

Meditation

A Simple and Effective Way to Help
Your Child Enjoy – and Succeed at – School

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As I write this, in a coffee shop, the next table is engaged in a particularly animated conversation. Until a few minutes ago, I was struggling to focus on my writing and decided to meditate. See? It works!

Actually, it's not *that* simple.

My father (who, it occurs to me, I have only heard raise his voice once in my life) meditates, and for that reason I've had an awareness of meditation my entire life. I began using meditation as a clinical tool around 15 years ago after completing a course offered by the Mind-Body Medical Institute (now called the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine). I used it on an as-needed basis when I was feeling anxious. I only became aware of its potential when, for no particular reason, I decided to begin a daily meditation practice.

Within a month, I had noticed benefit. After almost a year, I am very aware of improved focus, greater patience, improved mood and emotional resilience and in general, a greater sense of calm, contentedness and optimism. These are some of the most vital tools children need to thrive in their studies and survive the sometimes-difficult emotional climate of the school environment.

What is Meditation?

Meditation is a term most people are aware of, but few can define.

Historically, meditation has been used as a means to spiritual growth and consciousness-raising: a path to one's most evolved self. In the West, we are more prone to use meditation as a secular pursuit for the purpose of stress management and improvement of health or performance. There are many ways to *Western-Meditate*, but at their core, all are mental exercises. The goal is to improve voluntary control over our thoughts and mental processes, resulting in greater relaxation, calmness, and concentration.

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So, I'm Interested: How Do I Meditate?

There are many ways to meditate! For the purpose of improved academic performance and stress management, I believe mindfulness meditation is the most useful in the context of practicality and convenience.

Mindfulness may be defined as "bringing one's complete attention to the present experience on a moment-to-moment basis", and can be achieved through a wide range of activities.

In order to meditate, there are only three requirements:

1. A distraction-free environment (not necessarily a silent, solitary environment, but a comfortable one in which interruptions will not occur)
2. Engagement in diaphragmatic breathing (strictly speaking not essential, but in my opinion, invaluable, particularly if relaxation is a goal)
3. The bringing of attention to a single object (e.g. breathing, muscle tension, a phrase or visual image)

Let's break some of these down! Head over to page 22...

Diaphragmatic Breathing

Diaphragmatic breathing, sometimes described as belly breathing, refers to deep breathing in which your diaphragm, the large muscle at the base of the lungs and primary breathing muscle, is used most efficiently.

Practice diaphragmatic breathing - on your own or with your child:

Sit comfortably, with a straight back, and place one hand on your abdomen and the other on your chest. As you breathe, imagine you are filling a balloon in your belly with air, allowing your abdomen to stretch and expand as you inhale. Monitor your chest movement with your second hand. It should be minimal: a feeling of your ribs widening. Exhale fully through pursed lips, allowing your shoulders to drop, and release all muscle tension.

Diaphragmatic breathing may feel awkward at first, and doesn't come naturally to all: don't be frustrated by this! It's all about the practice.

Maintaining Attention on a Single Object

Maintaining attention on a single object can take many forms:

- practicing yoga or tai chi
- repeating a mantra or engaging in prayer
- attending to the direction offered in a "guided meditation" in which actions are directed by a recording

My experience with yoga as a meditative pursuit was that it required almost a year of regular practice before I noticed I was attending only on my breathing during classes. Hundreds of hours of yoga classes are not practical for most children and families (though there are many other benefits of yoga to be found!).

Silent repetition of a prayer or mantra can be effective for more experienced meditators, but beginners often find it difficult to maintain attention on an internal object.

Other common techniques for centering attention include:

- Attending to breathing by deep, relaxed diaphragmatic breathing
- Attending to how air feels as it follows the path through your mouth and throat into your lungs and then out again
- Attending to muscle tension, via progressive muscle relaxation

Here, attention is methodically moved through the body, from head to feet, simply noticing how every part of the body is feeling (and if possible, releasing tension as it is noted).

Because of the time investment required to "master" yoga, and the challenge associated with maintaining attention, guided meditations are the easiest and most practical place for beginners and children to start.

Guided meditations are readily available on the Internet, but two resources I have used and like are:

- An app called Stop, Breath & Think – www.stopbreathethink.org
- Podcasts available at Meditation Oasis® – www.meditationoasis.com/podcast/

Find a guided meditation that resonates with you (e.g. one that focuses on muscle relaxation if you have muscle tension), maintain attention and follow the directions offered, actively, but gently (i.e. not with laser-like focus, which is its own kind of tension).

As you or your child meditate, foster a non-judgmental attitude. If the instruction is to bring your attention to your shoulders, and you feel tension there, simply acknowledge the tension you feel. Do not beat yourself up over it or try desperately to fix it.

When you (inevitably) notice your attention has strayed and you are thinking of other things, simply acknowledge: "I'm off track", and return to the meditation.

After your meditation is complete, take a few minutes to gently bring yourself back to your environment and return to your day, rather than jumping directly into a board meeting, screen time or other stressful situation.

Anything Else Standing Between Me and Enlightenment?

Not really!

Although short meditations provide immediate benefits, to gain cumulative benefits (e.g. be a calmer, more focused person), meditation should be practiced at least 10 minutes daily.

As with any new habit, to successfully integrate meditation into a lifestyle, plan a regular time for it, rather than realizing at day's end that meditation was missed *again*.

Many people find they have a best time of day to meditate. In my experience, this is often on waking. For those with children, after children have been dropped off at school (usually the most frantic portion of a parent's day) tends to work best. Meditation at this time allows the remainder of the day to be calm and optimally productive. Others having stressful jobs will find that immediately after work is the best time, so that stresses can be left at the workplace, and family time can be enjoyed. After school may be the best time for children as well, to mark the transition between school and the outside world. For younger children, before bedtime may be ideal, so they can be calm and relax into sleep.

As with any worthwhile pursuit, meditation requires commitment. Don't be frustrated if when meditating you find your mind wandering: this is a normal part of the process, and in fact a sign of success! Unawares to you, your monkey mind is constantly jumping from concern-to-concern: when meditating you're now becoming aware of these jumps. With practice, they will occur less often. Eventually you reach a point at which time disappears: you will immerse yourself in meditation, and 10 or 20 minutes will seemingly pass in only a few minutes.



Is There Scientific Support for Meditating?

Thousands of researched experiments have been published on the effects of meditation, including benefits in reducing discomfort from pain, reducing symptoms of depression, and improvements in cognitive function and performance:

- A study of 60 adults participating in a three-month meditation program demonstrated that those having meditated were able to better maintain attention on mundane tasks.
- A study of 50 adults having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) demonstrated that mindfulness meditation resulted in decreased brain activity associated with ADHD symptoms; corresponding decreases in hyperactivity, impulsivity and inattention; and increased "acting with awareness".
- In a very recent study of 42 elementary school-aged children, eight weeks of meditation resulted in significant improvements in social anxiety and aggressive behaviour, and decreased salivary cortisol measurements (the primary hormone we release in response to stress).
- And meditation does not only result in changes in a subjective experience! MRI scans of persons who meditate compared to those who do not demonstrated that meditators have increased thickening in areas of the brain associated with conscience, long-term memory, sustaining attention and visceral awareness (e.g. breathing, heart-rate, muscle tension and other potential physiological cues of being stressed).

