the “Mindfulness Tree”, they pause to tune in to consider what their behavior was and the impact of that behavior. The child who was noticed tunes in to his or her actions, intrapersonal attunement, while the Mindfulness Monitor tunes in to the other child’s actions, interpersonal attunement.</p> <p>Prefrontal cortex functions: noticing positive actions and the impact they have may strengthen focal attention, attunement, insight, empathy and even morality. Teaching children to notice the “good” primes the brain to be in an integrated state of well-being and allows these higher order cognitive capacities to develop.</p>

<p>Yoga</p>	<p>Yoga can be defined as movement with breath. Any time children engage in purposeful movement and attend to their breath, they are doing yoga. For example, when a teacher encourages children to shift their attention inward, tuning in to their breath as they move their bodies.</p> <p>In particular, yoga puts emphasis on non-judgment of the body, accepting what is there, and being compassionate and kind to yourself as you explore the body's varying abilities. Starting with oneself, children may be encouraged to apply this same care to others in their classroom and community.</p> <p>Paying attention to the body's movements, while also tuning in to the breath, is an opportunity to promote integration of the mind, brain, and body in the context of relationships.</p>	<p>Integration: during yoga, children are activating both the right and left hemispheres of the brain to conduct the movements monitor the breath and stay focused. They are also connecting the “upstairs” and “downstairs” brain by remaining non-judgmental, compassionate, loving, and kind toward themselves and others.</p> <p>Executive function skills: children plan, initiate, organize and carry out their body movements, track their efforts, and make adjustments as they move through the yoga poses. Yoga supports the development of emotional regulation, helping children use breath and focus to create calm within.</p> <p>Intrapersonal attunement: as children move through the postures, they are encouraged to notice their body sensations, their feelings, their thoughts that arise.</p> <p>Interpersonal attunement: although during the yoga practice children are encouraged to go within, the insight gained during yoga may help children tune in to others during interactions: insight that helps build empathy.</p> <p>Prefrontal cortex functions: matching breath to movement has the potential to strengthen all nine of the prefrontal cortex functions.</p>
<p>Belly Breathing</p>	<p>Belly breathing can be an anchor strategy to help children regulate their emotions.</p> <p>Locating the breath in the body helps train children's focal attention as they follow the sensation of breath as it moves within them.</p> <p>Shifting focal attention to breath may help children shift the gaze inward away from the stressor and toward the sensation of using the physical body to initiate</p>	<p>Integration: both the left and right hemispheres of the brain are engaged when practicing breath awareness. The sensations of the body are brought up from the downstairs brain into the awareness of the upstairs brain for full integration.</p> <p>Executive function skills: children plan, initiate, organize and carry out the practice of breath awareness. As they notice the location of the breath</p>

	<p>regulation. The act of deep breathing, along with co-regulation strategies, help children return to an open, receptive, compassionate, nonjudgmental, loving, and kind state of mind.</p> <p>Try having children lie on their backs with a stuffed animal or other small toy on their bellies. Tell them to watch the toy rise and fall as they breathe in and out. Or, have them place their hands gently on their bellies and heart to do the same. As they watch the rise and fall of the belly/chest, ask them if they can feel their breath in their nose, their chest, their belly, their toes, other parts of the body. Children love this exercise and often return to it on their own quite readily!</p>	<p>in the body, they may adjust their breath to vary the sensations, shifting gears to move the breath to other parts of their body.</p> <p>Intrapersonal attunement: as children pause to notice their breath in their bodies, they turn inward to explore their sensations, feelings, thoughts, and images of their interior landscape.</p> <p>Prefrontal cortex functions: learning to notice and shift the breath in this way helps with body regulation and emotional balance as well as response flexibility, or putting a space between stimulus and response. Children may be asked in moments of stress/strong emotions to harness the power of attention to locate the breath to help them pause, think, and then act.</p>
<p>Alternate Nostril Breathing: <i>Start by placing your left thumb on left nostril to close the airway. Breathe in long and slow through the right nostril and pause. Then put your right thumb on the right nostril, closing it while holding the breath. Exhale through the left nostril. This cycle can be repeated or switch with the inbreath being in the left nostril, out breath from the right, etc.</i></p>	<p>Children engage their attention to organize breath and hand movements. Because this is a fun yet challenging activity, it typically captivates their full attention. It also helps that it feels silly.</p> <p>Teachers may use this strategy during their circle time/community time, then encourage children to engage in the practice throughout the day. This is also a good strategy to include in the classroom's relaxation kit to promote emotional regulation. Be sure to include a visual of children doing alternate nostril breathing.</p> <p>Click here to read a blog and watch a video of an early educator facilitating alternate nostril breathing at circle time.</p>	<p>Integration: both the left and right hemispheres of the brain are activated and linked, helping children feel more relaxed, focused, and alert.</p> <p>Executive function skills: the extra coordination of the breath and hand movements takes this breath awareness practice a step deeper than belly breathing. Children enjoy working to master their breath as they carry out plans to move it in and out through the nostrils.</p> <p>Intrapersonal attunement: as with the other breath practices, the child's attention is cast inward upon his or her interior landscape: breath, sensations, feelings, thoughts.</p> <p>Integration: as with all breath awareness, both the left and right hemispheres of the brain are activated. By alternating the breath pattern, particular focus on the left or right engages the hemispheres separately then together as a whole.</p>

		<p>Prefrontal cortex functions: learning to identify and monitor the breath may support body regulation</p> <p>and emotional balance as well as response flexibility. Over time, breath awareness develops the circuitry that helps children learn to pause and think before they act.</p>
<p>Tensing and Relaxing the Body/Body Scanning</p>	<p>Teaching children to tighten then relax throughout the body or the mind brings a combination of wonderment, joy, and calm to most children.</p> <p>Children harness their attention to create the tensing/relaxing process. Taking time to scan the inside of the body this way is a unique and typically captivating experience.</p> <p>For example, ask children to tighten the muscles in various parts of their body for a few seconds, then release. Consider starting with their toes and working their way up their body to their legs, tummy, shoulders, arms, hands, faces, and then their whole body all at once.</p> <p>For children with varying abilities, an adult can squeeze the child's body or have another child do so. Another option is for the child to think a thought, let it go, feel an emotion let it go: tensing and relaxing mental activity if the physical isn't accessible. Turn it into a challenge by having them tense their knees, their nose, or their ears.</p>	<p>Integration: both the left and right hemispheres of the brain are activated as children call their attention to the left and right sides of their body, then the body as a whole.</p> <p>Executive function skills: somatic (body) awareness and mastery helps with all EF skills, especially emotional balance. Children alleviate stress through tensing and relaxing their muscles where energy from emotions tends to "get stuck".</p> <p>Intrapersonal attunement: as with breath practices, somatic awareness shifts the child's attention inward, helping them to notice their breath, sensations, feelings, and thoughts.</p> <p>Prefrontal cortex functions: this exercise has the potential to strengthen all nine prefrontal cortex functions. When the body is not sending signals of alarm up through the spinal column and into the brain, the higher order cognitive capacities have the chance to strengthen.</p>
<p>Mindful Walking/Movement: <i>Note: This can be done in the classroom and/or outside.</i></p>	<p>Much of the time children move on autopilot, focusing on something (their destination rather than the journey). With mindful walking, children tune in to the moment, fully present with what "is."</p> <p>For example, have children notice various sensations as they walk: sight, sound, taste, touch, smell, balance, where they are in space in relation to "other," and interior body sensations. Encourage them to notice all mental activity: thoughts,</p>	<p>Integration: moving body with attention and intention promotes activation of all parts of the brain. When children notice internal sensations, they can engage different parts of their brains and make connections between parts.</p> <p>Executive function skills: getting off autopilot, even for brief periods of time, strengthens the development of these skills as the child remains</p>

	<p>feelings, images. For example, invite them to notice how it feels as each foot hits the ground, or as their wheelchair rolls over gravel; notice the birds singing, the feel of the wind on their skin; smell the rain or the flowers; hear the cars driving by or the plane flying overhead; notice the sensation of their jacket against their skin, their knees as they bend, how they balance as they jump over puddles, or how small they are in relationship to the big trees. What are they feeling or thinking? What does this remind them of?</p> <p>Encourage children to do this in silence for short periods, then invite them to share insights.</p>	<p>present with what he/she is doing. Attending to an action helps strengthen that action.</p> <p>Intrapersonal attunement: introducing novelty to a repetitive practice creates yet another opportunity to notice within instead of focusing outward.</p> <p>Interpersonal attunement: children are asked to notice their connection to their surroundings: how they feel in connection to the wind, the air, the trees, the ground, etc. As they tune in to nature, they also tune in to others having the experience with them.</p> <p>Prefrontal cortex functions: As children shift their attention from one sensation to another, they learn that they have the power to choose where their attention goes. This is important groundwork for helping children develop physical and emotional self-regulation, focus, impulse control and even self-esteem.</p>
<p>Mindful Eating: using all the senses while eating.</p>	<p>Shifting the consumption of food from autopilot to a purposeful action engages focal attention. Teachers can do this at mealtime, or as a small group activity. If done at mealtime, it is encouraged for small periods of time to allow children to engage in the fun and healthy conversations that typically occur when they gather to eat together.</p> <p>Teachers can introduce the activity by saying, “Hey, guys, did you notice we have apple slices today? Before we eat, let’s see what our minds notice about them.”</p> <p>A few questions to engage mindful eating:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “What do they smell like?” ● “What shape are they?” ● “What does the skin feel like?” ● “Put it in your mouth and chew it while I count to 10, and then tell me what you noticed about eating it.” 	<p>Integration: making an experience novel takes a person off autopilot, priming the brain to use all parts during the experience at hand. While eating, children can use the different parts of the brain in connection with one another to respond, versus react, to the taste, smell, and texture of food as well as if they like it or not.</p> <p>Executive function skills: the practice of breaking the act of eating down into steps, monitoring one’s efforts, opinions, desires, or plans engages EF skills. If children slow down for moments during eating, it may help with emotional balance as well.</p> <p>Intrapersonal attunement: moving from the act of eating to the experience of eating gives the child a chance to tune in to his relationship</p>

	<p>Continue the activity by saying, “Now take another bite, but don’t swallow. As you chew, notice if you still smell it, and how it feels on your tongue. Keep chewing, now what do you notice? How does it feel as it moves down your throat as you swallow? What does it feel like in your stomach?”</p> <p>Some teachers may prefer that children not talk with their mouths full, so this strategy can be done in silence, with teachers asking the questions and children answering after they have swallowed.</p> <p>Teachers may also try 15 seconds of silent eating, inviting children to close their eyes or lower their eyes to look at one spot on the table as they chew, then ask them what they noticed. Over time, they may notice food tastes better, or that they could hear themselves chew, or they smelled it more.</p>	<p>with food, strengthening his self-understanding.</p> <p>Interpersonal attunement: as other children share their experiences, a sense of similarities and differences in relationship arise. Another opportunity for children to tune in to “other” and stay non-judgmental, compassionate, loving and kind to differences.</p> <p>Prefrontal cortex functions: attunement, insight, empathy and even emotional balance may be strengthened with this practice as children are guided to notice their experience, as well as others, with food.</p>
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Note, the strategies shared in part 1 and part 2 gain effectiveness when teachers practice [attuned communication](#), and when they adapt the strategies to meet the needs, abilities, and developmental levels of children. As you apply these strategies, be sure to scan for any unusual responses from children such as over arousal, severe protest, withdrawal, or other extreme changes to the child’s typical way of being. These behaviors may be signs of underlying trauma activation. Tuning in to body sensations and practicing breath work are an important part of healing trauma, but such work needs to be done mindfully to avoid exceeding the child’s window of tolerance.

For more about mindfulness in early childhood and teaching with the brain in mind visit my website laurafishtherapy.com or:

- Click [here](#) to read “**Mindfulness in The Classroom: Part 1.**”
- Click [here](#) to listen to Pre-K Teach and Play Podcast episode 24 titled, “**Cultivating Mindfulness in the Classroom**”.
- To learn more about training and coaching with Laura Fish, please visit [my Consulting site](#).