

Mindfulness and Focusing-Oriented Arts Therapy with Children and Adolescents

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Today, mindfulness practices are being taught to children in school-based programs, summer camps, meditation programs, and family life. The arts can be used as inspiring means to teach mindfulness to children and adolescents (Coholic 2010, 2011; Saltzman and Goldin 2008). While many children are able to learn formal mindfulness practices, such as sitting and walking meditation, the arts often provide an enjoyable, tangible route to access and express mindfulness practices. For example, a child can choose a color and draw a line coordinated with their in-breath followed by creating another line on their out-breath. Children can notice how it feels in their body after mindful breathing, and then draw the feeling onto a body outline or cut-out figure.

Focusing-Oriented Arts Therapy (FOAT) (Rappaport 2009)—a mindfulness-based approach that incorporates the expressive arts with Gendlin’s Focusing (1981, 1996)—helps to deepen the experience of mindfulness. The core elements that contribute to FOAT’s mindfulness foundation are: the Focusing Attitude—being welcoming and “friendly” toward inner experience, and Clearing a Space with Art—setting stressors aside and accessing a place that is “All Fine,” or separate from these stressors. From a mindfulness-based perspective, being able to create a healthy distance from thoughts and emotions with a witnessing presence is key, and the addition of art to the Focusing process facilitates this externalization and crystallization of emotions. Integrating mindfulness practices with Focusing-Oriented Arts Therapy (FOAT) (Rappaport 2009) provides an arts-based method for children and adolescents to learn the fundamentals of mindfulness skills—becoming more accepting of their inner experience, developing a healthy relationship with their emotions, accessing a place of wholeness, and cultivating both self-compassion and compassion toward others.

Before teaching mindfulness to children, it is important to cultivate one’s own mindfulness practice. Thich Nhat Hanh (2011) describes the importance of teaching mindfulness to children:

I have learned that the most important thing to transmit to the children is our way of being... So our presence, calmness, gentleness, and peace are the most important things we can offer them. Therefore, we need to really practice in order to have these things to transmit to them. (p.37)

This chapter provides an overview of research on mindfulness with children and adolescents, a brief summary of approaches that integrate art with mindfulness for youth, and a description of a week-long Mindful Art Program that integrated mindfulness and FOAT at the Omega Institute's Teen Camp in New York (Weiner 2012).

Theoretical Framework

Mindfulness and Art with Children and Adolescents

There is increasing evidence of the benefits of mindfulness for children and adolescents. Research has demonstrated that mindfulness training with children and adolescents leads to increased cognitive attention and learning (Biegel and Brown 2011; Flook *et al.* 2010; Siegel and Bryson 2011), social and emotional learning (Lantieri 2008), emotional self-regulation (Coholic 2011; Flook *et al.* 2010; Saltzman and Goldin 2008), resiliency and coping skills (Coholic 2011), overall psychological well-being (Huppert and Johnson 2010), and decreased stress and anxiety (Biegel *et al.* 2009; Burke 2010; Ryan 2012; Semple *et al.* 2010; Sibinga *et al.* 2011; Thompson and Gauntlett-Gilbert 2008).

The integration of art with mindfulness has also demonstrated positive outcomes. Saltzman and Goldin (2008) integrated art into the standard Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) curriculum for children (MBSR-C). They found that the use of metaphors and art helped the mindfulness exercises to be more fun and engaging for children. Coholic (2010, 2011) developed an arts-based mindfulness group with children that has been found to increase self-awareness, acceptance of feelings, emotional regulation, problem-solving, coping and social skills, and resiliency at school and at home. Coholic (2011) also found that mindfulness practices taught through arts-based methods were more "fun," engaging, and effective than the mindfulness practices alone.

FOCUSING-ORIENTED ARTS THERAPY (FOAT) WITH CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Focusing-Oriented Arts Therapy (FOAT), developed by Rappaport (2009), has recently been adapted for children and adolescents. Lee (2011) conducted research using FOAT and positive psychology with children in a homeless shelter, and Weiner (2012) designed a research grant using mindfulness and FOAT with fourth and fifth graders. Other Focusing trainers have also incorporated Focusing with art with children and/or adolescents (Marder 1997; Merkur 1997; Murayama and Yuba 1988; Neagu 1988; Novek 2009; Santen 1990, 1999, 2007; Stapert 1997a, 1997b; Stapert and Verliefe 2008).

Clinical Application

Mindful Art Program with Teens

With the collaboration and guidance of Dr. Laury Rappaport, I (Emily) have created a Mindful Art Program for children and adolescents that integrates mindfulness practices with FOAT. The program is based on both FOAT and the curriculum of Mindful Schools, a non-profit organization in the San Francisco Bay Area, which offers professional training, in-class instruction, and other resources to support mindfulness in education. The Mindful Art Program is framed within a wellness and prevention model to teach tools for stress reduction, relaxation, and compassion for oneself and others. The Mindful Art Program is also very much aligned with the Center for Mindful Self-Compassion, which combines skills of mindfulness and self-compassion (Neff and Gerner 2013). The program was piloted at the Omega Teen Camp in Holmes, New York, Summer 2012. Seven adolescents (ages 14–17) participated, and the class met for one hour and a half on five consecutive days.

OVERALL STRUCTURE OF MINDFUL ART PROGRAM

Each day included a mindfulness and FOAT exercise. We began with an opening ritual of sitting in meditation for five minutes. Because the teens had previous meditation experience, they were able to practice for this length of time. Groups new to meditation and/or mindfulness may need to begin with one to two minutes of mindfulness exercises, building up to longer periods with practice. At the end of each day, we concluded with a closing ritual of art sharing for 10–15 minutes; teens were invited to share anything from their art and/or art process that they wished to share with the group—but always with the option to “pass” and not share.

MINDFUL ART PROGRAM WEEKLY SCHEDULE

Day 1: Mindfulness Fundamentals

- FOAT Exercise: Clearing a Space with Art
- “All Fine Place” journal covers

Day 2: Mindfulness Fundamentals (continued)

- FOAT Exercise: Clearing a Space with Art
- Complete journal covers

Day 3: The Focusing Attitude with Oneself

- Self-compassion meditation and mandalas

Day 4: The Focusing Attitude with Others

- Self-compassion mandala group poems

Day 5: FOAT Exercise: Carrying It Forward

- Prayer flags

Description of Themes and Exercises

Days 1–2: Mindfulness Fundamentals and FOAT

- *Goals:* Create safety, introductions; mindfulness—to learn mindfulness tools for grounding, centering, and witnessing their experience; FOAT—to teach Clearing a Space with Art as method for stress reduction, healthy dis-identification with feelings, and access to an inner place of well-being.
- *Materials:* Tibetan bell, blank journals, pre-cut peaceful magazine images, inspiring words/quotes, pens, scrapbooking paper, glue sticks, glue guns, glitter glue gun sticks, scissors, etc.

MINDFULNESS PRACTICE: ANCHORS

After introducing ourselves and sharing our intentions for the program, I guided the teens through various mindfulness exercises (Mindful Schools 2010). The concept of having an “anchor” to the present moment was introduced. An “anchor” is an object of attention that helps to keep the mind from moving away from the present moment (like a boat’s anchor that keeps it from moving away from its docking place). I taught the teens three anchors—sound, breath, and body sensations—that we practiced on the first two days:

- **Sound (mindful listening):** “What does a boat’s anchor do? An anchor helps keep the boat right where it is, right? If the boat starts to drift away, the anchor pulls it back in. Sound can be your mind’s anchor to the present moment. When your mind starts to drift off in thought, the sound of the bell or the sounds in the environment can help bring your mind’s attention back to this moment, here and now. Let’s try mindful listening to the sound of the bell. See if you can pay attention to the sound of the bell from the very first moment you hear it until the sound is completely gone for you. Raise your hand when you do not hear the bell at all anymore” (*ring Tibetan singing bowl or bell*). Practice ringing the bell with mindful listening several times; share experiences of the exercise.
- **Breath:** “Your breath can be another anchor for your mind, helping your mind stay in the present moment. See if you can notice your breath near your nostrils. What sensations are there? Is it cool? Warm? Or what? Next, see if you can notice your breath in your chest. What sensations are there? Is it tight? Relaxed? Now, see if you can notice your breath in your belly. What sensations are there? Try to just notice and accept however it is right now. See if you can keep your attention and focus on your breath, for one full cycle (inhale/exhale). When your mind wanders, see if you can gently bring your attention back to your breath. The mind likes to think and have thoughts. There is nothing wrong with this. This is actually the mind’s job! However, sometimes it is nice to give the mind a rest or break from working! Remember—the goal is not to try to stop thinking; the goal is just to simply notice when your mind is thinking and gently bring your attention back to your breath.”

- Body sensations or the body scan (flashlight of attention): “Imagine you have a flashlight. Shine your flashlight down into your body. First, stand back... open the lens of your flashlight wide, and let the flashlight shine light on your entire body. See if you can sense your entire body as a whole. Then, come in closer... narrow the lens, and begin to shine the flashlight on different parts of your body. Shine the light on your feet. What sensations do you feel in your feet? Are they hot? Cold? Now shine the light on your ankles.” Repeat with each body part, scanning up the entire body (i.e. calves, knees, thighs, hips, bottom, back, belly, chest, shoulders, arms, fingers, neck, head, etc.).

SHARING

After practicing, the teens were invited to share how the experience was for them. I reminded them that the goal of this practice is not to have a certain type of experience, but rather to just notice and accept whatever experience is present. These mindfulness fundamentals then helped provide a foundation for going deeper into the mindfulness-based FOAT practices.

FOAT EXERCISE: CLEARING A SPACE WITH ART

Clearing a Space with Art teaches how to set stressors outside of the body (metaphorically) and to sense the place inside that is already and always whole, or “All Fine” (Rappaport 2009). I led the teens in a guided Clearing a Space (see Chapter 14, p.196). The teens were reminded that they were not “banishing” or “getting rid” of their issues, but rather, gently and lovingly setting them aside, just for now, in order to gain some healthy distance from them. I asked the teens to focus on four to five minor issues, rather than larger life issues, since this was a camp program and not a therapy setting. At the end of the guided Focusing, the teens were invited to create “All Fine Place” journal covers. The teens were reminded that it was OK if they did not feel “All Fine” or peaceful at the end of the exercise—and they could represent however they were feeling through the art.

SHARING

One teen, Mollie, excitedly shared her experience during Clearing a Space: “I imagined sitting in a peaceful place, near a lake I like to go. As I was setting things aside, I felt a breeze go by, and then I got ‘chills’...and I felt my body relax.” I explained that this is what is known as the “felt shift” in Focusing, and I encouraged her to express this felt shift into relaxation by drawing and/or writing in her journal.

Ria drew her “All Fine Place” as a beautiful landscape with a blue sky, a waterfall, and a periwinkle hummingbird hovering over it (Figure 18.1).

Ria shared that after she drew her “All Fine Place” in her journal, it felt “more real.” This is the power of the arts with Focusing—the art concretizes the bodily felt sense and helps it to “come alive” and become more vivid. The art journal serves as a tangible reference point and reflection of Ria’s internal experience, that she can carry with her and return to as a reminder.

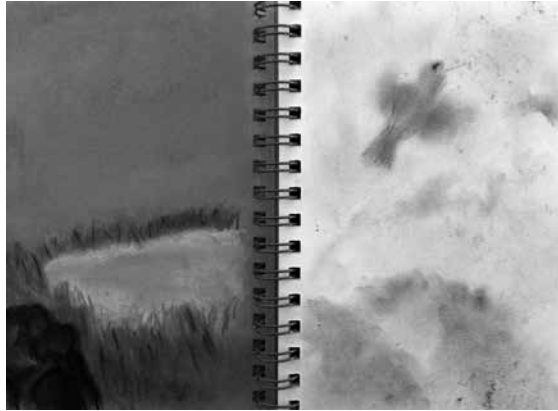


Figure 18.1: “All Fine Place” journal cover

Liza drew her “All Fine Place” as a picture of herself touching a lightning bolt, with a blue, iridescent light behind her (Figure 18.2).



Figure 18.2: “All Fine Place”: The Protector

She shared the following: “The first night here, our cabin was struck by lightning and everyone was saying we have a guardian angel—and it kind of freaked me out. But, it helped to put it down on paper, in a drawing. It made it less scary. I could see that we did have a protector...and I felt more relaxed after I drew it.” The act of art-making helped Liza to concretize the experience of having a protector, which helped the experience to feel more manageable and helped her relax. Clearing a Space with Art helped Liza gain some healthy distance from the experience and from the fear.

Mikhail drew his “All Fine Place” with a collage of peaceful nature scenes. Above his collage, he wrote the words: “Home, but in a different world.” Mikhail described how the word “home” was his “handle”—the word that matched the felt sense of his “All Fine Place”—but that it was different from his actual home. Finding the “All Fine Place” can allow teens to come home to their bodies and find a spiritual home within

themselves. They can experience a place of “inherent wholeness” (Rappaport 2009) or “fundamental okayness” (Ferraro 2012) within themselves that they may not have known was there.

Day 3: “The Focusing Attitude” with Oneself

- *Goals:* To cultivate greater self-acceptance and self-compassion.
- *Materials:* Tibetan bell, journals, construction paper for mandalas, markers, oil pastels, etc.

MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

I guided the teens in mindfulness practice for the opening five minutes of the meeting. The teens were encouraged to choose one anchor that they resonated with the most and to practice with it for the remainder of our meetings.

FOAT EXERCISES: SELF-GRATITUDE OR SELF-KINDNESS JOURNALS (WRITING); SELF-COMPASSION MEDITATION AND FOCUSING; SELF-COMPASSION MANDALAS (ART)

The teens were invited to start a daily practice of writing three things they are grateful for about themselves and/or three ways they can show kindness to themselves. Mollie wrote: “I am grateful for my creativity, open heart and perspective.” Liza wrote: “1. Eat right. 2. Accept yourself for who you truly are. 3. Know that you will be loved for who you are.” After journaling, I guided the teens in a self-compassion meditation with Focusing.

Self-Compassion Meditation and Focusing

Imagine someone living,¹ who you see regularly in your life right now; someone who it is easy for you to have loving thoughts and feelings about, and someone who helps you feel loved. Feel in your body how it feels when you think about and/or imagine this person standing in front of you. Imagine this person telling you loving things and giving you a hug/smiling at you. (*Pause for about 30 seconds*). Now imagine loving yourself the way this person loves you. See if you can tell yourself these same kind and loving things. See if you can give yourself a loving hug and smile. Many people often find it harder to feel and give love to themselves, as compared to others. It can take time to cultivate this sense of love toward yourself. Be patient, gentle. Even when you are not able to be loving toward yourself, see if you can find a way to be loving toward this part that is finding it difficult and learning how to love! Even if you don’t feel compassionate toward yourself right now, that is OK. Whatever you feel is OK... just notice and be accepting. Sense inside what it feels like in your body right now, and see if there is an image, word, or phrase that matches your felt sense.

Afterwards, the teens were invited to symbolize their felt sense from the self-compassion meditation in art by creating a self-compassion mandala (mandalas were also used in Day 4).

SHARING

The teens shared their experiences during the self-compassion meditation and/or their mandala.

Day 4: “The Focusing Attitude” With Others: Self-Compassion Poems

- *Goal:* To cultivate kindness and compassion for others.
- *Materials:* Tibetan bell, mandalas from previous session, strips of paper, pens, markers.

MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

As before, this took up the opening five minutes of the meeting.

FOAT EXERCISE: SELF-COMPASSION MANDALA GROUP POEMS

Each group member was given small strips of paper, one for each member of the group and one for themselves. The mandalas were arranged around the room so that members could walk around and stand in front of each one. I guided the teens: “As you view each mandala, see if you can get a sense of something about it—a quality that you can affirm. Notice the felt sense in your body. Write down a word or phrase on the strip of paper that matches your felt sense when looking at the mandala—and leave the strip of paper as a gift for the mandala’s creator, including your own. Remember to write only positive messages as gifts.”

Afterwards, the teens returned to their own mandala to receive their gifts. I guided them: “Notice the felt sense in your body as you receive these gifts from others and yourself. Create a poem using the words/phrases on the strips of papers. You can use the actual words/phrases written on the strips, some of them, part of a phrase, none of them, and/or add your own words and phrases.”

SHARING

Many of the self-compassion mandalas and accompanying poems centered around the themes of peace, love, interconnectedness, and acceptance of all emotions and facets of life (see Figures 18.3, 18.4 and poems below).

Self-Compassion Poem: Waves of Love and Light

May your mind flow like water
from the core waves of love and light
calming peaceful
relaxed
rich with energy and life—rushing power
Freedom.

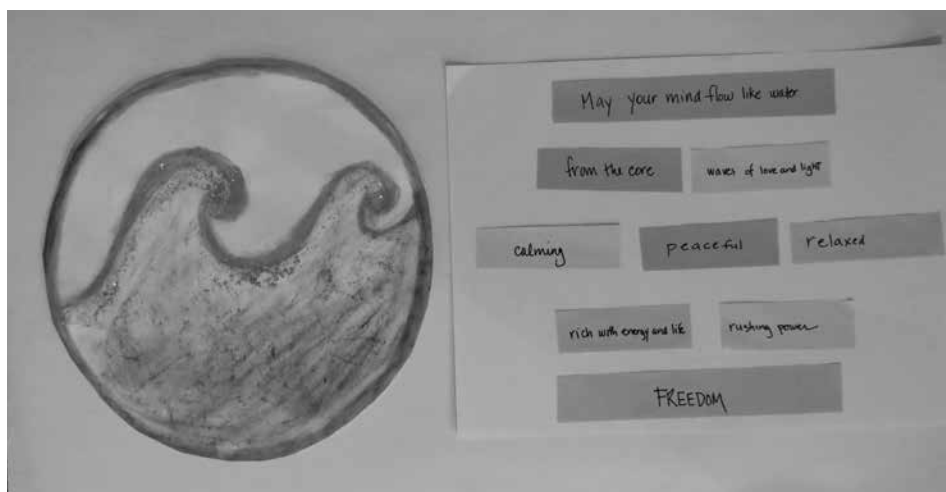


Figure 18.3: Self-compassion mandala: Waves of Love and Light

Self-Compassion Poem: Heartful Web of Life

Joyously, she navigates the many facets of being, through the colorful web of life. Her calming illusion, the sensation of being around her brings you on a journey of energy, power and inner peace. Together your elegance is nothing but interminable and heartful.

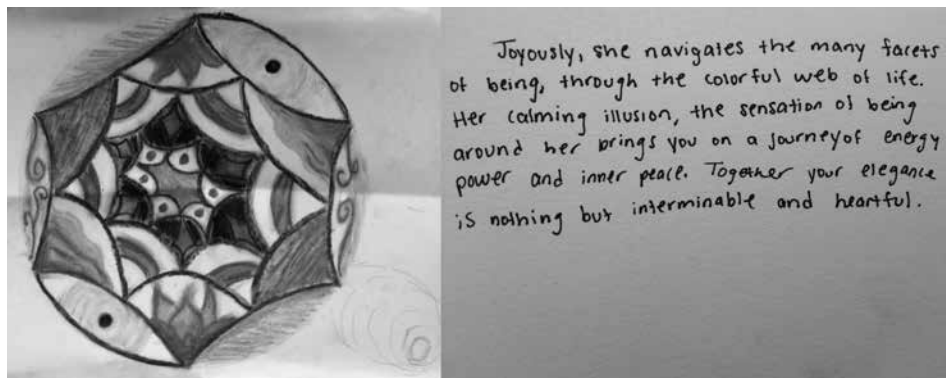


Figure 18.4: Self-compassion mandala: Heartful Web of Life

Day 5: Closing Ritual: “What I Want to Carry With Me” Prayer Flags

- *Goals:* To integrate the experiences from the week and identify tools to bring into daily life.
- *Materials:* Tibetan bell, small square pieces of cloth, string, glue guns, glitter glue gun sticks, jewels, markers, scissors, etc.

MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

Again, this took up the opening five minutes of the meeting.

FOAT EXERCISE: CARRYING IT FORWARD

I guided the teens:

Think and feel back over our entire week together. Remember first arriving here...all of the mindfulness and art activities we have done throughout the week. Ask inside: “What do I want to carry with me from the Mindful Art Program into my life?” Listen to the felt sense inside your body, and see what comes. See if there is a word, phrase, and/or image that matches this felt sense and/or represents something you want to take with you.

After the Focusing, the teens were asked to express the word, phrase, or image on prayer flags that we strung and hung together as one (Figure 18.5).



Figure 18.5: Prayer flags: “What I Want to Carry With Me”

SHARING

Many teens wrote variations of the word “peace”—“Inner Peace” and “Circle of Peace.” Another teen, Madilynn, drew a wishing flower (also drawn in her self-compassion mandala) and shared that her wish was for “everyone to find peace.”

Findings From the Mindful Art Program

In their program evaluations, almost all of the teens reported that the Mindful Art Program helped to decrease stress, and increase relaxation, self-compassion, and compassion for others. Five of the six teens completed program evaluations (one left early) and all reported that the Mindful Art Program helped them to decrease their stress levels. They also reported that the program increased their self-compassion and/or compassion for others. One teen reported, “During the course of the week my stress level has gone down so much and also meditation got much easier. This class really helped me see myself in a different light and increased my compassion for myself and others.” Two of the teens described feeling “calmer” and “clearer” after the class: “I liked that we meditated for five minutes at the beginning of each class because it was calming. I also liked making and writing in the journals... If I’m feeling under pressure, meditating or clearing my mind for a few minutes can make me feel better and more relaxed.” Another teen reported, “My stress level was very low in the beginning, but now my mind is cleared.” In addition, three of the teens reported that they felt less judgment and more acceptance of themselves, their own art and/or the artwork of their peers. One teen reported, “I learned not to be so hard on myself.” Another reported, “I learned that no one’s art is perfect, but accept what it is.” And another, “I didn’t ridicule myself and my art.”

Additional Suggestions for Pre-teens and Adolescents (ages 11–17)

Daniel Rechtschaffen (2012), who helped form the curriculum for Mindful Schools and their new year-long Mindfulness in Education Certification, suggests:

- “Counsel Practice”: The teens can break into small groups and each share in response to a specific topic, quote, poem, phrase, or question. During counsel practice, borrowed from Native American traditions, each teen shares for a set amount of time, uninterrupted by others. The teens do not respond to each other’s shares but rather practice a deep, mindful listening and witnessing presence.
- Tai Chi and Yoga: These mindful movement practices provide balance to the sitting during mindfulness and art activities. Expressive arts modalities—art, dance, music, sound, and gestures—can be integrated as a way to add movement and offer another non-verbal, fun, and active way to be witnessed.

Adaptations for Younger Children (ages 5–10)

- Shorter time frames for mindfulness and art activities.
- Concrete and directive art activities, for example, Clearing a Space Concrete (Rappaport 2009) in which the children symbolize their stressors using objects and put them inside a container.

- Movement activities and games using mindfulness metaphors. Examples include catching thoughts like butterflies in a net; thoughts swirling like glitter in a jar; thoughts going by like floats in a parade or sticks in a stream. These can all be turned into movement games and/or art activities.
- Parent/guardian participation and at-home practice.²

Conclusion

The earlier children and teens learn these mindfulness and FOAT skills, and the earlier they become reinforced neural pathways in the brain, the more easily they will be able to access and remember to use them later in life (Siegel and Bryson 2011). As Thich Nhat Hanh (2011) teaches, “We each have a seed of mindfulness, but we usually forget to water it” (p.16). Programs like these are planting and watering the seeds of mindfulness, social-emotional learning, compassion, and peace in children and adolescents. “The seed is already there. A good teacher touches the seed, allowing it to wake up, to sprout, and to grow” (p.15). Practicing mindfulness can help the innate seeds of unconditional presence take root and grow, first in ourselves, and then in the children and adolescents whose lives we touch. This unconditional presence is a way of being with—simply being with—whatever is here, now, with kindness. Children and adolescents who have these seeds tended to early in their lives, who receive this quality of presence from adults in their lives and learn how to treat themselves with this kind presence, will be more likely to bloom into joyous, compassionate adults.

Notes

- 1 Since the program was only one week and there would not be regular follow-up, I decided to have the teens focus on a living person in case there were unresolved emotions about someone who was deceased.
- 2 For school-based programs, it may also be necessary to keep the language and content completely secular (i.e. “mindfulness exercise” rather than “meditation,” Vibra-Tone bell rather than Tibetan bell, etc.).

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