

Minivan musings: Practicing mindfulness can help children

Jackie Goldschneider, Special to NorthJersey.com Published 6:00 a.m. ET Oct. 25, 2018



(Photo: Getty Images)

When I recently told a friend that my kids constantly argue, she recommended mindfulness sessions for them, which made me giggle.

"I don't even know what that means," I admitted, adding I know plenty of angry people who do lots of yoga. "It's more than just doing yoga," she said, suggesting I look into it.

And when I did, I was surprised by what mindfulness really entails and how it can help children in their everyday lives.



Mindfulness is a mental and physical state that's characterized by four prongs: being aware in the moment, being present in the moment, being non-judgmental, and narrating to yourself as you go along (Photo: Getty Images)

Mindfulness expert Laura Cipullo owns Closter's Lifestyle Lounge where, as a registered yoga instructor and dietician, she offers mindfulness classes for children and adults. According to Cipullo, mindfulness is a mental and physical state that's characterized by four prongs: being aware in the moment; being present in the moment; being nonjudgmental; and narrating to yourself as you go along.

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"So you're aware of what you're doing, you're recognizing the little things, and you're paying attention," she said. "You're observing, you're noticing the five senses and you're using self-talk."

Practicing mindfulness teaches children how to reach this mental and physical state and can help them in a variety of ways.

Cipullo explained that a non-mindful child may react to something impulsively rather than exerting self-awareness.



Mindfulness practice can help kids simply be happier, more compassionate and more grateful people. (Photo: Getty Images)

“A child who’s learned to be mindful would think about what they want to say while being cognizant of how they’re feeling,” she said. “The mindful child would notice their body is tense and would likely have the mind space or internal dialogue to respond by using their breath rather than yelling.”

In addition to being able to calm themselves in tense moments, mindfulness can lower a child’s stress level.

“Teaching a child to use their breath helps decrease their cortisol levels and engages their parasympathetic nervous system,” Cipullo said, referring to the part of the nervous system that slows the heart rate and increases relaxation. “It teaches them how to go from a state of high anxiety to a state of calm by using breathing exercises. There’s actually a chemical reaction that changes in the body.”

Children also learn to focus through mindfulness techniques, which can help them in school.

“Mindfulness is about quieting your mind, paying attention and observing your breath, so you can learn to stop when your mind wanders and bring it back to what you’re supposed to be observing,” she said. “If you’re sitting in class and your mind keeps wandering, you can notice of that and bring it back to what the teacher is saying.”



Mindfulness technique may also help children focus. (Photo: Getty Images)

Many parents send their kids to her classes for school-related issues, she said.

Finally, mindfulness practice can help kids simply be happier, more compassionate and more grateful people.

"If your body's in a state of calm rather than in a state of fight or flight, you're not constantly walking around on edge reacting to people," she said. "When you're mindful, you have higher levels of oxytocin and serotonin, so you're naturally going to feel better."

You don't need to bring your child to a mindfulness center for classes, Cipullo said, explaining that there are plenty of ways to incorporate mindfulness practices into a child's everyday life.

"First, there are activities you can engage in that can be mindfully meditative, such as gardening, hiking, eating, practicing yoga and engaging in art," she said, explaining these activities usually involve many textures, sounds and colors which make it easier for parents to engage their child's awareness. "The easiest way to do these activities mindfully is for parents to be aware of engaging their child's five senses while they're doing it. So 'let's eat and notice the texture and the smell and the taste,' or 'let's hike and notice the leaves and listen to the birds.'"



There are plenty of ways to incorporate mindfulness practices into a child's everyday life, including hiking. (Photo: Getty Images)

Cipullo notes that parents don't need to engage in the activities with their child.

"The child can be coloring and they're automatically using their senses. Just the act of doing it slows you down," she said.

These activities are different than mindfulness meditation, she explained, where you're using the breath to calm the body. Parents can use apps to meditate with their child at home.

"Don't place too much expectation on the child, especially at home," she said. "If they can start with one minute to play around with their breathing or do an activity that encourages slowing down and uses the senses, they can work toward lengthening that."



Art is another way to incorporate mindfulness practices into a child's everyday life. (Photo: Getty Images)

There are also tools parents can use to teach their child about mindfulness. "Some of the tools are breathing apps, mindfulness apps — like Headspace or Mindfulness for Children — and books that teach kids about mindfulness," Cipullo said.

These tools help children understand what mindfulness is and how they can use it, she said.

"There are also tools that help kids learn, like blowing on a pom pom ball so they learn how to control their breath, or playing with toys like the Hoberman Sphere which expands and contracts and is a useful tool to illustrate what their belly is doing when they breathe."

While yoga can be a very mindful activity, it's not practiced mindfully by everyone.

"Some people just go to yoga and use it as physical fitness, so they're thinking about how many calories they burned instead of what they're doing," she said.

This is less likely to be the case for children, she explained, since they don't know the routines as well, so if their minds wandered they may fall out of the pose.



There are also tools parents can use to teach their child about mindfulness. (Photo: Getty Images)

Using these techniques and tools to incorporate mindfulness into your child's life can help them become more focused, calmer and even help them live longer, Cipullo said.

"There's a science behind it," she explained. "The more mindful experiences you have, the greater the amount of telomerase activity, which research associates with living a longer, healthier life."

It sounds like some mindfulness is exactly what my kids need to stop all their fighting and calm them down. If some inner peace for them means some peace and quiet for me, I'm definitely on board.

Contact Jackie Goldschneider at minivanmusings@gmail.com.

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