

Mindfulness Meditation and Children: An Interview With Susan Kaiser Greenland

Today I have the honor of interviewing Susan Kaiser Greenland, who had the courage to leave a well-paying law career to embrace a calling to teach mindfulness meditation to children as young as four years old. She is author of the upcoming book *The Mindful Child: How to Help Your Kid Manage Stress and Become Happier, Kinder, and More Compassionate*, developed the website MindfulnessTogether.com and the Inner Kids program, designed to teach young kids [1]_____ skills toward a more peaceful and compassionate world.

Elisha: What inspired you to [2]_____ the golden handcuffs and venture into this sorely needed area?

Susan: I practiced meditation myself and saw how it helped me, so it was only natural to wonder if it could help my children too. But the [3]_____ to begin looking in earnest for ways to practice with my children (who were quite young at the time) came when I was on a week-long meditation retreat with Ken McLeod. I had studied with Ken for a few years before this retreat and was friends with many of his students.

Looking around the meditation hall one evening, I noticed that many of us were parents and was struck by the fact that none of us were talking about bringing mindfulness to our kids. Something happened during that retreat and I felt a shift - a desire to [4]_____ mindfulness into my family life in a more direct way. It's not uncommon for me to leave a retreat thinking that I've had some major insight -- so after having one of these a-ha moments after meditation I wait a week or so before acting on it. If after a week I still feel that way I try to do something about it. A week after I got home from Ken's retreat that year -- now over a decade ago -- I knew this practicing mindfulness with kids was something I wanted to do (or maybe needed to do). Although I had no idea that it would eventually lead me away from my law practice -- which I also enjoyed.

Elisha: Can you give us a brief synopsis of some of the vital skills you teach these children?

Susan: The program has evolved over the years and now my primary objective is to teach kids a more mindful [5]_____. This comes through the development of three qualities simultaneously: awareness, wisdom, and values. My work is secular, yet informed by classical models, and those three qualities (awareness, wisdom and values) can be translated beautifully as attention, balance and compassion, what I like to think of as the New ABCs of learning. By learning these new ABCs, kids, teens, and their families can develop a more mindful worldview by:

- Approaching new experiences with curiosity and an open mind;
- Developing strong and stable attention;
- Seeing life experience clearly without an emotional charge;
- Developing compassionate action and relationships;
- Building communities with kindness and compassion;
- Working together to make a difference in the world;
- Expression [6]_____; and

- Planting seeds of peace by nurturing common ground.

Elisha: Can you share a practice that parents, caregivers, or teachers may be able to take into their lives with their kids?

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Susan: I think helping kids find a physically comfortable [7]_____ from which to practice meditation is very important. Encouraging kids to lie down while practicing breath awareness is quite useful but also is an activity that I use called the Pendulum Swing (or tic-toc with younger children.) The aim of this activity is to help those who find it hard to be still (either sitting or lying down) to meditate in a group. Here's how it goes:

Objectives

- To build body awareness.
- To make it easier and more pleasant for those who find it difficult to be still to meditate with a group of people.
- To help settle body and mind before meditating.
- To develop concentration skills by attending to the sensation of movement.

Leading the Activity

Preparation

Make sure students have enough space to sway from side-to-side without touching each other.

Introduction

- Starting from either a seated or standing position encourage children to take one or more breaths and notice the sensations associated with breathing.
- Explain that we will swing our bodies from side to side slowly, starting to the right (keeping our sit-bones firmly on the cushion) and then slowly swinging back to the left.
- Remind students that the object of attention (or focus) is the [8]_____ of swinging from side-to-side and when they notice that their minds have wandered, just bring it back to the sensation of movement.
- The goal is to help children find and establish a repetitive, rhythmic swing that works for them. Irregular movements with respect to pacing or pattern are not as likely to promote a felt-sense of calm, center, and concentration. Because the swing must viscerally resonate with the person swinging to be effective, the pace and duration may vary from child to child. What is calming for one child may or may not be calming for another, in fact what is calming for one child may agitate or frustrate another. Just as there is no right or wrong way to practice mindfulness in general, so long as children respect each other (and don't intentionally knock into other people or things) there is no right or wrong way to practice the pendulum.

Instruction

- If you are familiar with the classical instructions for walking meditation it is helpful to use them as a reference point for this activity. In the classical instruction there are three parts to walking: lifting the foot, moving it and placing it down (or stepping).
- There are three similar occurrences in the pendulum - moving, shifting, and center.
- 1. Starting in a centered position first sway (or move) to one side keeping your sit bones on the cushion.
- 2. When you reach the point where you cannot sway any further without lifting your sit bone, shift weight and sway back again toward the center. Shifting is similar to lifting in slow and silent walking. You're moving again as you sway back toward center.
- 3. When you reach the center of the cushion pause for a moment -- that moment is similar to placing (or stepping) in slow and silent walking.
- 4. The sway begins again to the opposite side (moving);
- 5. The moment that you reach the end of the sway to one side and shift weight before beginning to sway back toward center is similar to lifting; and
- 6. The moment you notice the feeling of being centered again on the cushion is similar to placing
- The instruction goes like this: move to one side; shift weight; move back toward center; pause for a moment to feel centered sitting on the cushion. Then, move to the opposite side; shift weight; move back again toward center; pause for a moment to feel centered sitting on the cushion. Repeat. At first there is a slight pause at each change, but gradually the practice becomes more fluid.
- Once students are familiar with the eight pieces of the exercise (moving/shifting/moving/center - then in the other direction - moving/shifting/moving/center), and the movement becomes more fluid, encourage students to sway from side to side without pausing in the middle of the movement to notice the feeling of being centered on the cushion.
- With young children it is helpful to use a stringed instrument to accentuate each change, strumming as a prompt signal it's time to shift weight and move in the opposite direction.

Elisha: What can parents do to support their children in being more mindful?

Susan: Hands down, the most powerful thing a parent can do to support his or her children in their practice is to develop their own mindfulness and practice themselves. Kids learn by example and what we do often has a greater impact on our children than what we say.

Thank you so much, Susan. As always, please share your thoughts, stories, and questions below, your interaction provides a living wisdom for us all to benefit from.

A. Choose words from the box below to fill in the blank spaces numbered 1-8 in the next.

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|--------------|----------------|--------------|--------------|
| a. gratitude | b. sensation | c. posture | d. worldview |
| e. venture | f. inspiration | g. integrate | h. vital |

B. Pronouns (I, you, she, he, it, we, they, that, this, these, those, and so on) are words that replace nouns in a text and they can often give a text cohesion, that is they help connect the ideas in the text. Try this task to see which words pronouns refer to in the text. Identify which word in each sentence the underlined pronoun refers to:

1. I practiced meditation myself and saw how it helped me, so it was only natural to wonder if it could help my children too.

2. I noticed that many of us were parents and was struck by the fact that none of us were talking about bringing mindfulness to our kids.

3. The program has evolved over the years and now my primary objective is to teach kids a more mindful worldview. This comes through the development of three qualities simultaneously

4. The aim of this activity is to help those who find it hard to be still (either sitting or lying down) to meditate in a group. Here's how it goes.

5. The most powerful thing a parent can do to support his or her children in their practice is to develop their own mindfulness and practice themselves.
