

## Discussion Paper 3

### Mindful Educators, Mindful Kids, Peaceful Environments



#### Introduction

This discussion paper is one in a series designed to stimulate discussion and sharing of experience, amongst early childhood educators working with infants and young children who may have experienced complex relational trauma.

The focus here will be on the topic of 'Mindfulness' and how its practice may be useful in the early years education settings.



#### What is this thing called 'Mindfulness'?

Definitions of Mindfulness vary, but for the purposes of this paper, we will base our discussion on the definition by John Kabat-Zinn: ***"Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally."***

Mindfulness is currently a hot topic in Western psychological circles. This widespread current interest might lead to a perception that this is something new, but in fact this is an ancient practice common to Eastern spiritual traditions. As Western culture has become more aware of these traditional practices, scientists have become interested in verifying anecdotal claims of their benefits. Research findings of the neurobiological and clinical effects of mindfulness practice are increasingly impacting on the practice of mental health practitioners and educators.



## Research findings

Mindfulness training has been used successfully to treat a range of stress and anxiety related disorders.

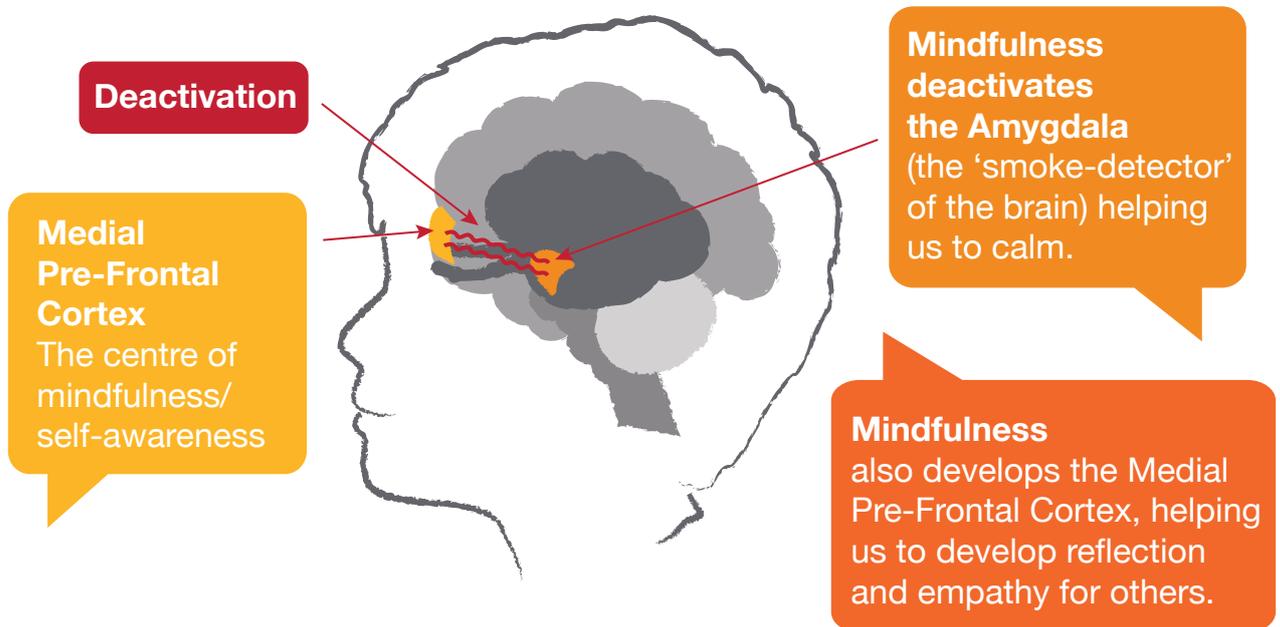


To date, research findings have shown that people who practice mindfulness can have:

- thicker cortical regions related to attention and sensory processing
- heightened empathic awareness
- more reactive immune responses
- better stress regulation
- enhanced relationships
- reduction in symptoms of anxiety
- improved attention and social skills



## Mindfulness and the brain



The Medial Pre-frontal Cortex is thought to be the 'mindfulness centre' of the brain. It has direct connections with the Amygdala in the limbic system. When we focus our attention in the moment, during the practice of mindfulness, the pre-frontal cortex is activated, and the Amygdala is able to 'stand down' from its work of keeping us on alert to danger. This allows us to be both calm and aware- an ideal state for learning.

Long-term mindfulness practice increases activity in the Medial Pre-frontal Cortex, precipitating growth of connections in this highly evolved and integrated area of the brain. Dr Dan Siegel associates the medial prefrontal cortex with nine forms of attunement: body regulation, attuned communication, emotional balance, response flexibility, empathy, self-knowing awareness, fear-modulation, intuition, and morality- surely qualities we would all want to develop in ourselves and in the children in our care!



## Mindfulness practice for early childhood educators

Mindful practice is already widely used in the early years environment. Early childhood educators offer mindful opportunities throughout the day by offering quiet time opportunities and a variety of relaxation places and poses. Some babies may enjoy some one on one contact time focused just on them, others enjoy time in a safe place where they can gurgle and play with their toes. Early childhood educators can take children through short visualizations where in a safe relaxed space, even perhaps with their eyes closed, listen to a story and imagine themselves in the story.

Mindfulness provides a much needed reprieve from busy activities and external environments that can be overwhelming for some children. Mindfulness allows an opportunity for everyone to slow down and take a breath.

It is helpful if early childhood educators are in a mindful place themselves so they can respond to the infants and young children through a mindful lens.



## Mindfulness practice for infants and young children

As young children slow down, breathe and focus, their minds tend to quiet, and a space opens up in their moment-to-moment experience. This allows them to see what's happening in and around them more clearly and to make wiser choices. Through this process infants and young children become more attuned to their inner and outer worlds- including to each other.



## Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What are the mindful practices and approaches that are already occurring at your early childhood setting?
2. How could you embed elements of mindfulness into your staff meetings?
3. What could you do to give yourself a mindful start to every day?
4. How could you give infants and young children a mindful start to their day?
5. What might mindfulness practice look like in a room of babies
6. What might mindfulness practice look like in a room of 2- 3 year children?
7. What might mindfulness practice look like in a room of 4-5 year olds.
8. How could you embed mindful practice into the daily routines for infants and young children?
9. How would you inform parents about, and involve them in, your mindfulness approach in your early childhood setting?