

Mindfulness and Aggression in Children & Teens *A Guide for Parents and Professionals*

Lori A. Moses
University of Pittsburgh

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Introduction

Welcome to this guide for both parents and professionals interested in the benefits of mindfulness practices, particularly for children and teens experiencing aggression. This study guide is a set of handouts that follow-up and supplement the PowerPoint presentation on mindfulness and aggression (<http://www.sbbh.pitt.edu/>).

I am currently a graduate student in Applied Developmental Psychology at the University of Pittsburgh. We have done a great deal of work this semester discussing positive behavioral supports in our Behavioral Interventions for Children and Adolescents class. I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to research mindfulness and its benefits when used as an intervention for children and teens with aggression.

Children today experience a great amount of anxiety and stress. Mindfulness techniques can be very useful tools for children, helping them effectively manage their stress and anxiety. One of the greatest benefits to mindfulness training is its ability to stay with the child from year to year. Once the skills have been mastered, mindfulness can remain a life long management technique.

Within this guide you will find a set of handouts aimed at accompanying the information presented in the PowerPoint. Please allow some time to become familiar with the layout of the study guide, particularly the Glossary, which will define some terms and concepts that you will later come across.

I hope this guide can be helpful to you and your efforts in mastering positive behavioral interventions. Mindfulness, although a relatively new intervention for children, has documented success in numerous populations and applicable skills for all.

I sincerely appreciate your time, energy and interest in the subject of mindfulness, and its benefits for children and teens with aggression. To learn more about positive behavioral interventions and support, please visit <http://www.sbbh.edu/>.

~Lori Moses

What is mindfulness?

- Mindfulness can be described in many ways. However, we will define mindfulness as a “certain quality of attention to moment-by-moment experiences (Bishop et al., 2004).”
- We learn to slow down and control our reactions, particularly through deep breathing, motivation and focus.

“Mindfulness is an attribute of consciousness long believed to promote well-being”
~ Brown & Ryan (2003)

Glossary of Terms

- **Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT)** - single-component therapy used to help individuals with self-regulation. More specifically, to encourage individuals to engage in and take control of their own behavior.
- **Meditation on the Soles of the Feet** - applied mindfulness technique used to move the focus of attention caused by an emotional stimulant to a “neutral” part of the body, the soles of the feet, to encourage focus and decrease stress.
- **Self-Regulation** - a range of procedures in which the student acts as his or her own behavior change agent.
- **Mindfulness-based interventions** - mindfulness based practices helping the child to become aware of any stimuli affecting his or her behavior and to respond appropriately to such stimuli.
- **The Attention Academy Program (AAP)** - applied mindfulness technique used to help children (1) increase attention, (2) view experiences without immediate judgment, and (3) see new experiences with a “beginners” eye.

A Case Study to Consider

Please take a moment to read the following case study. We will later reflect on mindfulness practices and revisit the case study to implement our intervention.

Sonny is a young man who loves his sports and videogames. However, lately he has been having behavior problems in school and at home. He gets frustrated and angry very easily. When he has these feelings, he tends to act out aggressively towards his teacher, his peers and his parents. After Sunny acts out, he has a very hard time regaining his focus and attention.

Sonny's actions have caused him to be a frequent visitor to the principal's office. At the age of twelve, he has seen the school counselor and psychologist numerous times. His mother has tried to be as understanding as possible, but she is becoming more frustrated.

Sonny's mom has also spoken with Sonny's elementary school teacher, Mr. K., as the students kindly refer to him. Mr. K. wonders if there is anything going on outside of school that may be fueling Sonny's aggression. The school psychologist has told the family that Sonny does not have conduct disorder, or any other disorder that may be causing these outbursts.

After some digging and questioning, Sonny's mom discovers that entering middle school was a much larger change for Sonny than anyone had anticipated. All of a sudden, he was separated from his friends, classes were more difficult. The young boy who once excelled in math was suddenly lost among the numbers.

Finally, they have a place to start! However, Sonny's mom wants to help her son take action. She begins to ask herself, is there something *different* we can do to help him with his acting out and his aggression?

Discussion Questions

Now that we are much more familiar with some key concepts and terms, let's take a moment to consider a few questions regarding mindfulness and Sonny's story. Please feel free to revisit our definitions and case study at any time.

1. Consider our case study. Will Sonny benefit from mindfulness training if he is not motivated to learn how to control his aggressive reactions? Why or why not?

2. What are some ways to encourage Sonny in his motivation efforts? Take a moment to discuss this with your colleagues.

3. Why might it be important for a child like Sonny to be motivated during his mindfulness intervention?

4. Do you think mindfulness training and interventions could be incorporated in your school or classroom? What additional training or resources would be needed to bring mindfulness interventions to your classroom or school?

5. Do you think a mindfulness intervention can be used for behaviors other than aggression?

Case Study Revisited

Let's now consider how to go about implementing a mindfulness intervention for Sonny.

First things first: Find an experienced/trained counselor or therapist to work with. If this is a problem, the next step would be to speak with a therapist or psychologist, possibly in the school, for guidance and professional references.

Sonny and his mom will now meet with the therapist to discuss their goals and pinpoint the source of aggression (e.g., math class). This will also be the point where they will discuss Sonny's motivation (why this is important).

The design of our intervention is *Meditation on the Soles of the Feet*. We have already defined this intervention, so feel free to take another look at the definition for better clarification. Our goals for Sonny are to (1) provide a justification for the training [help control aggressive behavior] and (2) take Sonny through the necessary steps so that he can acquire the new mindfulness skills.

The following provides the particular steps for *Meditation on the Soles of the Feet*:

1. If you are standing, stand in a neutral rather than an aggressive posture
2. If you are sitting, sit comfortably with the soles of your feet flat on the floor
3. Breathe naturally, and do nothing
4. Cast your mind back to an incident that made you very angry. Stay with the anger.
5. You are feeling angry, and angry thoughts are flowing through your mind. Let them flow naturally, without restriction. Stay with the anger. Your body may show signs of anger (e.g. rapid breathing)
6. Now, shift all of your attention to the soles of your feet.
7. Slowly, move your toes, feel your shoes covering your feet, feel the texture of your socks, the curve of your arch, and the heels of your feet against the back of your shoes. If you do not have shoes on, feel the floor or carpet with the soles of your feet.
8. Keep breathing naturally and focus on the soles of your feet until you feel calm.
9. Meditate on the soles of your feet for about 10 to 15 minutes.
10. Slowly come out of your meditation, sit quietly for a few moments, and then resume your daily activities.

(Singh et al., 2007)

One of the greatest outcomes of the mindfulness intervention is the ability to take the learned steps and apply them while not with a counselor or facilitator. Sonny will be encouraged to practice his steps *alone* during times of aggression. He will also meet with his therapist once a month for discussion.

A few more points to consider: Sonny's behavior may decrease significantly rather than be completely eliminated. A good way to check on progress is to simply ask the child. And remember to continue mindfulness techniques. They should become automatic reactions to the stressor for Sonny.

FAQ's

Q: Can mindfulness interventions be applied to all students, or is it more for at-risk students?

A: It can be applied to all students. If you are interested in learning more about universal mindfulness strategies, one great resource comes from the *Attention Academy Program (AAP)*, designed to be implemented in physical education classes (Napoli, Krech & Holley, 2005).

Q: How long will it take to recognize the results of a mindfulness intervention?

A: It truly depends upon the specific intervention being used. With *Mindfulness on the Soles of the Feet*, a trained therapist should meet with the student once a week to discuss their ongoing improvements. Results have been indicated in a 25 week period, although our intervention has been tailored to a six week period, to meet the needs of Sonny.

Q: Are mindfulness techniques used in response to a problem or is it more of a proactive approach?

A: Both. Mindfulness can be used as a self-regulation tool in response to students experiencing aggression, anxiety or stress. However, trained professionals can teach those in education settings, or parents, how to carry our mindful techniques with children to help *control* or manage behavioral or emotional problems that may arise.

Q: What age group is mindfulness most effective for?

A: Mindfulness can be used and taught to mostly any age group. The *AAP* has been used in elementary schools with students in first, second and third grade. The most important aspect of mindful practice is motivation, not necessarily age.

Q: Is there more than one mindfulness intervention?

A: There are a few different approaches to mindfulness techniques. To name a few: *Meditation on the Soles of the Feet*, *AAP*, Mindfulness of breath, Body scan, and Walking meditation (Thompson and Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008).

Q: Is mindfulness the same as meditation?

A: Not really. They are very close though. Research suggests that the difference lies in the individual's experience in regards to their focus. Mindfulness creates a more open approach to the immediate experiences. This means that the experience may be positive or negative. Meditation tends to invoke a very calming experience when totally absorbed in the focus of meditating.

Recent Research

Take a moment to familiarize yourself with the research below. There are some technical terms; focus on the overall review and summation.

1. Bishop, S., Lau, M., Shapiro, S., Carlson, L., Anderson, N.D., Carmody, J., Segal, Z.V., . . . Devins, G. (2004). Mindfulness: A proposed operational definition. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice, 11*(3), 230-241. doi:10.1093/clipsy/bph077

As attention to mindfulness techniques grows within contemporary psychology and clinical settings, a common operational definition of mindfulness is greatly needed. The goal of this discussion was to develop such a definition. The authors agreed upon a two-component model to define mindfulness. This model draws on the process of self-regulation, in regards to attention, and of the awareness of an individual's immediate experiences. The authors also agreed that their model could be integrated with current models of psychopathology and cognitive strategies.

An important aspect of the proposed model was its implications for measurement. This model lends itself to measurement specific techniques to test each component of mindfulness, on an individual level. Future research efforts should investigate the basic fundamentals of mindfulness. These efforts may encourage an instrument that can test validity and sensitivity to change. Those interested in defining mindfulness and the implications for measurement may find this paper useful.

2. Brown, K.W., & Ryan, R.M. (2003). The benefits of being present: Mindfulness and its role in psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 84*(4), 822-848. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.84.4.822

A series of studies explored an examination of the relationship between mindfulness and psychological well-being. This examination required the development of a new instrument, the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS), to analyze this relationship. The MAAS was designed to assess individual differences in the frequency of mindful states over time.

Several definitions and key concepts are involved in mindful states. These studies presented a definition of mindfulness that emphasizes openness, receptiveness, and clarity, especially to new experiences. Both external and internal stimuli are involved in the formation of mindfulness. The authors described the nature of mindfulness and mindlessness and presented their hypotheses for the relationship between mindfulness and well-being. Also illustrated was an explanation for the validity and reliability of the newly developed MAAS. Results of the studies provided evidence for an association between mindfulness and well-being indicators. Several elements, such as individual dispositions, are involved in mindful awareness. The authors utilized past studies, personal experiences, and empirical evidence in clinical settings to design and analyze their research. This research provided both general and specific discussions of mindfulness in relationship to psychological well-being. Provided are various insights into future research.

3. Napoli, M., Krech, P.R., & Holley, L.C. (2005). Mindfulness training for elementary school students: The attention academy. *Journal of Applied School Psychology, 21*(1), 99-125. doi: 10.1300/J008v21n01_05

Children today are experiencing an increase in anxiety and stress, due to numerous external and internal influences. Mindfulness is a proposed model to help children effectively deal with these experiences in a healthy, focused manner. This discussion defined mindfulness as the choice and ability to be fully aware in the present moment. The purpose of this article was to examine the effects of the Attention Academy Program (AAP) on mindfulness training.

Two-hundred and twenty-four first, second and third grade students and 11 teachers participated in the study. An SPSS-Compare Means was used to analyze the data from three established measures. These measures were used before and at the end of the 24-week session. Three out of the four attentional measures showed significant differences between the control and experimental groups. These results showed further evidence for the positive effects of mindfulness training, particularly when integrated in physical education classes. This study suggested the difficulty of utilizing and obtaining instruments designed for non-ADHA children. Also, it may be important to include gender and ethnic differences. The study provided useful mindfulness activities and lessons. Overall, mindfulness facilitators should have experience with, and continued education for, mindfulness practice.

4. Singh, N.N., Lancioni, G.E., Joy, S.D.S., Winton, A.S.W., Sabaawi, M., Wahler, R.G., & Singh, J. (2007). Adolescents with conduct disorder can be mindful of their aggressive behavior. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 15(1), 56-63.

This study focused on three adolescent students with conduct disorder. The goal was to determine if mindfulness training would help control a specific aggression behavior for each individual. Meditation on the Soles of the Feet is an intervention that has been used in past studies to help with emotion and self-regulation in managing aggression. This study provided evidence for the benefits of Meditation on the Soles of the Feet. However, the small number of participants may affect generalizability of the results. Also, the researchers relied on student self-report to determine the outcome of the training. The study provided insight into the power of self-control and personal responsibility for adolescents when directing their recovery. The greatest results appeared when an individual was motivated to make an effort. This article is a good resource for those interested in the benefits of mindfulness techniques. However, past studies have shown that experienced therapists and clinicians are most effective in delivering this intervention.

5. Thompson, M., & Gauntlett-Gilbert, J. (2008). Mindfulness with children and adolescents: Effective clinical application. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 13(3), 395-407. doi: 10.1177/1359104508090603

Although mindfulness techniques have been documented in *adult* populations, little evidence and literature is available for *child* and *adolescent* populations. The authors relied on the Bishop et. al (2004) two-component model of mindfulness. Based on adult practices, mindfulness techniques were believed to be adaptable and teachable to children. Because few randomized controlled trials were available, any adaptation of adult practices came from literature or clinical experiences. The basic techniques of mindfulness of breath, body scan and walking mindfulness were briefly discussed.

Numerous examples of modifying adult mindfulness techniques were discussed. The authors also suggested the importance of personal mindfulness practice for clinicians. Future research should focus on the developmental stages of children in relation to the modification of mindfulness techniques. This article is useful for those interested in the exposure of mindfulness techniques and applying or modifying such techniques for children.

Thank you for taking this time to consider mindfulness as an intervention. Research suggests that practicing such techniques genuinely contributes to overall well-being, for both children and adults. Although mindfulness practice is relatively new for children, the outlook is very promising.

Additional Resources

For more information on mindfulness in schools, please refer to the following website: <http://www.sharpbrains.com/blog/2008/01/29/mindfulness-and-meditation-in-schools-for-stress-and-anxiety-management/>

Semple, R.J., Reid, E.F.G., Miller, L. (2005). Treating anxiety with mindfulness: An open trial of mindfulness training for anxious children. *Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy*, 19(4), 379-392.

Wall, R.B. (2005). Tai Chi and mindfulness-based stress reduction in a Boston public middle school. *Journal of Pediatric Health Care*, 19(4), 230-237.

Brantley, J. (2003). *Calming your anxious mind*. California: New Harbinger.

It is important to note that these additional resources are provided to supplement any interest and research in mindfulness and mindfulness interventions. Please refer to a counselor or licensed therapist if needed.

