

# Mindfulness

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We made it!!! We did it! We have almost survived another school year. The end is near and summer is calling. For me, this year has been one of the hardest since my kids became school-aged. This year was almost as hard as the one where my youngest was born. That year my middle kiddo started kindergarten and my oldest began second grade and the baby would wait all day to get fussy for when the big two came home and it was time for me to make dinner, or at least something resembling dinner. That was a hard year. Thankfully, my youngest is also the only one who ever cared for one of those baby swings, so there she'd be, buckled in and sailing side to side at Mach 10 while I tried to boil water, help/yell with/about homework and locate shin guards and socks.

Although that was a super hard year, at that time, 2 out of 3 of my children were in the *same* school and the other one was on my hip. Or in the swing. Gosh that was a great swing.

This year, however, I have had three kids in three *different* schools, each with their own activities and school function schedules. At the same time, I've been trying to carve out more time for my own professional goals. I have been drowning. I've been drowning in kids, activities, school functions, work, laundry and taxiing. I am constantly driving up and down Woodinville Duvall Road and this year, I actually began driving one of my kids to soccer practice without them in the car. I'm pretty sure that I am putting more miles on my car in a week than I did when my tribe *literally* drove across the country 3.5 years ago to get here.

It's been a lot and we've all had to dig deep. I have asked a lot of my kids and I have asked a lot of myself. Now, this introduction would have been great if I had been writing a piece on being Resourceful, which is what I thought this month's character trait was, however, it is not. It's Mindfulness. But I had almost finished my piece on Resourcefulness when I realized that the actual topic for this month was something else. See what I mean – drowning. But the introduction still works so I'm running with it 😊.

I will be the first to admit that I don't come by practicing Mindfulness honestly. I come more from a "muscle through it" and "grin and bear it" kind of upbringing. My parents weren't big on talking through discipline and I didn't ask why a lot growing up because I was pretty sure that I already knew what the answer was; "because I said so." That said, my parents were actually pretty great at encouraging (perhaps sometimes unknowingly) an incredibly important building block of empathy and mindfulness - self-reflection.

Self-reflection is a huge piece of what we've been building upon this year at East Ridge, it is a pillar of social and emotional learning and development. Self-reflection allows us the opportunity to practice things like empathy, gratitude, generosity and flexibility because it helps us to better understand others by better understanding ourselves. Moreover, it is one of the most essential outcomes of practicing **Mindfulness**.

Mindfulness is the state of "active and open attention to the present." It's a rather "basic human ability" to pay attention to what is going on inside of us and around us without being overly reactive. Someone who is being mindful is in a relaxed state of alertness. Mindfulness is not one more thing that you have to learn how to do! Arguably, it's something that we all possess innately, even though we may be better

at one time or another at practicing it. Think of this as a superpower that both you and your child already have inside of you. The key to unlocking it is in understanding how and when to practice it.

But first, why? Why would we be interested in practicing mindfulness at school?

Like almost all aspects of Social and Emotional Learning my easy answer to you, within the context of classrooms and schools, is that it [drives academic outcomes](#). Mindfulness has been shown to boost emotional regulation, increase focused behavior, decrease distracted behavior, increase self-control, increase an overall sense of well-being and reduce stress. All things that I think so many of us would like to see more of from our children both in and outside of their school day. Mindfulness has also been shown to improve school climate by increasing levels of respect shown between students and improving teachers' moods. It has also been used along side something called [Restorative Practices](#) in transforming the way that schools deal with discipline by repairing relationships and promoting more positive discipline models and fostering community.

Mindfulness meditation and it's noted benefits are not new but with it's growing mainstream popularity in education, the military, in healthcare and in the sport's world we have more and more research that shows us the positive effects that mindfulness meditation can have on our brains.

What we see is that mindfulness meditation has the ability to change areas of our [brain](#) that respond to stress, pain and fear, potentially lessening our experience of these things. The more mindful meditation practiced, the bigger the changes. Schools have begun to leverage these results because, in addition to the above findings, "It's fairly intuitive that a moment of quiet and reflection during the day would provide some benefit to stressed-out children."

The other side of this debate however asks us to be mindful (see what I did there) of the push to help kids figure out how to handle more. Doing this, without reflecting on "why more?" in the first place, is important. Why are our kids so stressed out to begin with? And what is the appropriate amount of stress we should encourage children to know how to handle? These are hard questions and I don't pretend to have the answers. I tell my own children that a certain amount of stress is inevitable and even functional. Healthy levels of stress can improve our focus, can promote healthy levels of competition and help us strive for excellence. All things that we value in our household. I also tell my children, however, that the secret to stress lies in how we handle it. How we are able to deal with stress helps us determine what amount of stress can move us forward and what amount just gets in our way.

Recently, my 13 year-old daughter suffered a serious concussion. We have been learning a lot about concussions and the nuances of recovery in the last 4 weeks. Charlotte is a high-achieving student with a rigorous course load which includes double jump math. It's near the end of the school year so she was knee deep in projects and tests at the time of her injury. She is also a fantastic and very competitive athlete. What we have been learning in the last few weeks is how large of a role stress plays in an individual's recovery time. People who allow themselves adequate time to rest and do not rush back into difficult mental and physical tasks, after a concussion, can typically recover in about 45 days. Those who begin to push themselves too hard too fast are looking at about 100 days or longer. That's a big gap. But the world doesn't stop so although it was clear that Charlotte needed to rest, and as much as we tried to resist it, both she and I felt the slow pull of the race around her. As she began to feel a little bit better after the first few days she did a little more, and then a little more and then a little bit more. She wasn't cleared for physical activity, but she could manage to keep up with a modified academic

schedule, and I began to let her go watch practice a couple of times a week because she missed her team mates. Then she had 2 days of standardized testing.

That afternoon when I picked her up from school for her follow up with the doctor she had an unbelievable migraine and her speech was a little bit groggy and slow. The doctor explained to Charlotte that although she was doing super well in her recovery her brain was slowing things down for her when she would not. Lesson for mom and daughter!! It was easy for me to eliminate some of the extra obvious stresses and no-gos for Charlotte, like lacrosse practice, but it was harder for me to limit her mental output. It was clearly up to me though because Charlotte was being a good kid. She was going to school, answering all of the questions, and trying to do her best. All of the things I've always told her to do. It was my job to eliminate the stresses that were standing in her way by securing more doctor's notes, communicating better and more frequently with teachers and the school nurse, scheduling breaks for her during the day and just plain keeping her out of school to sleep and rest. Even, and not at all to her liking, eliminating lacrosse practice hang outs and any social commitments for a short time. School was still the priority, and not going anywhere, it became clear that we needed to reduce and eliminate the "extra" things that were compromising her ability to deal with the everyday stresses and responsibilities of school work.

How?

To manage the stress that she couldn't completely escape, Charlotte has relied on sleep and quiet and on mindful meditation. The last few weeks have been overwhelming and it's been important for her to take breaks. Some of these mindful breaks have been two to three minutes and others have been much longer and sometimes she's completed them right before bed making it easier for her to sleep. I should say that we built mindfulness meditation into Charlotte's social and emotional tool box about 4 years ago when she began experiencing migraines. We downloaded some free and very short meditations for her to use and she got hooked pretty quickly. She noticed a huge improvement in her experience of migraines and just generally felt really good after using mindful meditation. They were very accessible for a 9 year old to use independently and she discovered that she could use the box breathing techniques at any point in a day where she felt that she might need them, like right before a test.

Mindfulness can be simple. You might ask that you and your child come up with a mindful pose or body signal when a mindfulness check is needed. Maybe your child will want to place their hand on their tummy. In my house my kids know that when I put up a high five they need to give me or themselves 5 seconds for a head and heart check.

Mindfulness can be taking a moment to concentrate on your breathing, to hear and feel your breath and to quickly tap into whether or not you can slow your breathing down. Or it can be anywhere from 2 – 15 minutes of sitting somewhere with your eyes closed where you begin to focus on the way that your feet feel on the floor, how heavy your arms are as you rest them on your legs, you can attempt to clear your mind by allowing thoughts to come and go quickly as you place your focus and concentration on counted breathing.

Maybe you will take your kids on a mindful walk where you ask them to pay particular attention to the sound of the ground under their feet, the smells and sounds in the air and to look for the unexpected treasures you all might find.. More tips and tricks can be found [here](#). Furthermore, allow yourself to set appropriate expectations. What is it you are looking to achieve with your child. Maybe it's less tantrums

and stress, in schools, it might be less calling out and impulsivity. Some really great discussion on these ideas can be found [here](#).

In classrooms, I've seen teachers commit to a [Morning Meeting](#) either every Monday or everyday, to quickly assess the emotional temperature in their rooms. This is mindfulness in action. Allowing kids just a few minutes to indicate how they are feeling before they begin their day is an extremely powerful way to provide space for our setting events, those things that happen just before school or over the weekend, that are invisible to classmates and teachers, and, that might get in the way of a student achieving their full potential at school. These mindful moments are also great at building empathy amongst the group.

Mindfulness is being practiced in classrooms across the globe because a research case for mindfulness is growing. Beyond that, however, mindful teaching, parenting and learning is incredibly intuitive. It makes sense to most of us to allow our kids the room that they need to self-reflect in a way that can be transformational in how they learn and feel. Mindfulness shouldn't be a tool used to simply help kids handle more. We need to figure out how to help our kids do less with ease. Summer is approaching, in my home we will not only use this time to reflect on our choices and successes this school year, but we will use it to reset. To do more with less. For us, the greatest gift that summer provides is the opportunity to have more togetherness, more time, more sleep, more quiet and more introspection, all with less structure. Our mantra for this summer will be to find the beauty in boredom and to give our brains and bodies the rest and recovery they need. I'm also hoping to find that swing. 😊

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-courage-be-present/201001/how-practice-mindfulness-meditation>

<https://www.edutopia.org/search?query=mindfulness>

Listening to My Body: A guide to helping kids understand the connection between their sensations (what the heck are those?) and feelings so that they can get better at figuring out what they need. By Gabi Garcia

Mindful Kids: 50 Activities for Calm, Focus and Peace by Whitney Stewart

Master of Mindfulness: How to Be Your Own Superhero in Times of Stress by Laurie Grossman

Good Night Yoga: A Pose-by-Pose Bedtime Story by Mariam Gates and Sarah Jane Hinder

The Story of Ferdinand by Munro Leaf