



Barnardos

Because childhood lasts a lifetime



# Mindfulness in Early Learning and Care

## Introduction

We live in an age that recognises the importance of good mental health and openly discusses and promotes emotional well-being. It is also a time, however, when we, as a society, are feeling more anxious than previous generations. This is particularly true for children (Bitsko et al., 2018; Dooley, O'Connor, Fitzgerald & O'Reilly, 2019).

In recent years, there has been an increase in awareness, understanding and scientific research into the impact of mindfulness on our mental health. This resource highlights the benefits of mindfulness, both for your own wellbeing as an early childhood educator and for the children you care for and educate. It also offers you practical ways to incorporate mindful moments into the everyday in your early learning and care setting.

*Because when you stop and look around, this life is pretty amazing.*

*Dr Seuss*



## What is Mindfulness?

People have been practising mindfulness for many, many years. The concept originates in Buddhist thinking and meditation, and has links to a number of other religious traditions. Over the past 30 years, mindfulness has become more secularised and simplified to suit a wider Western context. When we consider mindfulness, we might first imagine difficult yoga positions or a type of zen-like meditation. While mindfulness is rooted in these practices, it has also evolved to become a very accessible tool for us to use every day.



Mindfulness is really about awareness – being aware of our thoughts, our surroundings, our emotions and how we feel physically. It is about simply pausing and noticing what is happening. Too often, our minds are preoccupied with memories, plans or worries, which, while a necessary part of being, can at times feel overwhelming. Creating moments in our day to practise mindfulness can help to tame those thoughts. In doing so, we are better able to process them and think more clearly. Mindfulness and mindful breathing works for children in the same way as it does for adults, calming their minds and making it easier for them to self-regulate their emotions and respond more calmly to situations.

There are many ways to build mindfulness into our day. This might be during everyday moments, for example, focusing on our breathing or carrying out tasks such as washing our hands in a more mindful way, or it might be through specific mindfulness activities, and we will look at some of these later on.

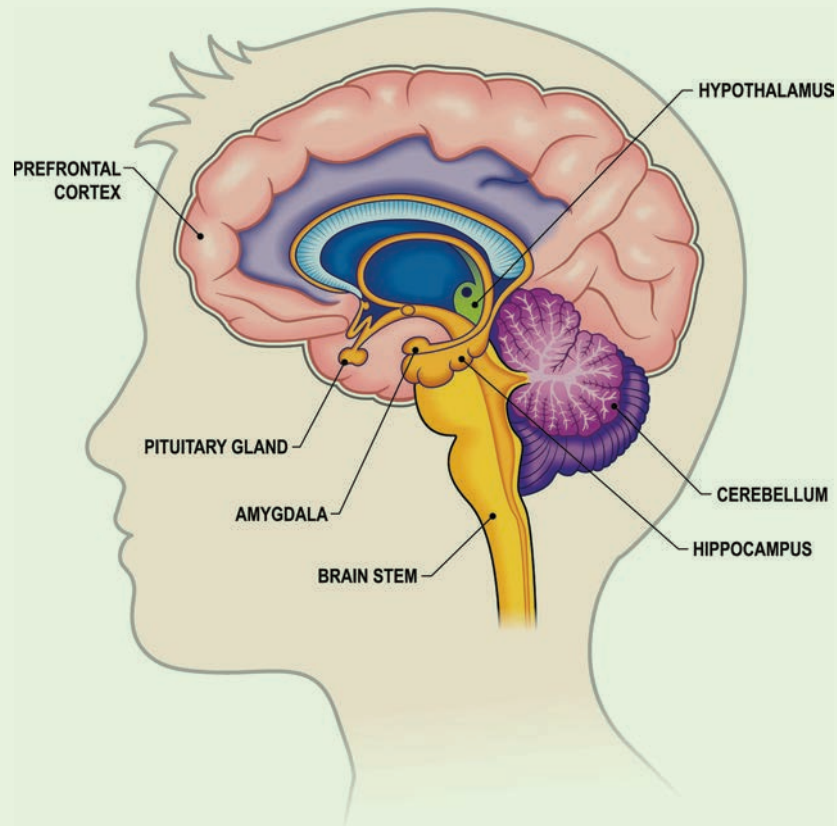
*Mindfulness is the quality of being present and fully engaged with whatever we're doing at the moment, free from distraction or judgement and aware of our thoughts and feelings without getting caught up in them.*

*Headspace*

## The Science Bit

There has been a surge of interest in mindfulness and how it affects the brain among the scientific community and academic institutions in recent years.

Brain scanning technologies have revealed that the actual physical structure of the brain can change when a person practises mindfulness on a regular basis (Hölzel et al, 2011).



- The **amygdala**, the ‘fight or flight’ region of the brain associated with stress response, fear and anxiety, tends to be less active after mindful practice.
- The **hippocampus** region, which is associated with the formation of memories and the regulation of emotions, and which helps to regulate the amygdala, has been found to be more active after mindful practice.
- The **prefrontal cortex** part of the brain associated with impulse control, concentration and decision making is also more active.

In simple terms, mindfulness strengthens the parts of our brain that help with remaining calm during stressful events, enabling us to react more positively to stressful situations and feel more in control of our emotions. When we are calm we are better able to accurately process information about the situation we are facing and use the parts of our brain that promote creativity, flexibility and thinking.

*Our life is shaped by our mind,  
for we become what we think.*

*Buddha*

## Care for the Carer

To be able to support the children in your care to practise mindfulness, you need to start with yourself.

Life can be overwhelming at times, especially when working in a caring profession such as early childhood education and care. This can sometimes lead to 'compassion fatigue', in other words a reduced ability to feel compassion for others, due to emotional and physical exhaustion. Your own self-care should be your first priority to enable you to manage early signs of exhaustion and ensure that you are in a position to be able to provide good quality education and care to others.

Research suggests that mindfulness helps us to tune-out distractions, reduce stress and regulate our emotions (Garrison, Zeffiro, Scheinost, Constable & Brewer, 2015). By practising mindfulness, you will become more aware of your thoughts and emotions, which will benefit all of your interactions, especially with the children you care for and educate.

*By practising mindfulness or meditation we develop and strengthen our ability to calm and quiet our mind without struggling...just by sitting and doing nothing we are actually doing a lot.*

*Psychology Today*



Mindfulness is an exercise for the brain and, as with all exercise, some people love it while others find it difficult to commit to daily. When you have established your own mindfulness routine and have a better understanding of how to practise it, you will be ready to introduce the concepts and practice of mindfulness to children.

The simple breathing exercises opposite are a good way to get started. You can also try any of the activities described for children later in this resource for your own mindfulness practice.

*When we get too caught up in the busyness of the world, we lose connection with one another - and ourselves.*

*Jack Kornfield*

### Belly Breathing (1 min)

Sit comfortably and place one or two hands on your abdomen, close your eyes and simply breathe. Take a deep breath in and become aware of your abdomen moving inwards. Hold for a second and then breathe out slowly, being aware of your abdomen moving outwards. Repeat this a number of times.

### Body Scan (3 mins)

Find somewhere comfortable to sit and close your eyes. Take a deep breath and exhale slowly, repeating 2-3 times. Then bring the focus downwards and feel the sensation of your feet – are they tingling? Next focus on your legs, feeling the sensation of them as you breathe deeply in and out, before slowly moving upwards to focus on your knees, your fingers, your arms, your shoulders, your neck and finally to your head. Take the time at each point to consider how the area is feeling before moving onto the next area, all the while breathing slowly in and out. When you have reached your head, take a deep breath in and breathe out slowly before opening your eyes and returning to the room.

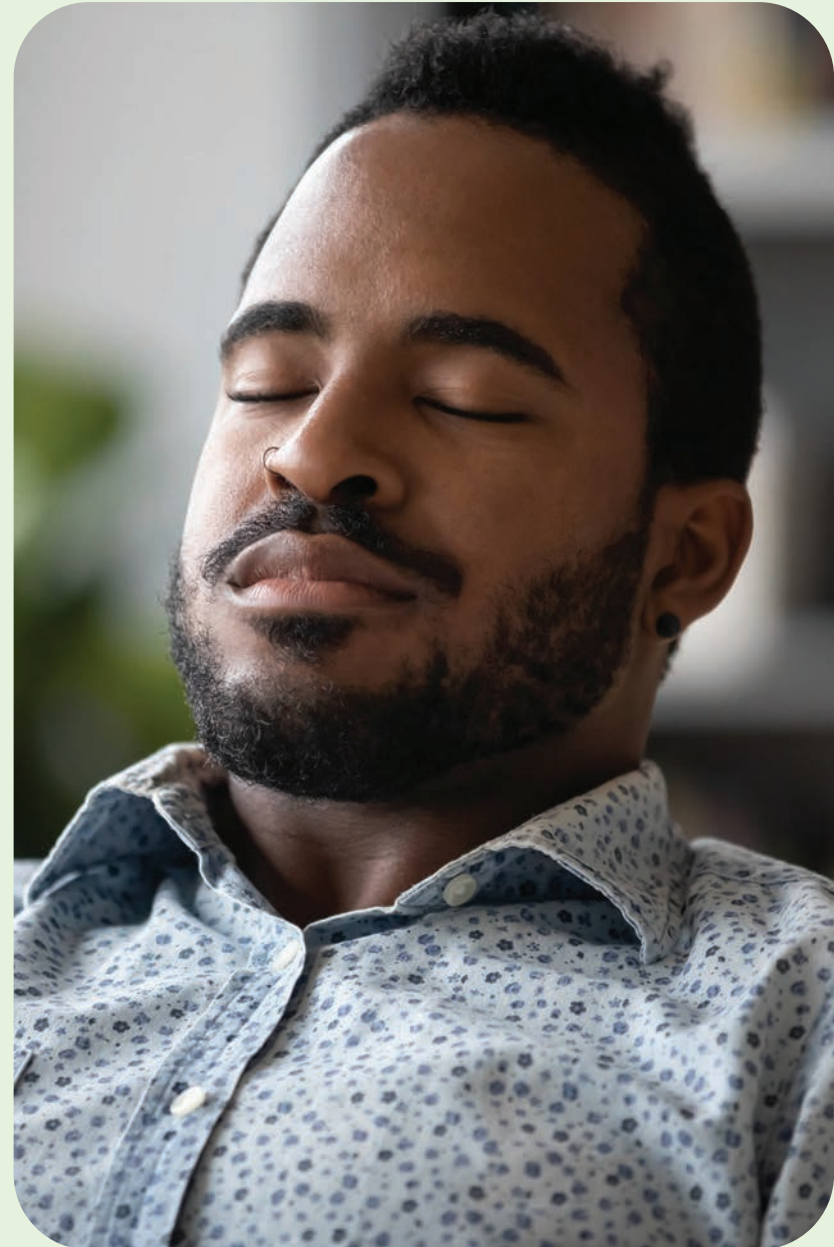
### Mindfulness at work

There are a number of ways you can introduce mindfulness into the daily practice of the team in your setting.

- Create a quiet space within the service that individuals within the team can use for mindful moments, in the staff room perhaps. Include items that stimulate the senses such as a diffuser, hand creams, plants and soft lighting, and display mindful reminders or quotes on the wall.
- Introduce collective mindfulness at the beginning or the end of a team meeting through one of the mindful breathing or sound activities outlined later in this resource.
- Practise reflective supervision. This involves taking time during your supervision session to focus on the thoughts, feelings and experiences you have in your day-to-day practice. By doing so, you will gain confidence in your abilities and strengths, and become more aware of your limits and vulnerabilities and how these might be addressed. This type of mindful practice can bring emotions to the surface. It is important to note that while these can be discussed within supervision, supervision is not a counselling space or a therapeutic intervention.

*If you want to conquer the anxiety of life,  
live in the moment, live in the breath.*

*Amit Ray*



## Introducing Mindfulness to Children



*Live the actual moment.  
Only this actual moment is life.*

*Thích Nhất Hạnh (Buddhist monk)*

Children can teach us a lot about being in the moment. Have you ever observed a child fully engaged in their play or focused intently on an object? The activity has their full attention, even if only for a short time. The adult's role is less about teaching a child how to 'do' mindfulness and more about creating mindful opportunities for them. As the educator, you can introduce mindful moments in a purposeful way into the daily routine, helping children to tame their thoughts and giving them the skills and language to regulate their emotions.

Children of all ages benefit from mindfulness activities. Mindfulness (Wedge, 2018):

- Introduces children to the habit of focusing on the present moment and ignoring distractions.
- Helps children to stay calm in stressful times.
- Encourages good habits. When faced with challenges, children come to know they can find some peace by taking a few moments to breathe.
- Helps to promote happiness by lowering social anxiety and stress.
- Promotes patience.
- Improves functions in children's brains like cognitive control and working memory.
- Improves attentiveness and impulse control.



### Before you start

It is important to remember that mindfulness is not always about deliberately carrying out a specific 'mindfulness activity', it is also about how mindful moments can be built into what you do every day. For example, when you are outside with a group of children, consider activities that you could do in a more mindful way such as walking on the grass in bare feet, being more mindful of your steps or how you are moving your bodies, or quietly listening to the sounds of your surroundings. Even if you do decide to carry out a mindfulness activity with children, you do not need to worry about finding or creating the 'perfect' conditions, just consider what times throughout the day would work best for you and the children.



When practising mindfulness activities with children:

- Remember **all feelings are ok**; children should be able to feel their feelings without judgement.
- Be realistic about what you want to achieve.
- Think about what props you need (if any) and prepare these before starting.
- Tap into something that you know the children enjoy.
- Keep activities short.
- Foster a positive atmosphere around mindfulness...keep it light, don't be too serious.
- Do something energetic beforehand.
- Keep instructions simple and use words and phrases that the children understand.
- Model mindfulness by either taking part in the mindfulness activities with the children or, during the course of the day, letting the children see you stop and take a few deep breaths, explaining to the children why you are doing so and encouraging them to join in.
- Practise the activities regularly and repeat them often.

## Mindfulness Anchors

There are a number of different types of mindfulness activities and these are divided into what are known as anchors. Children often benefit from using something visual or an object to focus them on the mindful moment, particularly very young children or children who are new to mindfulness. An anchor is an object or an image that you use to help you to focus on the moment and to refocus when your mind wanders. Anchors are grouped as Breath, Touch, Scent and Taste, Sound, and Body.

Like everything in life, some anchors will suit some children and adults more than others and, ultimately, children will determine what suits their needs best. Your role as educator is to plan and provide a variety of mindful opportunities using the anchors as your guide.

Before thinking about what anchor activities you will focus on, the two visualisation ideas below work really well to introduce mindfulness to the children gently. Following on from these, you can then plan other mindful moments.

*A few simple tips for life: feet on the ground, head to the skies, heart open... quiet mind.*

*Rasheed Ogunlaru*

### Monkey Mind



The Monkey Mind visualisation is an effective way to introduce children to the idea that our mind is often busy and full of thoughts, and sometimes we need to slow it down. This can be a difficult concept for children to understand so a visualisation prop can be helpful.

Show the children a monkey soft toy jumping around and being busy to demonstrate and reinforce the idea of a busy mind. Discuss with the children how you could help the monkey to calm down. Make some suggestions such as the monkey needing to take a deep breath or do a breathing exercise. Ask the children to try it with you to see if that helps the monkey's mind to calm down.

### Mind Jar



The Mind Jar is another great prop to help children visualise a busy mind and show them how slowing down will help the thoughts and feelings settle in their minds.

Fill a large jar or bottle that can be easily sealed with water and add coloured glitter and/or other small objects such as beads to represent feelings and thoughts. Gently shake the jar to demonstrate how busy our minds can get. While shaking, ask the children to imagine that everything in the jar is like their thoughts and feelings, and show that when everything is swirling around it is hard to see things clearly. Reassure the children that this happens to everyone, even grown-ups.

Place the jar on a flat surface and ask the group to keep an eye on it to see what happens when it is still. Everything starts to settle and the water becomes clearer, just as our thoughts will settle when we are calm.

*It is important to stress that mindfulness is not about making our thoughts go away. Rather it is about recognising that these thoughts and feelings visit our minds, that they come and go, and are constantly changing, and the benefits of slowing the thoughts down.*

There is an abundance of information available on different mindfulness activities for adults and children (see useful links on the final page). The following are just a few ideas to help you gain confidence and get started on the mindfulness journey with the children. Most of the activities can be carried out either inside or outdoors.





# Breathing Activities

*The breathing anchor, which is simply about focusing your attention on the natural rhythm of your breathing, is the foundation of mindfulness.*

We all breathe all day, every day. However, most of us do not even think about the fact we are doing so, never mind how we are doing it or what is happening in our body. Even without being conscious of it, many times throughout our lives we naturally take a deep breath before doing something and use breathing to calm down when upset or when doing exercise to slow our heart rates.

Children benefit from focusing on their breathing when emotions are hard to manage. A simple way to introduce the breath to young children is to ask them to place a finger under their noses so that they can feel the warmth of their breath on it or, when you are outside, you could explain that what we use to blow a dandelion or a bubble is our breath.

All of the breathing exercises below will guide children to become more aware of their breath, to breathe more slowly and, in turn, to relax.



## Breathing

### Belly Breathing

Ask the children to lie on the floor and place a small object, such as a soft toy or beanbag, on their belly. The object needs to be something a child can easily balance without it falling off, as this would distract them. Ask the children to place their hands by their sides and to breathe normally, watching the object move up and down. As the activity progresses and the children settle into it, you could count aloud softly as they breathe, 'Breathe in 1, 2, 3, breathe out 1, 2, 3'.





## Breathing

### Shape Breathing

Print out some shapes or create your own (you can use any shape you wish except a circle) and give one to each child. Ask the children to trace their finger around the shape, breathing in while moving their finger along one edge of the shape and holding the breath for a few seconds before breathing out while tracing around the next side of the shape. Repeat this a number of times.

Another option is for children to use their own hand as the shape, using a finger on the other hand to trace up the side of a finger while breathing in and down the other side of the finger while breathing out, before moving on the next finger.





## Breathing

### Hot Chocolate Breathing

You do not need any props for this activity, just your two hands. While sitting comfortably, model for the children how to create a circle shape with their hands and ask them to imagine that inside the circle is a mug of hot chocolate or soup. Ask the children to breathe in slowly to smell the hot chocolate and then blow out slowly to cool it down, repeating this a number of times.







# Touch Activities

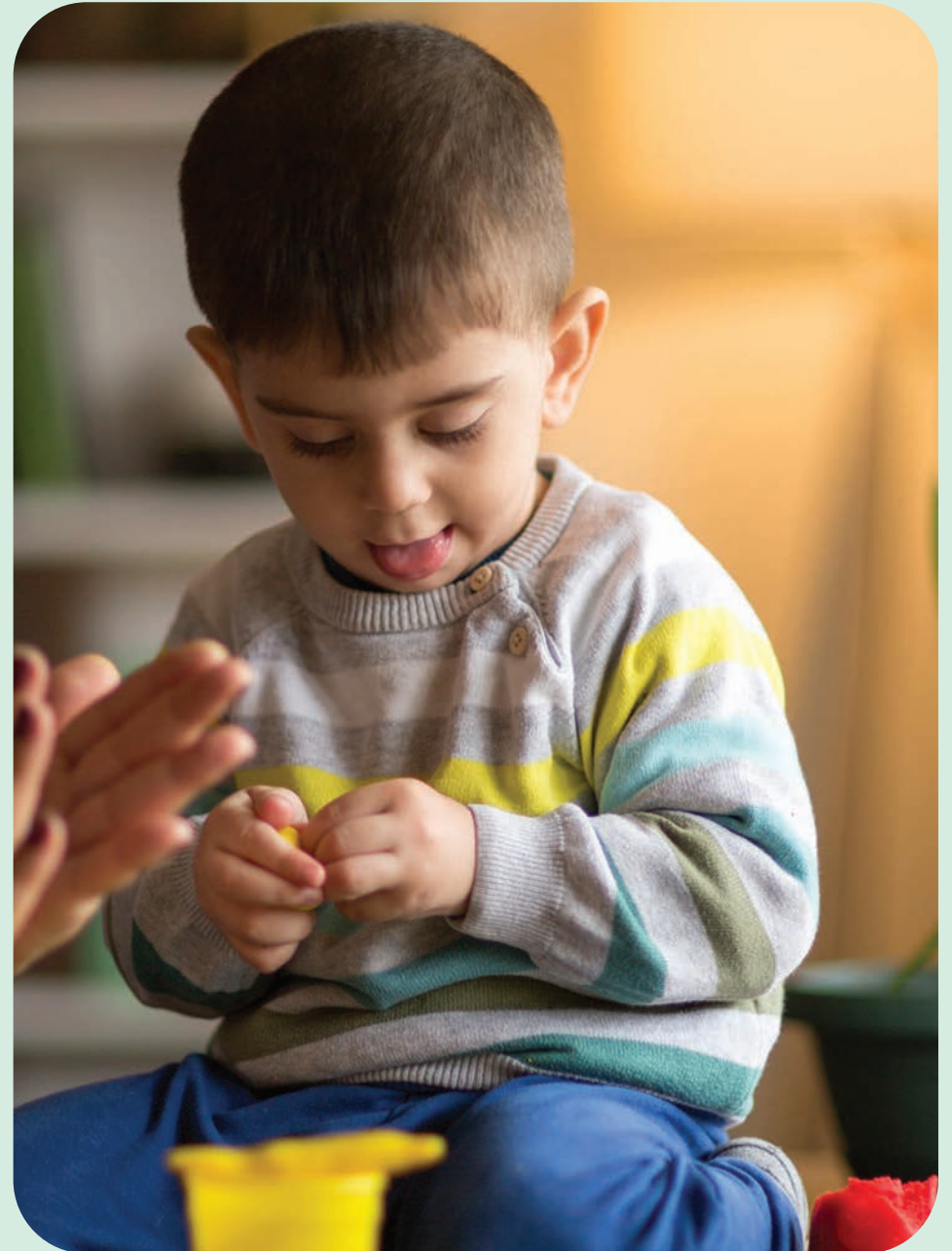
Although breathing is the cornerstone of mindfulness, within a mindful moment some children might find it difficult to use only breathing as a means of calming their mind or their thoughts. Children are naturally in tune with their senses so activities that involve the senses will spark their curiosity and engage them even more. The senses are connected to the brain and have a direct impact on our sense of being and our ability to concentrate.



## Touch

### Play Dough

Play dough is an everyday resource in an early learning and care setting but you can use it in a different way within a mindful moment. In either small group time or in a larger group, give each child a ball of play dough. When sitting comfortably, ask the children to close their eyes and to manipulate the ball – squashing it, squeezing it, feeling the shape. Ask questions about how the play dough feels, for example, is it cold, warm or soft? Encourage the children to smell the play dough and ask questions about that. It is important to prepare the questions you will be asking in advance. It is ok if there are silences, the important thing is that the children are engaged, focused on their breathing and relaxing in the moment.





## Touch

### Finger Tapping

You will need to model this activity for the children. Place your hands palm side together in a prayer position. Apart from the finger you are moving, keep your other fingertips touching at all times. Tap your two thumbs together slowly five times while counting aloud then repeat with your pointer finger, again counting to five while tapping together. Slowly work your way along to your pinkie finger, each time tapping five times, then work your way back. The first couple of times you do this activity, the children will need to keep their eyes open to see how to do it but they may choose to close their eyes at a later stage when they have got the hang of it.





# Touch

## Mindful Steps

This activity is best suited to the outdoors on grass as it involves walking around in bare feet for the anchor of touch. The outdoors also allows more space for movement. You could do it indoors too, however. The activity simply involves asking the children to imagine that they are a tree standing in the soil, to move around the space using big/ small steps or to imagine that they are an animal. The key experience you want to achieve is the children moving their body slowly and calmly and feeling the sensation of the grass (or floor) beneath their feet.





# Scent and Taste Activities

You can also use the senses of taste and smell as anchors to create mindful moments. Taste activities might be more suited for an older age group (4 to 6 years) but the smell activities can be adapted for babies.

## Scent and Taste

### The Nose Knows

You can carry out this activity in pairs or a small group and you will need to do some preparation beforehand. Fill small cloth bags, muslin works well, with objects that have a natural scent such as flowers, fruit or spices. Avoid chemical or heavily perfumed objects and check for allergies. You can be the leader or you can ask one of the children to lead. Encourage the children to close their eyes and breathe the scent in slowly, and to guess what it is.



## Scent and Taste

### Soothing Hands

For this activity you will need to use hand cream or body lotion suitable for children and babies. It is important that you model this activity and guide the children on what to do. Give each child a small amount of cream in their hand and ask them to close their eyes and rub the cream in slowly, covering their whole hand including all of their fingers. Encourage them to smell the cream as they are doing so. You can adjust this activity for a younger child, with you applying the cream to the child's feet or arms. Consider playing some calming music in the background during this activity.





Scent  
and Taste

**Mindful Eats**

Give each child a small selection of foods with different textures such as cut pieces of fruit like apple slices or grapes cut in half, berries, cooked pasta, small rice cakes/crackers or small pieces of chocolate, considering any allergies children in the group might have. Let each child choose a piece of food and encourage them to look at the food and think about its shape and colour. Ask whether their food looks soft, hard or crunchy. Encourage them to smell the food before putting it in their mouth and chewing it slowly, thinking about how it tastes and whether it is sweet or salty before they swallow it. Although this can be a fun activity, children will not be used to having to let food linger in their mouth and may not find that easy to do, so there is no need to prolong it too much. Repeat with another piece of food from the selection.







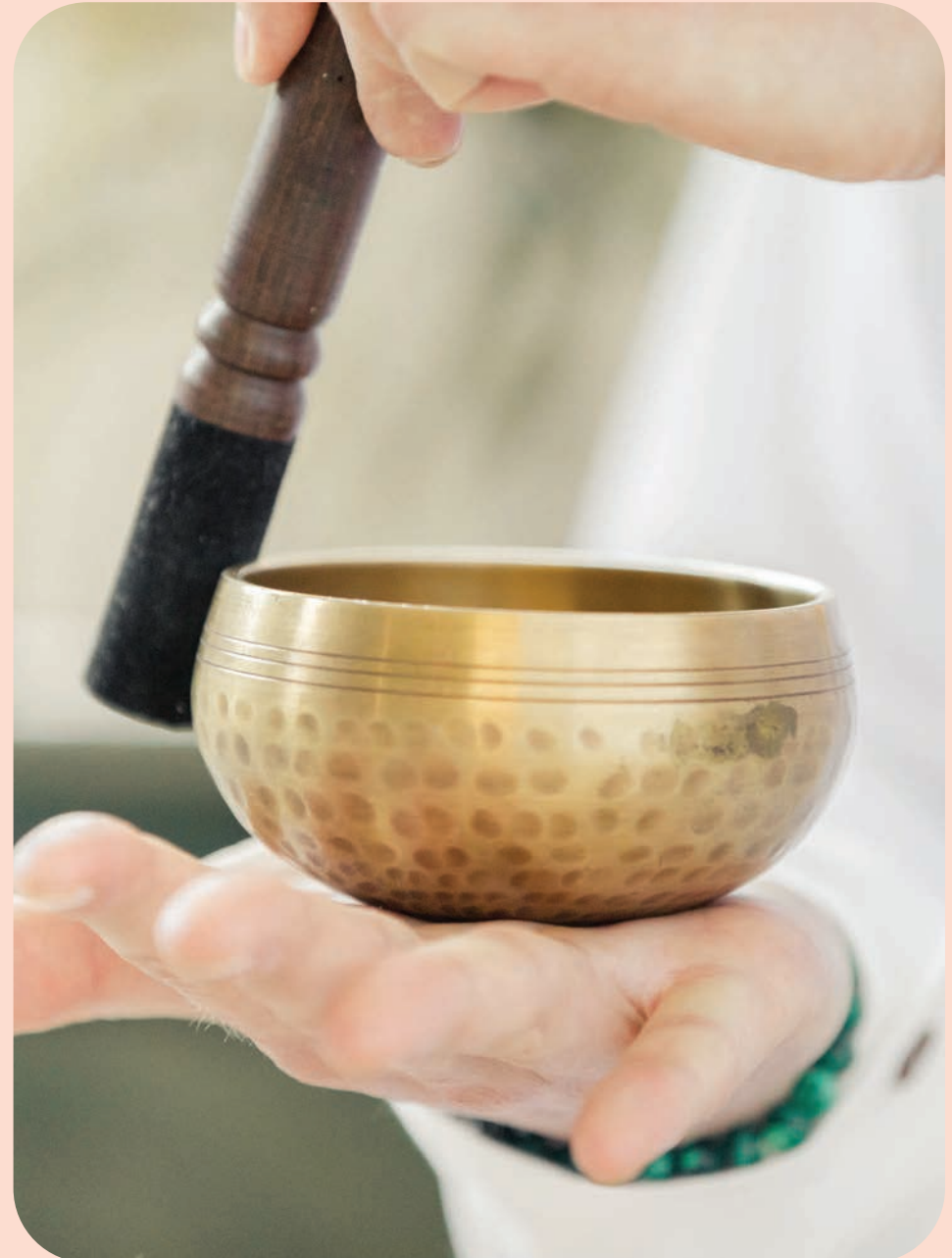
# Sound Activities

You might incorporate sound into many of the activities outlined above to create a calming atmosphere. In the following activities, you can use sound as an anchor in a more mindful way.



## Mindful Sounds

You will need a prop such as a chime or singing bowl for this activity. If you do not have a suitable prop, you could use an online sound website (see useful links on the final page). Ask the children to sit comfortably with their eyes closed while you create a sound using the bowl or chime or your phone. Encourage the children to remain still with their eyes closed and listen until the sound has stopped. It is important that the sound you use is not startling and has a lingering tone to it.





## Sound

### Listening Ears

Simply ask the children to sit comfortably with their eyes closed and think about what they can hear. It is important that they do not shout out their answers but remain quiet so everyone can hear the surrounding sounds. You could guide this a little at the beginning by suggesting a few obvious sounds, but it is important that you give the children the opportunity to focus on what they can hear themselves. After the activity, encourage children to tell you and the others what they could hear.





Sound

## Audio Visualisations

There are a number of audio visualisations specifically tailored for children available online. The visualisations for children are generally under five minutes long and it is advisable that you listen to them yourself first so you can choose ones that will best suit the group. When you have chosen a visualisation, ask the children to lie down and they will be guided through the visualisation by the audio. Allow the children time after it is finished to readjust to being present again in the room, do not rush them to move about or move on to another activity immediately afterwards.





The following activities are based on promoting kindness and self-compassion. Children need to learn how to value themselves before they can value anyone else. This can be difficult because we do not often acknowledge the good in ourselves and instead dwell on the negative, allowing that bias to be the loudest voice in our head.



The idea behind this activity is to use a bucket as a mindfulness visualisation for children, with the bucket representing our emotional health.

The first time you discuss the bucket as a concept, explain to the children that when we are having fun, playing, dancing or singing with friends, or when we are kind or helpful to others or they are kind to us, our bucket is being filled a little each time. When we are mean to someone, leaving them out of a play activity intentionally or bumping into them, or when someone is unkind to us, our bucket empties out. Then, using pieces of paper and a bucket or container as props, ask the children for examples of things that happened to them throughout their day and demonstrate the bucket being filled or depleted, based



on what happened. Discuss with the children how our feelings can depend on how full or empty our bucket is. It is important to stress that no one's bucket is full all the time, that we all feel a mixture of feelings each day, and that all these feelings are ok.

When children have grasped the concept, you can have frequent conversations with them about their bucket to help them connect into how they are feeling.



The idea behind this activity is to promote what is positive in our lives. The Gratitude Tree may begin as a craft activity where children create a tree or you can use a branch from a real tree and repot it inside. Encourage the children to make some leaf shapes out of paper. Discuss with the children things they are thankful for, for example, things that make them happy, something that someone did for them that was kind, something that they learned to do, someone they love, something that makes them laugh. You can then write these things, or children can draw them, onto the children's leaves if they made some or onto sticky notes, and then hang these on the tree together. Add new leaves to the tree daily or weekly.



# Body

## All About Me

This activity is about promoting the child's sense of uniqueness, highlighting that while we are all the same in many ways, each of us is different. You will find many templates online but, if you can, a fun way to approach this activity is to draw a full size outline for each child. Children then paint or colour in their outline showing hair, skin and eye colour, and include information about their favourite colour, TV show, food, book.

*Life is a dance.  
Mindfulness is witnessing that dance.*

*Amit Ray*





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## Useful Links

[Barnardos Heart, Body Mind](#)

[Mind Yourself - The Mental Health and Wellbeing Reading Guide](#)

[HSE Minding Your Well-being Programme](#)

[Healthy Ireland](#)

[Mindful Sounds](#)

[Audio Visualisation](#)

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