



Peaceful Schools Guidance Leaflet

Meditation for Children with Autism or ADHD

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SPIRITUAL^uEngland



About the author of this guidance - Lorraine Murray

Lorraine Murray is founder of the 'Connected Kids'™ programme and author of two books on teaching children meditation. 'Calm Kids – help children relax with mindful activities' and 'Connected Kids – Help Kids with Special Needs (and Autism) Shine with Heartfelt, Mindful Activities'. Lorraine runs her programme online (worldwide) and in person in the U.K. and on the continent. She can be contacted at 'Teach Children Meditation' to give talks/presentations as well as in-house training.

1. Can children with Autism or ADHD learn meditation?

In my experience of teaching meditation and mindfulness I have noticed over the years that it has become a popular way to help adults and children reduce the symptoms of stress and support a healthier lifestyle.

From teaching, I already knew how effective meditation was for kids, but I asked myself: 'Could children with additional support needs learn meditation? Could young people with Autism or ADHD benefit from mindful activities?'

Well let me assure you – yes they can. Most important of all, you are more than capable of teaching them this life skill.

Since 2003, I have been teaching adults how to teach children and teenagers meditation. I have witnessed children with special needs benefitting from meditation and mindfulness. Benefits such as improved focus/concentration, self-regulation, improved sleep patterns and emotional intelligence.

The beauty of teaching meditation in a creative and bespoke way is that it becomes a shared experience with the children and they notice and feel this. They teach us what they can/cannot do in meditation and we adapt the mindful activity or approach to suit their needs. Ultimately the intention is to reduce their stress as stress can exacerbate their difficulties with change and/or their challenging behaviours.

The most important thing to realise when you teach children meditation and mindfulness is that every time you do it, they will teach you how unique and special they are.

2. The 'Connected Kids' programme

I have developed the 'Connected Kids'™ programme – a two stage process that takes adults on the journey of learning how to teach meditation and mindfulness. In level 1 we learn how to develop bespoke meditations and mindful activities that suit the needs of the child. Here are some of my top tips from the 'Connected Kids'™ programme - if you are working with a child with special needs.

3. Meditation for children needs creative ideas

- In other words we need to make it creative and attractive to children. Think about what they are interested in. What do they like to do and can this become a mindful activity?
- You could turn an art project into a quiet, mindful activity that could help children to express their feelings and thoughts. They could choose to keep or destroy their art. Destroying their own art could help them to release negative feelings. Mandalas are great for this (we teach this on level 2 of the 'Connected Kids'™ programme). You can get books with Mandalas to colour in or get ideas for making your own from the Pinterest website.
- At the simplest level, maybe they would be interested in noticing their breath and what happens to their body as they breathe. Adults usually find it easy to 'notice their breath' but what does that mean to a child with special needs? Make noticing the breath a tactile experience - using feathers, windmills or balloons. They can feel their breathing with their hands on their tummies. There are many creative ways that you can help them to notice and observe their breath in a mindful way.
- You could start each morning with some mindful breathing in the classroom. Ask the children to put their hands on their tummies and breath in and out of their hands – using their tummies to move their hands if they can. This activates their diaphragms - a key component in relaxation.

4. Check out their energy

- There is no point telling a very active child to sit still and meditate. If they like to move, bring movement in to the meditation practice. Walking, running and skipping are great ways to bring in mindfulness. While they are active they can be noticing their heartbeat, the sound of their breath and the touch of their body on the ground.
- You can give children a fidget ball or a stone/shell to hold that they can move and touch in class.

5. Let them lie down

- One of the biggest things children with special needs struggle with is being centered and grounded. Let them lie down when you teach them and use the weight and touch of their body as a way to help them notice different parts connecting to the ground.

- You can place something on their tummy as they lie down – the pressure will help them pay attention to the sense of touch. Also bean bag pillows are good to use to cover the eyes.

6. Teach them how to notice their body

- We teach children to use the toilet by noticing the body signals, so we can do the same with stress. Talk to individual children about how they feel when they think about something that upsets them. You can show them how to connect to that part of their body and then how to use their breath to help calm down themselves down.
- In your classroom, you can allocate a lesson to discuss the subject of stress and help the children to understand what happens when our bodies have a stress response such as fight, flight or freeze. Ask where they notice this in their bodies. Teach them how to notice the trigger and count their breaths while they focus on their bodies.

7. Lack of imagination?

- Some children find it very difficult to use their imagination and tend to be quite logical and analytical. Asking them to be aware of, and engage, their imagination can be a challenge. I like to use tactile objects that represent the 'guided story' that you will take them on so that they can use their real physical senses. So a trip to the beach would incorporate sand, a gull's feather, seaweed or a shell.
- In your classroom have a sensory box that can be turned into a story either by you leading them or them leading you in a meditation.

8. What state is your energy?

If there is one thing I have learned is that if you are stressed, your children will reflect this right back – tenfold! Children easily pick up on the stress of others around them and I find that those with special needs are particularly sensitive.

- Before teaching children meditation, practise meditation for yourself. It is essential to practise mindful awareness when teaching meditation as it keeps you balanced, centered and calm.
- You can use your journey to work as a mindful activity. Notice your breath and where you hold tension in the body, invite your body to relax again and again.

9. Research

Research is growing in this field and in my second book 'Connected Kids – Help Kids with Special Needs (and Autism) Shine with Heartfelt, Mindful Activities', I cite many examples of science showing us how meditation helps to support brain activity and development - improving attention skills and reducing lapses in attention. Zoran Josipovic, a neuroscientist at New York University, has been studying the brains of monks who meditate on a daily basis. Josipovic says: 'Recent research on meditation and mindfulness has contributed significantly to a new understanding of the brain's capacity for change in response to experience'.

Neuroscientists have documented the way in which meditation impacts on brain activity itself. For example, meditation has been associated with decreased activity in undesirable brain functions responsible for lapses of attention and disorders such as anxiety and ADHD, and even for the build-up of beta amyloid plaques in Alzheimer's disease. Meditation has also been linked to dramatic changes in electrical brain activity, namely increased theta and alpha EEG activity, which is associated with wakeful and relaxed attention.

10. Recommended reading

'Calm Kids – help children relax with mindful activities' by Lorraine E. Murray

'Connected Kids – Help Kids with Special Needs (and Autism) Shine with Heartfelt, Mindful Activities' by Lorraine E. Murray

'The Explosive Child: A New Approach for Understanding and Parenting Easily Frustrated, Chronically Inflexible Children' by Ross W. Greene

'How To Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk' Paperback by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlis

'Smart Moves: Why Learning Is Not All in Your Head' by Carla Hannaford

11. Organisations

Teach Children Meditation - www.teachchildrenmeditation.com

Peaceful Schools Movement - www.peacefulschools.org.uk