



THE MINDFULNESS TRIANGLE

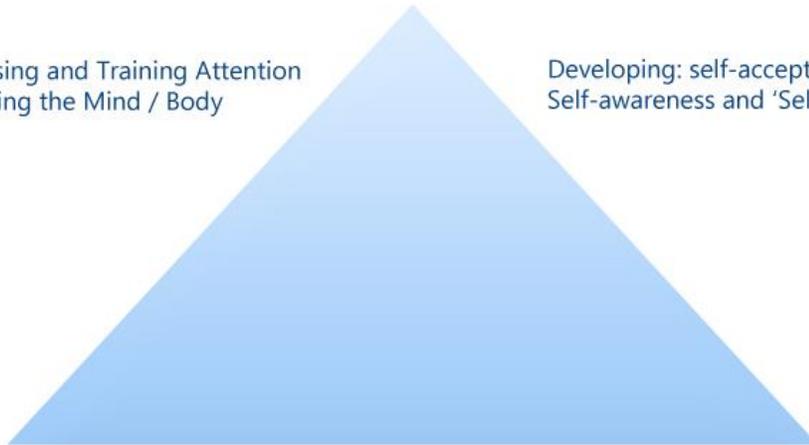
As a Classroom Teacher it is helpful to **visualise Mindfulness as a Triangle.**

Each side of the triangle has particular skills and practices you can teach.

Depending on the situation and your intention / need, you choose where to focus:

Focusing and Training Attention
Calming the Mind / Body

Developing: self-acceptance
Self-awareness and 'Self-compassion'



Cultivating Kindness, Appreciation and Positivity.

Triangle Side One: Focusing and training attention - and calming the mind /body.

Focusing and training attention supports calming and relaxing the mind / body in preparation for learning. Bringing the attention to the breath or the body and its senses – listening, smelling, etc. - calms the parasympathetic nervous system, while training the mind to be alert and focused.

It also helps children manage impulsive behaviour and gives them a sense of control over their brain / mind. You can further support this sense of control by teaching about key parts of the brain – particularly the functions of the amygdala and hippocampus in the limbic system and the pre-frontal cortex - and about how they affect each other – and about their impact on our behaviour.

The primary training tool is learning to direct the attention to the breath or to the body (or to sound or any of the senses). These tools include instructions such as 'notice your breath'; or guided instructions to notice sensations in one's body (body scan). **It's a bit like puppy training.** The breath / body focus is like your leash. You notice when the mind becomes absorbed in thoughts and feelings or pulled around by external distractions (as it inevitably will); and when you notice the mind tugging on the leash, then you gently return the puppy of your attention to the breath/body/senses. Don't keep the leash too tight (don't try too hard). Calmness and acceptance need a soft leash.





Begin with body awareness by guiding the children to find a gently upright and balanced **posture**.

Suggest they find balance on their sitting bones by gently rocking left and right, forward and back, until they find a balanced, upright position. Encourage ‘wiggly’ children to continue rocking gently – absolute stillness is not necessary. Being mindful of any movement that’s happening is better than trying to be absolutely still.

Guided instructions to relax the body / mind such as progressive muscle relaxations, visualising calm, peaceful places, finding inner peace and stillness are also very beneficial for children – **provided the teacher ‘normalises’ the usual thoughts and feelings that occur during these exercises!**

‘Focusing and training attention’ also includes:

- **Bringing intention to attention** and learning to direct ‘the flashlight of our attention’ where we want it and in the way we want it – e.g. a fine, sharp focus or a broad soft beam of focus;
- Knowing the **difference between focus and awareness** – both are necessary for learning;

Some children (and adults) say they “can’t do mindfulness” because they think their mind should always be completely still, quiet and calm. Thinking and distraction are normal. One can even be present when recalling the past or imagining / planning the future. What mindfulness does is to calm and quieten the everyday jumbled-scrambled-worrying-spacy thinking. This allows the children to discover that they are not their thoughts (or their feelings); it creates a ‘precious pause’, a quieter place where they can make choices about their thoughts, feelings and related actions.

Mindfulness creates a precious pause ...



....and helps children discover ‘almost’ moments:

“I almost hit my friend...

...but then I took a breath and calmed down and I didn’t hit her!”

Mindfulness doesn’t change **what** happens; it trains you to change **how** you experience ‘what happens’ – which creates the space to **choose a wise / skilful response** to ‘what happens’. That often leads to **changes in ‘what happens next’!**



Triangle Side Two: Developing self-awareness, self-acceptance and ‘self-compassion’*.

The primary training tool is learning to bring a gentle, curious, non-judgemental (kind) noticing to one’s thoughts and feelings – both as they come up quite naturally during mindfulness of breathing practice – and as they come up during the day. The attention is also directed to the way thoughts and feelings naturally relate to the breath (e.g. shallow / deep or slow / fast, etc.) and to the body (e.g. butterflies in the tummy, feeling ‘happy inside’, tight shoulders, etc.)

The teacher supports this ‘kind noticing’ by **allowing time for the children to talk about what happened during the breathing practice**. The teacher gently enquires and encourages the children to communicate their experiences. It is helpful to make time for this enquiry once or twice a week.

When children are encouraged to talk about what really happens during mindfulness practice, they will tell you they:

- Notice that thoughts and feelings come and go (like the clouds in the sky). This creates a space for them to let go of negative rumination and better manage anxiety: “I can have my thoughts and feelings without them having me.”
- Notice how thoughts and feelings form and how they change. This leads to greater awareness of context and ‘cause and effect’; children notice that thoughts and feelings can be influenced by data collected through the senses – e.g. a scary noise, a beautiful butterfly, a change in the weather, an expression on someone’s face; and by emotional memories.
- Realise that “everyone has thoughts and feelings similar to mine”. This normalises their inner experiences and increases empathy;
- Learn to be kind and compassionate to themselves by not judging / criticising their thoughts and feelings; a ‘kind mind’ develops resilience; an ‘unkind mind’ can lead to depression and self-harm;
- Can accept and tolerate difficult thoughts, feelings and experiences better. Developing ‘affect tolerance’ leads to less reactivity and more emotional maturity and resilience;
- Learn not to let difficult thoughts and feelings dictate actions;
- Notice they don’t feel good after they have done something ‘bad’ - or they do feel good after they have done something ‘good’. Noticing this develops their inner ‘moral compass’.

As they listen to others, they develop their listening skills, gain appreciation of differences and broaden their perspective. **Listening to each other also develops their social / emotional intelligence.**

From an educational perspective, when the children are encouraged to talk about their experiences, it engages their curiosity and interest and develops their vocabulary and language skills. Mindfully noticing thoughts and feelings can also help children learn to follow interesting and useful trains of thought, to notice novelty, to see situations from different perspectives and notice themes and patterns.

* Research by Christina Neff and others demonstrates that ‘self-compassion’ is much more important than ‘self-esteem’ in developing resilient children – see: <http://www.self-compassion.org/what-is-self-compassion/self-compassion-versus-self-esteem.html>]



Triangle Side Three: Cultivating Kindness, Appreciation and Positivity.

These practices are Social Emotional Learning tools which explicitly guide children to connect to themselves and others, develop positive qualities and build resilience. The primary tools include:

- Practices which intentionally generate feelings of kindness and compassion for oneself and others;
- Using positive guided imagery for relaxation and/or using positive imagination to improve anything from moods to test scores ;
- Intentionally noticing and re-calling 'positive' experiences – in at least a 3:1 ratio to difficult experiences – increases optimism, which in turn opens us up to new learning;
- Empathic listening and communication exercises;
- Gratitude / appreciation practices - including writing in a 'gratitude journal'.

Summary – the Triangle needs all three sides!

The three sides of the Mindfulness triangle overlap and support each other. As a classroom teacher of mindfulness, the mindfulness triangle will help you plan which aspect of Mindfulness you want to highlight in each session.



Put on your own
oxygen mask
before helping
those around you.

Teachers need to practice mindfulness too!

Many people, many teachers are naturally mindful. Nevertheless, developing a conscious mindfulness practice has enormous benefits for you personally, and will give you greater confidence to guide your students in mindfulness. You should always practice with your students.

Studies show that teachers who learn and apply mindfulness in their own lives benefit by:

- Improve their physical and mental health through better stress management / self-care
- Gain confidence in applying and teaching Mindfulness skills in the classroom
- Boost their enthusiasm and motivation for teaching
- Manage complex demands with increased calmness, skill and compassion
- Tune in better to their students and can respond with more flexibility.

"I find I am much calmer in the classroom and somehow that helps the children calm down. I'm not raising my voice as much. When problems arise, I seem to sort them out much quicker than before I began practicing mindfulness." Grade 5/6 teacher.