

## Introduction to Mindfulness

You may have heard the buzz word “mindfulness”, but what is mindfulness and why is it so important? Mindfulness is the idea of purposefully paying attention; an awareness of our thoughts, feelings, environment, and body sensations. Building upon this consciousness, mindfulness also involves acceptance; being aware of your thoughts and feelings without judging them, or believing that they may be “right” or “wrong”. Many studies have shown that practicing mindfulness, even just for a few weeks can bring a wide range of physical, psychological and social benefits. Here at Carnegie Mellon, Dr. J. David Creswell and his Health and Human Performance Lab are leaders in mindfulness research. As an undergraduate, I have had the privilege of learning about mindfulness as a research assistant in this laboratory.



Working at the Children's School for some time now, I recently began to wonder about the benefits of “early intervention” mindfulness, and how it could impact the lives of young children, both inside and outside of the classroom. Interestingly, the research in early childhood mindfulness is pretty slim. This month, I have had the opportunity to work with the Extended Morning friends during the Healthy Mind and Body unit. We started by learning about the “special bell”, where friends listen to the bell and raise their hands when they cannot hear it anymore. This routine helps friends to focus their attention and develops self-regulation. Each week, I've been sharing stories during circle time and lunch about being more mindful of our surroundings and our feelings. For example, in “The Lemonade Hurricane” Emma teaches her brother Henry the importance of taking time to breathe. I have helped the friends learn and practice taking time to breathe and calm their bodies through flower breaths, elevator breaths, and balloon breaths. Additionally, Mrs. Bird sang songs with the friends to develop executive control, and we encouraged them to be mindful through extended periods of time on the playground.



Practicing mindfulness helps us and our young friends in many ways. It helps to strengthen our “mental muscle” and bring our focus back to where we want it, when we want it. It helps us become aware of our patterns of behavior, and adaptable when we want to change them. It helps us to be calm through breathing and other mindfulness practices, giving us access to peace regardless of our surrounding environment. It helps us regulate our emotions, through being able to observe and recognize our emotions, as well as to change how we respond to them. Mindfulness helps us become aware of our own thoughts, emotions and senses, which in turn grows our understanding of what other people are experiencing. Finally, mindfulness teaches us resilience; by seeing things objectively, we can develop balance in response to the ups and downs of life. The benefits of mindfulness are enormous, and the idea is that starting mindful practice at a young age can both help children as they grow and likely have ineffable long term benefits as well. I encourage you to explore mindfulness practice and incorporate it into your lives at home. I'm sure the Extended AM friends would love to show you all that they have learned.

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