

# MINDFULNESS AT PRESCHOOL: MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING FOR EVERYONE

**By Karen Bonson, Early Years Leader, Gowrie Victoria Docklands**

At Gowrie Victoria Docklands we take children's rights and good health seriously. As early years educators, we acknowledge our role in promoting positive attitudes and habits for good health to families to achieve the best possible outcomes for children. This involves advocating for a holistic approach to health and wellbeing, which addresses physical, social and mental health.

Just as educators provide a wide range of experiences and strategies to support children's physical health, we also provide a range of strategies to support children's mental health, which we view with equal importance. The introduction of a mindfulness program has emerged, as somewhat of a natural progression of our long term work. The program has extended and complemented our earlier efforts to support children's strong sense of identity and empathy. The feedback from families has revealed that the benefits go beyond the service. Rewards have been significant for children and educators alike.

As early year's professionals we wish to create a program for children who participate in their own learning and develop a strong sense of wellbeing. The aim of the project is to support children in building resilience and to develop their roles as critical thinkers and problem solvers. By nurturing children's spirituality we seek to develop their wellbeing; which in turn increases their capacity to learn. We endeavor to provide children with the skills to take time to focus on the present, explore their feelings and their relations with others. Through mindfulness, children gain the capacity to increase attention, balance and compassion. The sessions allow us the time to identify, label and validate our feelings and emotions. It creates opportunities for us to develop a range of strategies to understand negative feelings and celebrate happiness; in short giving children a 'toolbox' for their mental health

and wellbeing. Those of us working or living with young children know, that not everything works all the time. We therefore need different strategies and ways of doing things.

The early years are a critical time for all areas of learning and development which has long been recognised by those working in the sector. Research supports the significance of this period for brain development as it is the time when the most neural pathways are formed and lifelong skills are developed. Therefore, it seemed appropriate that our mindfulness work should evolve within the 2–4 year old rooms, where educators spend a great deal of time supporting children as they

build relationships and deal with the challenges and delights of their increasing independence. Developing a strong sense of self, and an understanding of others, is an important life skill that should be encouraged as young as possible.

One of our kinder rooms runs a successful relaxation program, for the 2–4 year olds. Mindfulness is incorporated at a specific time into the day which ensures that children and educators have the opportunity for deep engagement or 'presence' (Rogers & Raiders-Roth, 2006). This allows children and educators to attend to feelings and communicate them effectively, reduce stress and create a community that is connected.

*"State parties recognise the right of the child to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health" (UNCRC cited in Child Rights Information Network, 2002).*





“This is my brain, it has a thousand lights in it, look”:  
incorporating mindfulness into our early years program.

Sharing information about the Mindfulness program with families is important, particularly when discussing mental health. Often there is a fear around this subject and the term has been misused and stigmatised. By involving families we have been able to highlight the positive nature of the program and emphasise how mental health is as important as physical health.

We have been careful not to introduce mindfulness as a form of crowd control or behaviour management. We began with the children and their prior knowledge, thoughts, interests and feelings. Through gaining an understanding of the children's ideas we have been able to create a mindful program that is contextually relevant and therefore more meaningful. Circle time has been a familiar space to facilitate the program. This is somewhere the children spend a lot of time sharing their thoughts and feelings. Most importantly, they are being listened to. Over time we have become more spontaneous in using mindfulness; identifying appropriate times of the day for small group work and even taking it out and about on our excursions; including laying on the grass, looking at the clouds and incorporating mindful feeling, seeing and listening.

Labelling what is occurring in the brain and the role of mindfulness to strengthen neural pathways, has been something which has been of great appeal to the group. Just as they enjoy strengthening their arm muscles, they enjoy strengthening their brain. We have raised the questions: What does your brain look like? What does your brain do? As always, the children have provided their own unique and interesting answers – from my brain looks like

bananas – to my brain is a jungle. A parent shared a very useful concept, from the work of Dan Siegal, which describes the flight or fight function of the brain. It has helped us to identify what is happening in the brain in moments of stress and when we ‘flip our lids’. Through the understanding that this is “what brains do”, children take a little less blame for “flipping their lids”, but a lot more responsibility for “popping their lids” back down. They have used their mindful toolbox to put their lids back down. Similarly, labelling, validating and sharing emotions has helped children to manage them more appropriately. Empathy is promoted as children listen to others describe their feelings and emotions.

During mindfulness we have noticed a strange and immediate calm, a sense of focus and purpose. Not only have children expressed feeling happier following these periods, but so too, have educators. Mindfulness is a time, not so much for clearing the mind, but focusing it on the now; allowing us to reset and energize for the rest of the day. Each day we spend from one or two minutes, to as long as 25 minutes on mindfulness time, according to mood of the group. Our toolbox is beginning to fill up with a range of hand and body techniques. We have created our own private imaginary spaces including a bubble – our bubbles can be taken out whenever we wish, need or choose. Some are kept in pockets, behind ears or just about anywhere. The children place their bubbles around them, they have painted them in their favourite colours; into these we have added several things which make them feel happy. We have placed something we love, something to touch, something to make us laugh, and something we love about

ourselves. The latter of these gave us an interesting insight into the children. Many struggled to find something they loved about themselves, often naming toys or things. Others were proud of their jumping or singing skills. This is an area we are keen to further expand and explore.

As these techniques become more and more familiar, they become easier to use. We have seen children implement them in their everyday lives, both independently and interdependently. Children remind one another of the techniques such as their bubbles. They identify when they have ‘flipped their lids’ and support one another to put their lids down. At other times children have simply sat and used their hand techniques, such as, running a finger up and down each finger of the other hand, tracing a line from one side of the hand to the other. Families have provided feedback on how these tools have been used at home and children have proudly taught their parents how to be mindful.

Educators have acted as both facilitators and co-learners, and in this way, the program has had a dual purpose of supporting children and educator's mental health. As the program expands and grows, we have combined it with our work on the Healthy Together Achievement Program (a government initiative to promote healthy lifestyles for all Victorians). We are beginning to share our work across the service and beyond. The more we connect with families, the more we understand the children as members of different communities, and the better our programs are informed. Our mindfulness program, so far, has created a unique space for children to better understand themselves and the hearts and minds of others.

*This article is underpinned by significant research. Please contact the author for more information on references, links and acknowledgements.*

*KarenB@gowrievictoria.org.au*