



Using Mindfulness with Children and Adolescents ↗

A Developmental Timeline and Review of Results



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Introduction

When is the right time to introduce children/adolescents to the practice of mindfulness? As a therapist working with youth and a mindfulness practitioner this question comes up frequently in conversation. While there is no single answer there is a growing body of research that helps inform the decision. The following article summarizes current research in this area as well as outlines key findings related to the benefits of using mindfulness with young people.





Childhood: The importance of early intervention

3 to 7-years-old

Childhood: The importance of early intervention (3 to 7-yrs)

Dramatic brain growth between the ages of three to seven supports aspects of attention, executive functioning and socioemotional skills that are foundational to mindfulness^{13, 17, 19, 21}. As a result, most young children display burgeoning capacities needed to engage in a variety of short (e.g. 3 to 5-minute) mindfulness activities, including sensory experiences, relaxation exercises, and sitting, movement and body scan meditations^{12, 23}.

While research with young children is just beginning, preliminary findings indicate that mindfulness practices help support behavioral regulation, attention control, social skills, and self-awareness, while also decreasing anxiety^{12, 28}. Furthermore, times of rapid neurological development are often considered windows of opportunity for shaping the brain and behavior³. Mindfulness training at early ages may therefore play a significant role in shaping subsequent development²⁸.

Childhood: The importance of early intervention (3 to 7-yrs)

Because select skills such as attention control are required for subsequent skill acquisition in other important areas, early development can serve as a gateway that ensures a cascade of related skills progress in an appropriate fashion. For example, research demonstrates correlations between early differences in voluntary control of attention and language development, academic learning, social functioning, emotional control, and impulse/behavioral control¹⁴.

Following similar reasoning, Diamond (2012) reports that even small improvements in the early development of executive skills, another key component of mindfulness, can promote substantial physical, psychological, and social gains realized later in life.



Preadolescence: Increasing awareness of self and others

8 to 12-years-old

Preadolescence: Increasing awareness of self and others (8 to 12-yrs)

Preadolescence brings with it neurodevelopmental capacities needed for more sophisticated, self-reflective aspects of mindfulness⁴. Because these skills corresponded with a second period of rapid neural development and restructuring, preadolescence may constitute another window of developmental opportunity for targeting such skills²⁸.

Of particular importance during this time period, 8 to 12-year-olds exhibit burgeoning meta-awareness or the ability to see more clearly the contents of their own thinking¹. This ability is the cornerstone of mindfulness practice and is linked to increased self-awareness, emotional understanding and control, and perspective taking capacities²⁷.

Preadolescence: Increasing awareness of self and others (8 to 12-yrs)

Research exploring the use of mindfulness practices with typically developing children has generated several findings^{17, 22, 25}.

Mindfulness increases

- attention
- socioemotional competencies
- self-reported optimism

Mindfulness decreases

- depressive features
- conduct problems
- inattentiveness/hyperactivity,
- issues with peer relationships

In treatment settings, mindfulness practices have also shown to improve ADHD symptomology^{15, 18}, including decreased:

- impulsivity
- distractibility
- problem behaviors
- stress
- anxiety



Adolescence: A time of opportunity and vulnerability

13-years-old to Adulthood

Adolescence: A time of opportunity/ vulnerability (13-yrs to adult)

Several authors consider adolescence to be a sensitive period suggesting that intervention may be particularly critical for supporting self-regulation and social functioning, which will relatively solidify by adulthood^{4, 16, 21, 30}.

Mindfulness-based intervention has proven particularly useful during the teen years, supporting skills related to higher order self-awareness, self-regulation, and prosocial attitudes during a developmental phase when these processes are crystallizing⁸. Furthermore, mindfulness training may also serve as a buffer against vulnerability to negative social influence, which can have particularly significant impacts in adolescence.

Adolescence: Window of opportunity/ vulnerability

Research with teens has generated a wide range of encouraging results. While a complete review is beyond the scope of this article a few highlights include below ^{2, 6}.

Mindfulness increases

- self-acceptance
- feelings of calmness
- relaxation

Mindfulness decreases

- negative affect
- absenteeism
- school rule infractions
- suspension days

In clinical populations, mindfulness has been associated with:

- improvements in ADHD³¹
- reduced anxiety, depression, obsessive tendencies, and interpersonal problems, as well as improved self-esteem and sleep quality in teens with psychiatric disorders³
- improved goal setting, attention, awareness, impulsivity, attunement, social problems, and happiness in teens experiencing conduct related symptoms⁵

Conclusions

Developmental evidence suggests that aspects of mindfulness training when adapted for age related needs are applicable from early childhood through adulthood. Furthermore, mindfulness seems well suited for supporting key aspects of development during critical periods in a manner that encourages long-term growth and transfer of training effects. Currently, research exploring the use of mindfulness demonstrates increasing support for positive effects through pre/elementary, middle, and high school years, with the majority of studies examining middle and high school students.

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