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# MINDFUL CLASSROOMS™

Daily 5-Minute Practices to  
Support Social-Emotional  
Learning (PreK to Grade 5)



James Butler, M.Ed.



# PRAISE FOR MINDFUL CLASSROOMS™



“*Mindful Classrooms* offers wonderfully concrete activities for teachers who want to lead mindful movement and breathing exercises with their students in the classroom. It’s the perfect complement to the daily guided sitting practices that more and more schools are embedding into the school day to benefit both students and teachers. This book can help educators foster a more mindful classroom in which to support their students’ social and emotional learning.”

—Laurie Grossman, director of social justice and educational equity, Inner Explorer, Inc.

“I have been inspired by the research presented that shows the positive effects of secular mindfulness in schools. It allows time for reflection while reducing stress and anxiety. Learning how to relax and concentrate on the task at hand is important and worthwhile for students, teachers, and even superintendents. I’m hopeful for *Mindful Classrooms*, and I want to encourage everyone to reflect on the importance of having a proper balance.”

—Dr. Paul Cruz, Austin ISD superintendent

“*Mindful Classrooms* has helped teach our students and staff to self-regulate when they are frustrated, angry, or anxious, or they need a brain break. Academics are very important but with the help of *Mindful Classrooms*, we are teaching whole-child life skills that will complement their academic work.”

—Mark Overly, Carrcroft Elementary principal

“My students have been more aware of themselves and how their attitude affects themselves and others. They’ve even told me ‘I was able to do this when I was angry, and I wanted to yell but I just breathed, and I worked through it.’”

—Callie Alldredge, Pflugerville Elementary third-grade teacher

“Students and teachers quickly embraced using *Mindful Classrooms* on a daily basis. Both groups stated it helps them be more centered and focused. It’s had a positive impact on my campus from kindergarten through fifth grade.”

—Genia Antoine, Pflugerville Elementary principal

“One of my favorite parts of the day is walking into a classroom where the teacher is leading a mindfulness activity. Seeing a room full of kiddos, sitting on the carpet, working on their breathing together, with the teacher modeling it with them . . . it’s really amazing to see. The *Mindful Classrooms* activities have been huge for our campus climate and we have even started incorporating mindfulness at our morning assemblies. It’s that important.”

—Brian Hill, Pillow Elementary principal

“I have experienced *Mindful Classrooms* as both a parent and an educator. Both my son and my students alike have learned how to use mindfulness as a tool to self-regulate. Professionally and personally I have learned how to use mindfulness as a way to manage everyday stressors that come along with being an educator, a wife, and a mother.”

—Allison Hinojosa, Gullett Elementary preK teacher and mom



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Daily 5-Minute Practices to Support  
Social-Emotional Learning (PreK to Grade 5)

James Butler, M.Ed.

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## Dedication

My amazing partner, Lindsey Wineholt, for her never-ending support and timely reminders for me to do some mindful breathing.

The students, families, and staff at Mangetti Combined School (Namibia); Winn Elementary, T.A. Brown Elementary, Barbara Jordan Elementary, and Gullett Elementary (Austin, TX) for allowing me to grow, become the best teacher I can be, and support my whole-child education beliefs.

The incredibly generous 274 friends, family members, coworkers, and strangers who pledged to support the original Mindful Classrooms Kickstarter project. This book is possible because of each one of y'all.



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# INTRODUCTION

As an educator, you know that teaching kids social-emotional and self-regulation skills should be “is” important for their development. But with more emphasis on testing and academics, it’s rare when schools set aside time for teachers to instruct their students in the use of these important tools. An ideal solution is to find short but effective lessons that fit easily into existing curricula. Mindfulness provides that solution.

## The Basics of Mindfulness

You may have heard the term *mindfulness* in the news or during professional development. It’s quickly gaining traction in the education world for its simplicity and usefulness. As defined by Jon Kabat-Zinn, a professor of medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical School and creator of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), mindfulness is “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.”

Put another way, mindfulness is a means to center your focus on a singular task (breathing, eating, listening) that clears your mind of all other thoughts. As adults, our minds are always racing. We’re thinking about having to go to the dentist after work and walking the dog and the important meeting we have to prepare for in two weeks. We also spend lots of time thinking about how embarrassing it was when we were late to the staff meeting or how we argued with our mother on the phone. Our brains get crowded with all these thoughts—past and future—which can lead to stress.

What we sometimes forget is that kids can feel this stress too. Their brains are also buzzing with worries about the past and future, which can make it hard for them to focus on what’s happening in class or keep their emotions in check.

Mindfulness practices offer simple and efficient techniques to bring one’s attention to the present moment. In doing so—when we temporarily release our worries about the future and past—we free up space in our minds for the here and now and charge up our abilities to concentrate. The best part is mindfulness doesn’t require hours and hours. A successful mindfulness practice takes just a few minutes a day.

Like most things, a mindfulness practice requires . . . well, practice. To reap the benefits, it’s important that the techniques are performed regularly, daily if possible. The more you do them, the easier they become. Starting a mindfulness practice can be difficult. Frequently, when new practitioners begin, they find their attention

pulled away by stray thoughts while trying to focus on something like breathing. As a result, they get disappointed and give up quickly. This is where the “nonjudgmental” part of Kabat-Zinn’s definition comes in.

It’s important, when crafting a mindfulness practice, to accept errors and move on. Let’s say you’re spending a minute focusing on your breathing. You’re doing well for about ten seconds and then you remember you must buy your cousin a birthday present. This is *going* to happen. It’s how our brains have been conditioned. Mindfulness encourages you to recognize that this thought happened, accept it, push it out of your mind, and pick up where you left off by focusing on your breath again. No blaming. No disappointment. Just acceptance. With diligence, practitioners find themselves able to go longer periods of time staying focused on their breathing. It becomes much easier not to be distracted by other thoughts.

By allowing yourself to periodically live in the moment and clear your mind of other thoughts, you can gain clarity, calm, and empathy.

And this is what we want to do for students. We want to give them the tools that help them channel their focus, practice compassion and empathy, and self-regulate their emotions.

## About This Book

In 2002, I started teaching kindergarten and prekindergarten in Austin, Texas. My teaching philosophy was always centered around compassion for my students and their families. But it’s one thing to show and believe in compassion and another thing to integrate those ideals into a classroom with guidance. I would have greatly benefited from some concrete exercises that supported social and emotional learning. What I didn’t realize at the time was that I already had the tools I needed to create those exercises.

I had been familiar with the concept of mindfulness for some time and had used various techniques to help me handle how overwhelmed I felt, both professionally and personally. I quickly saw how spending just a few minutes a day concentrating on my breath could help me calm down and focus on the matters at hand. It was a life changer. But I hadn’t yet discovered how these techniques might have applications in the classroom.

In 2009, I volunteered as a high school English and math teacher in Namibia. The conditions there were often harsh and, as a result, my students had overwhelming needs. I began using mindfulness in my classroom to help them (and myself) cope with adversities. This is where I really began to understand how these techniques could be a positive influence in school for students and teachers.

When I returned to Austin in 2010 to teach again, I began dealing with depression and anxiety, so I sought help. In therapy, I learned more specifics about mindfulness. Through a simple five-minute daily mindfulness practice, I was able to be present for everyone in my classroom. More than that, my practice helped me prevent my personal life from getting in the way of how I interacted with my students.

I was able to get to the root of their behavior rather than just deal with the behavior itself. My mindfulness practice also helped me recognize any biases or preconceived notions that I had about my students and how those notions might have been impacting how I was treating them. Overall, I became more compassionate in my instruction and more focused on my students' social and emotional growth.

I introduced mindfulness techniques to my classroom. The consistency of daily breathing was incredibly helpful in developing a sense of routine for my kindergarten students at a Title I school. I saw an increase in self-awareness and self-management, which led to improved responsible decision-making and social awareness. Students became more considerate toward one another, exhibited more patience, and made better choices. Mindfulness helped my students deal with difficulties they were having at school, and parents reported improved behavior at home as well. I tried the daily practice at a preK classroom in a non-Title I school and saw similar results. The Austin Independent School District noted the impact my efforts were having and asked me to implement my work district-wide. Currently, I am their SEL mindfulness specialist.

As of this writing, *Mindful Classrooms* is being used in over a thousand classrooms across the United States. Even with that kind of reach, more solid evidence is required to convince some school districts and administrators to adopt new practices. Which brings us to the scientific research behind mindfulness.

## Research About the Benefits of Mindfulness

The last time one of your students was angry and needed to calm down, you probably suggested that he or she stop and take a breath. Breathing is one of the oldest and best-known methods for helping someone regain control and avoid having a complete meltdown. And most of the time, breathing works. Why? It's not just a diversion. It also involves physiology and brain chemistry.

Although mindfulness entails many aspects (stretching, listening, seeing, and eating, all of which we'll discuss throughout this book), much of it revolves around breathing and focusing on breath. It's not a coincidence that this central tenet is also a popular tool when it comes to anger management. Minute by minute, breathing affects our bodies in ways we rarely think about. This is a key element of the science behind mindfulness and what it does for us.

We've been taught the basics of breathing: every inhale brings nourishing oxygen to our blood and every exhale expels carbon dioxide. But the benefits don't stop there. Breathing has been shown to have positive influence on respiratory muscle activity, heart rate variability, and blood flow dynamics. Consequently, there's a notable elevation in mood, release of tension, and pain relief.



Researchers have been testing the impact of mindfulness, and the initial data is very encouraging. Neurologists, in particular, have noted the effects meditation can have on the brain.

A study published in *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* showed that the amygdala—the part of the brain that fuels strong emotional responses and is generally responsible for fear and anger—is *less* active following mindfulness meditation practice.<sup>1</sup>

Though still in its infancy, scientific research on the effects of mindfulness is showing a lot of promise. And, in addition to the ways mindfulness can help students improve, the unsung perk is that mindfulness can easily be introduced by anyone who works with kids, regardless of his or her background.

Similarly, research published in *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* suggested that the prefrontal cortex—commonly associated with regulating emotions and behaviors and making wise decisions—is stimulated during periods of quiet meditation.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps most intriguing, a study published in the American Psychological Association’s journal, *Emotion*, indicates that the hippocampus—critical to memory and emotional regulation—is *more* active following breath-focused mindfulness training.<sup>3</sup>

Purely from a physiological standpoint, much can be gained by adding a mindfulness practice to *anyone’s* daily routine: an uptick in memory, emotional regulation, and decision-making skills just to start. From there, we can project how these gains would be a boon to any classroom.

## Benefits in the Classroom

Other studies on the effects of mindfulness show how the techniques can yield valuable results in a classroom setting. For example, one study examined a two-week mindfulness-training course and the effects it had on mind wandering and cognitive performance. The results suggested that mindfulness training improved both reading-comprehension scores and working memory capacity while also reducing the number of distracting thoughts. The researchers concluded that the use of mindfulness techniques is “an effective and efficient technique for improving cognitive function.”<sup>4</sup>

David S. Black, director of the BioMind Lab at Keck Medicine of USC, led a field intervention trial at a public elementary school with primarily lower-income and minority children. This study evaluated what effects a five-week mindfulness-based curriculum had on teacher-ratings of student classroom behavior. Results showed that teachers reported improved classroom behavior of their students (for instance, paying attention, self-control, participation in activities, and caring/respect for others) that lasted up to seven weeks post-intervention.<sup>5</sup>

William Kuyken, from the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Oxford, concluded that establishing and maintaining a regular mindfulness practice can lead to less stress while taking tests, which in turn can lead to better scores.<sup>6</sup>

Though still in its infancy, scientific research on the effects of mindfulness is showing a lot of promise. And, in addition to the ways mindfulness can help students improve, the unsung perk is that mindfulness can easily be introduced by anyone who works with kids, regardless of his or her background.

## How to Use This Book

My goal with *Mindful Classrooms* was to create an easy-to-use resource that's immediately accessible to all educators. Whatever your role—classroom teacher, resource specialist, paraprofessional, counselor, or any other type of educator—you will be able to inject the activities into the day without taking time away from your established curriculum. Use them at the start of the day, after lunch or recess, during transitions between subjects or activities, or at another time that fits well in your day.

The key benefits to these exercises include: better ability to manage strong emotions, increased empathy for others, heightened focus and memory retention, and better concentration.

The activities in this book consist of five different facets of mindfulness:

- Stretching
- Breathing
- Listening
- Seeing
- Eating

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### THE LANGUAGE OF MINDFULNESS

The most common mindfulness exercises involve meditation and yoga. However, I won't be using those terms in this book. Instead, I will talk about breathing and stretching. It's much easier to get kids to practice mindfulness using already familiar terms. Additionally, some view meditation and yoga as religious practices, but classroom mindfulness is secular and is not connected with any religion.

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These mindfulness activities are broken up into thirty-six weeks to encompass most full school years. Use the activities in order or as best fits your classroom, setting, or group. Each week's entry begins with a suggested weekly schedule of five mindful exercises for each day of the week. Each exercise takes no more than five minutes to complete.

You may choose to do as many of the daily exercises as you like. The best results come from doing at least one stretching and one breathing exercise a day. It can be fairly simple to start each day with three to five minutes of these exercises. Any time of day works but try to make that time consistent to help you and your students benefit the most from daily mindfulness.

Here's an overview of what each activity involves. You'll find specific prompts in each week's activities.

## Mindful Stretching

Stretching is a great way to kick off each day. The activities give a new stretch for Monday through Thursday, with review on Friday. Perform each stretch slowly. When you're just starting out, guide students into the pose by using the given scripts. Each pose is accompanied by three slow, deep breaths. You can modify the poses for students who have mobility concerns (see page 174 for suggestions).

## Mindful Breathing

Traditionally, mindful breathing is done through the nose (feel free to adjust this for students who find this difficult). Students should use normal in-and-out breaths, not deep breaths. (Unless, of course, a particular script or activity calls for it.) Try mindful breathing after stretching at the start of each day. At first, guide students through five deep breaths ("slowly breathe in, slowly breathe out"). As students improve, set a timer starting at thirty seconds and slowly work your way up to a minute.

While breathing exercises are typically done with eyes closed, be aware some students may not be comfortable doing this. Don't press them on the issue. Invite them to keep their eyes open but to focus on a single spot, rather than looking around.

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It's beneficial to have a timer handy when doing mindfulness exercises. You want one you can set for any amount of time up to five minutes (but not one that audibly ticks away the seconds; the noise can be distracting). My favorite is the Insight Timer app. It allows you to set any time increment, choose ambient sounds, and use a number of soothing bell tones to begin or end a breathing session.

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Scripts have been provided for different types of breathing. In *guided breathing*, you'll lead students through a breathing exercise, giving them verbal prompts that guide them to think about a social-emotional learning topic. This can lead to silent reflection on the topic or class conversation.

In *intentional breathing*, you lead students through basic breathing exercises to focus on their breath with intent. This helps kids (and adults) feel centered and can help during difficult times that might be caused by strong emotions. This type can also be done during transitions.

## Mindful Listening

Encourage students to listen for ambient sounds and either notice the qualities of what they hear or figure out what the sounds are as they transition from one activity to the next. This book emphasizes listening specifically for sounds of nature, nonliving objects, and humans in addition to general listening. Feel free to listen for other categories and/or to randomize the days when specific listening focuses are suggested. This activity is great for transitions between subjects or activities or before moving from one room to another. Mindful listening can also be used as a prompt for journaling, arts integration, self-reflection, and so on. Scripts for mindful listening are on pages 162–165.

## Mindful Seeing

Mindful seeing is also a great activity for transition. Encourage students to look around and notice their surroundings in depth and detail. Mindful seeing requires giving thought to every observation. This book emphasizes looking specifically for colors, shapes, and sizes of objects in addition to general seeing. Feel free to look for other categories and/or to randomize the days when specific sight focuses are suggested. Mindful seeing also can be used as a prompt for journaling, arts integration, self-reflection, and so on. Scripts for mindful seeing are on pages 166–169.

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### MINDFULNESS FOR DE-ESCALATING

Mindful listening and seeing are great strategies for helping escalated students calm down.

- Calmly ask students to start listening mindfully and to name the different sounds they hear. This can help bring students into the present moment and away from the space in their minds that might be causing the escalation.
  - Ask students to focus their eyes on something in their surroundings and to describe it in detail. You might prompt them: “What color is it?” “What shapes do you see?”
- 

## Mindful Eating

Mindful eating can be used during snack or lunchtime. Mindful eating involves taking one bite at a time and focusing on one sense for a period of time. For example, if students are given slices of oranges during snack time, instruct them to take a moment to look at an orange slice and make silent observations. What do they notice? Then tell them to slowly take one bite. Ask them to chew slowly and swallow that bite. Now, ask them to look at the orange again and notice any changes after that first bite. This activity is best done in silence, so students can focus on their food and then share their experiences with the bite(s). It’s a great way to start snack or lunchtime.

When mealtime begins with mindful eating, it becomes a calmer, slower, and more appreciative experience. When things are getting crazy in the cafeteria, try calling for a “mindful eating break” by ringing a chime and leading the cafeteria in one bite at a time for a few bites. It’s a great way to help students refocus in a nonpunitive way. Carrcroft Elementary in Wilmington, Delaware, created a mindful eating bulletin board for their cafeteria



using student art and phrases (for example, “One Bite at a Time,” “Slow Down, Focus on the Taste,” and so on) to help remind students about mindfulness in the cafeteria.

If providing treats for the class, please consider any limitations (allergies, religious exemptions, and so on) students may have. It’s not important that everyone eats the same thing. What matters is that students observe the experience of eating slowly.

Lunchtime can be a much-needed break for teachers, and they often eat separately from students. In this case, teachers can provide the prompts to students when they drop off students for lunch and then follow up afterward to see how the activity went. Scripts for mindful eating are on pages 170–172.

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#### PREPARING TO EAT MINDFULLY

For the first few weeks, bring some small snacks to class—raisins, marshmallows, and so on—being sure to provide only snacks that accommodate allergies, dietary needs, and religious observances. (Nuts are generally not a good idea.)

It’s best to bring food that naturally comes in a small form, so you don’t have to break it down. Raisins are great, because students can focus on a single raisin at a time. (It’s up to you if you want to pass out more raisins after the exercise is over.)

You can change up this food item each week or, once students become used to how this works, maybe try this exercise during lunch.

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## Getting Started

One of the best things about these mindfulness exercises is that they don’t require any sort of special equipment or preparation. Most stretches can be done within the space it takes to stand or while seated. You’ll want to make sure each student has enough space to fully lie down without touching anyone else for some of the more expansive exercises. Kids can do mindful listening, eating, seeing, and breathing from their seats. As noted earlier, you may want to have a timer handy (preferably a silent one, since ticking can be a distraction).

The scripts for mindful seeing, listening, and eating exercises are all located at the back of this book (see pages 160–172) and as downloadable reproducible handouts (see page 181 for information on how to download). Have copies of these scripts ready to go before the start of each exercise. Make notes on your printed scripts of any adaptations you would like to make to fit the specific topic of the week.

Throughout the book, you may notice that some students in the photos are using mats or are barefoot. These are both optional. What’s important is that the students are comfortable. If you don’t have carpeting, you can still do these practices on the floor or maybe take the students outside.

Before you begin mindful breathing exercises, remind students:

- Whether they’re focusing solely on their breath or concentrating on a specific topic, it’s okay if their minds wander. This is normal.



- If they find their minds have wandered, they can steer themselves back by taking a slow, deep breath, letting it go, and bringing their thoughts back to the task at hand.
- A wandering mind *does not* mean they've failed. In fact, when they recognize that their thoughts have wandered, they've succeeded in being mindful.
- If students are discouraged because they couldn't stay focused, assure them that the more they do these breathing exercises, the easier it will become to gently recognize their wandering mind and come back to the breath or task at hand. It only takes practice!

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Occasionally you may need to modify some of the exercises to accommodate students with varying abilities or change things up to add variety. Suggestions for modifying some of the existing exercises can be found on pages 173–174.

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As you begin any mindfulness exercise, ask all students to face one direction. For example, have them all face the front of the room toward you as you lead the practice. If the class is sitting in a circle, have them turn their bodies so they're all facing out once they've received instructions for the practice. This reduces the temptation of looking at their friends and trying to make them laugh. It also can promote self-reflection.

A great way to engage students is to have them take turns leading the mindfulness activities for the class. After you've established a pattern and students understand the exercises, ask for volunteers to take over for a day. It's empowering and promotes peer-to-peer learning. Don't force anyone to lead if he or she is not comfortable, but make sure everyone is given an opportunity.

Lastly, I hope you'll take advantage of this time for yourself by participating in these mindfulness activities with your students. Students can learn faster if new skills are modeled for them. It will be important for you to demonstrate the techniques to help them with their practice. Beyond that, keep in mind that the benefits of mindfulness are available to *everyone*. By establishing your own daily practice, you can boost your personal well-being, ground yourself throughout the course of the day, and find it easier to work with your students. You may even find yourself practicing mindfulness outside the classroom.

A great way to engage students is to have them take turns leading the mindfulness activities for the class. After you've established a pattern and students understand the exercises, ask for volunteers to take over for a day.

Every technique in this book can be adapted to a solo mindfulness practice. It's not necessary to spend thirty minutes sitting in silent darkness while focusing on your breath. Just a few minutes a day can make a tremendous impact on how we handle ourselves in the classroom. Mindfulness can be practiced:

- first thing after you wake up
- while you're waiting for coffee to brew

- instead of checking your phone for the hundredth time
- while moving from one place to another
- as you lie down for bed at night

The best reason to establish your own mindfulness practice is that students are more likely to “buy in” if they see you performing the exercises too. It might never have occurred to some kids that *your* brain can race a million miles a minute like theirs do or that you can get distracted too. Discussing this with students can be an important part of generating mutual compassion and understanding.

I hope you find these activities easy and fun to do with your students. I would love to hear about your successes with introducing mindfulness into your classroom. Please feel free to reach out to me at:

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Best of luck!

**James Butler**



# MINDFULNESS ACTIVITIES

Week by Week

