

# The Many Benefits Of Meditation For Children



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Children at Rosewood Primary school take part in a free meditation class led by volunteers from 'I Meditate Africa'. (Photo Credit: RODGER BOSCH/AFP/Getty Images)

A [piece](#) on Upworthy.com last month featured a Baltimore school that's replaced the classic sit-in-your-seat-and-suffer detention with a more progressive and effective form: one where kids learn to meditate. Far from the classic method of hoping that kids will spontaneously reevaluate their own behavior through punishment, teaching kids to focus on their breath and on the present moment may have a lot more value in the long run. But as one reader pointed out, teaching mediation *outside* of detention by infusing it into the school day as a matter of course is even better, and may help kids avoid the things that land them in detention in the first place.

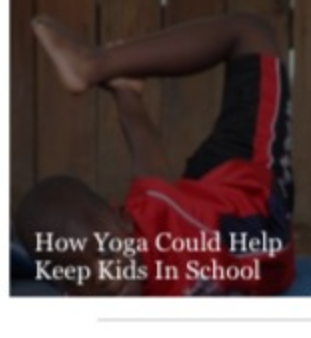
The research on mediation and the developing brain (i.e., kids) is not quite as robust as it is in adults, but it's starting to take off. Here are [some](#) of the benefits that research tells us mediation and mindfulness can offer kids.

## Increased attention

One thing that grownups are perpetually concerned about in kids is attention. Studies have shown the effects of meditation on attention in adults with and without ADD/ADHD, and there's some [evidence](#) that it can help kids focus, too. One 2004 [study](#) found that children with ADHD who learned meditation with their parents twice weekly in a clinic setting, and kept practicing at home, had better concentration at school, among other benefits. Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for children (MBCT-C) has also been [shown](#) to help improve attention and behavior problems, and reduce anxiety in kids who started out with high anxiety levels. A [study](#) in 2013 showed that in boys with ADHD, an eight-week training in mindfulness, significantly reduced hyperactive behaviors and improved concentration. Other studies have [pointed to similar results](#), and more are currently underway to continue exploring the connection.

## A bump in attendance and grades in school

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Anecdotal evidence, and some scientific evidence, suggests that meditation in schools may help improve the things that school officials like to see – grades and attendance. One school district in California [expanded](#) its school day by half an hour in some of its “high-risk” schools, to build meditation into the day. And with good results: The schools have reported better attendance and grades, fewer suspensions, and generally happier and less aggressive kids. And research has supported this: For instance, one [study](#) found that mindfulness helped kids during high-stakes testing, by reducing their anxiety and boosting working memory. A few [others](#) have suggested mindfulness training or mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) may help school [achievement](#), but more work needs to be done to fully understand the applications.

## A reprieve from outside trauma

A lot of kids are dealing with major stressors at home, either in the form of chronic stress or outright trauma. As a [number of experts](#) has pointed out, when kids are living with really bad situations outside of school, their bodies and minds are so overwrought as a result, that it's virtually impossible for them to sit in class and learn. So intervention is almost a requisite, both from an academic point of view, and an ethical one. Meditation and mindfulness have been [shown](#) to help kids who are dealing with [stressors](#). But it's important to mention that many teachers and researchers feel that with kids and trauma, there has to be a [physical component](#), because asking traumatized kids to sit still and meditate right off the bat is not going to work, and it may actually backfire.

“We always assume that kids have been through something, because we don't always know what's going on. Sometimes they don't even know,” says Ali Smith, co-founder of the [Holistic Life Foundation](#) in Baltimore, which helped create the Mindful Moment and Holistic Me programs. “So we always do movement first, then breath work, *then* meditation. We never just walk into a room and say, ‘hey, kids, let's meditate.’ That empty space isn't good for trauma.” So it's obviously extremely important for teachers to be conscientious about what might be going on in the kids' lives outside of school, and tailor the program accordingly.

## Better mental health

For kids who aren't dealing with outright trauma, meditation has been thought to benefit overall mental health in kids, as it's been shown to in adults, but this research is more in its infancy. As mentioned in the [study](#) above on MBCT-C, the (small number of) children who started out with high anxiety had reductions in anxiety symptoms at the end of the 12-week treatment. Another [study](#) found that an afterschool program consisting of yoga and meditation helped kids feel happier and more relaxed. And yoga itself has been [shown](#) to help reduce anxiety, depression and fatigue in kids, compared to physical education alone.

But the research here is still young, and much of it is still in the works. “We've seen it work, for anxiety and depression, in schools, and in mental crisis facilities,” says Smith. “But it's all been anecdotal so far.” The next decade may see more studies on how these practices from an early age can help treat mood and anxiety disorders in kids, at least as an adjunct to other treatments.

## Self-awareness and self-regulation

Mindfulness is intimately connected to self-awareness (it's almost the definition of it), and this extends naturally to self-regulation. That is, if you learn to be more aware of your thought processes and reactions in the present moment, it follows that you would be more in charge of your emotions and behaviors. Kids, who are just learning to manage their own internal stuff, can benefit hugely from some instruction on how to do this, rather than having to stumble through it on their own (and most adults would probably say they wish they'd had some sort of training in it as kids).

“That's one of the biggest things we've seen in the 15 years we've been doing this,” says Smith. “That it teaches kids to connect to themselves. When they aren't empathic, when they aren't kind to others, or their communities, it's usually because they're not connected to themselves.”

And the [research](#) has backed this up: one [study](#) found that kids who learned mindful awareness practices (MAPs) had better executive function after eight weeks of training twice a week. [Another](#) found that a mindful yoga treatment helped kids improve their ability to self-regulate over the longer-term (the one year study period).

“It does a lot for self-regulation,” says Smith. “Kids that are really impulsive can learn to develop that pause between stimulus and reaction. Then you have the skills to realize when you're angry, when you feel stress arising. And you have the skills to de-escalate yourself.”

## Social-emotional development

As Smith mentioned, one thing that meditation seems to do is to inspire kindness to others, and there's definitely some evidence here. One [study](#) found that a social-emotional learning program coupled with mindfulness was more effective than a classic “social responsibility” program in several measures. Kids in the former treatment had greater empathy, perspective-taking, and emotional control, compared to the control group. They were also more “prosocial,” and had lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol than their counterparts in the control group.

“Kids who practice yoga, meditation and mindfulness build skills of attention, self awareness, self management leading to more responsible decision making and prosocial behavior,” says [Yoga 4 Classrooms](#) founder Lisa Flynn. “It's no surprise that studies show that these kids are, in general, happier, more resilient children. They have a solid sense of self and are more connected to, and respectful of, others and the world around them. The result? Kinder, more compassionate kids!” Flynn also helped create the free [Research Repository for Yoga, Meditation and Mindfulness for Children, Adolescents and in Schools](#), [which can be found here](#).

Hopefully more schools will jump on board, particularly as more research is published and more success stories are shared. Even if your kids' school doesn't offer meditation or yoga yet, you can always introduce it to your kids at home, and see if you think it makes a difference for them, and for you.

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