

Atkinson Centre Internship Report  
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**Mindfulness in Early Childhood Settings**

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After observing the many benefits of teaching various mindfulness practices to my students when working as a kindergarten teacher, I became interested in studying mindfulness in early childhood. My research at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education involved implementing a mindfulness curriculum in full-day kindergarten classrooms to show how young children practicing mindfulness improves their self-regulation and their prosocial behaviour. During my internship with the Atkinson Centre, I spent time in the George Brown College Childcare Centre to explore how mindfulness can benefit preschoolers. Rather than teaching young children how to practice mindfulness, I had the opportunity to observe how mindfulness with this younger population is being incorporated through the mindful interactions they experience with the adults who care for them. Based on my observations in the Toddler room, I reviewed the literature on how mindfulness can improve the interactions between adults and children. This report will provide a summary of the literature and will illustrate how and why mindfulness in early childhood settings benefits both early childhood educators and preschoolers.

*What is Mindfulness?*

Mindfulness is most commonly defined as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). Practicing mindfulness also allows one to view experiences as novel and new which is known as a “beginner’s mind” (Napoli et al., 2005). “Space” between perception and response is created by observing thoughts and feelings as events in the mind without over-identifying with them and reacting to them in a pattern of automatic reactivity (Bishop et al., 2004). Practicing mindfulness allows for thoughtful, self-regulated *responses* rather than habitual, impulsive *reactions* (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Hooker & Fodor, 2008; Bishop et. al., 2004).

*Benefits of Practicing Mindfulness*

In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature on the benefits of practicing mindfulness (see Keng et al., 2011 for a review). The host of benefits experienced by individuals practicing mindfulness includes increased emotional regulation and overall well-being (Shapiro et al., 2008; Broderick & Metz, 2009; Baer et al., 2008), improved executive functions and attention regulation (Flook et al., 2010; Chambers et al., 2008), and reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression (Shapiro et al., 1998; Grossman et al., 2004). As studies showing the benefits for individuals practicing mindfulness proliferate, researchers are

beginning to investigate how practicing mindfulness influences relationships (i.e., Carson et al., 2004). In recent years, researchers have started to explore relationships between educators and their students as well as between parents and their children. In addition to improvements in their overall well-being, studies have shown that educators practicing mindfulness report increased quality interactions and better relationships with their students (Jennings et. al. 2011; Napoli, 2004). The preliminary research in mindful parenting shows that parents practicing mindfulness report enhanced interactions with their children (Reynolds, 2003; Singh et al., 2010; Dumas, 2007; Cohen & Semple, 2010). These findings highlight the potential for mindfulness to improve the quality of interactions between adults and children.

### *The Mindful Preschooler*

As preschool-age children are wired to explore, experiment and investigate with curiosity (Bluth & Wahler, 2011) and many of their experiences are in fact “novel and new”, their general nature can be described as mindful. Joseph Pearce, a well-known author on human intelligence and creativity describes young children’s ability to be mindful in the following account of the importance of play:

“Children at play are not doing one thing with their hands or bodies, thinking something else in their minds, and speaking something else with their voice as we adults tend to do. They are totally absorbed in their play-world, absolutely one with their talk of play...Through this discipline, true concentration and one-pointedness develop.”(p. 41).

Play-based early childhood programs are designed to reflect the developmental qualities of young children. In addition to programs being developmentally appropriate, research has indicated that the quality of teacher-child interactions is another important aspect of children’s environment that predicts improved child outcomes in early childhood settings (Pianta, 2003). Therefore, it is important that programs for preschoolers be designed to accommodate their “beginner’s minds”, and that the adults in their classrooms also model the qualities cultivated by practicing mindfulness.

### *The Mindful Early Childhood Educator*

“Through mindfulness practice, one becomes increasingly aware of one’s thought and emotional processes as they unfold, in this case, as they occur in response to a child’s actions. The ability to “pause” before providing a habitual reaction becomes an available option, and responding to the child occurs only after taking ample time to consider the array of possible ways to react.” (Bluth & Wahler, 2011, p.282)

The most important influences on young children's development come from the adults in their lives (Bodrova et al., 2005). As educators are role models who are constantly responding to the emotional reactions of the children in their care, early childhood educators have a significant influence on young children's development through how they relate, teach and model social and emotional constructs (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). In fact, mindfulness-based programs designed for educators and parents are based on the idea that adults should enhance their own social and emotional capacities by practicing focused attention and emotion regulation in order to elicit similar responses from children (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

### *Conclusion*

This report has given an account of and the reasons for the growing interest in applying mindfulness to improve relationships between adults and children. Based on the principles for mindful parenting (Duncan et al., 2009) and for mindful teaching (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), listed below are five ways that support how incorporating mindfulness in early childhood settings improves the quality of interactions between early childhood educators and the young children in their care:

1. Practice paying attention on purpose while interacting with the child
2. Listening with full attention to the child (and colleagues)
3. Nonjudgmental acceptance of and compassion for self and the child
4. Emotional awareness of self and the child during interactions
5. Self-regulation and emotion regulation during interactions with the child

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