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How Old-School Toys Can Help Our Kids Practice Mindfulness

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As I gazed up into the crystal blue sky to track the dancing kite, I got lost in the moment. I forgot where I was and stopped dwelling on my to do list and other worries of the day. What exactly was that light, free calmness I just experienced? Well, we can consider it a type of mindful meditation.

Mindfulness can seem like hard work if we make it too complicated. Sure, you can download special mindfulness apps, listen to soothing meditative music, or spend time and money attending classes requiring equipment to reach that peak moment of pure bliss. But what if mindfulness could be simply found in a toy from our own childhood – one that does not require batteries or hi-tech remote controls or sensors?

Before we can figure out which type of toys will do the trick, we need to understand why that kite helped me feel so relaxed. When I was enthralled by the kite's colors and movements in the air, my attention was completely absorbed. Mindfulness is the act of focusing on the moment at hand in a non-judgmental way. It gives us an awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment. It also helps us accept what is happening without thinking about whether it is right or wrong, good, or bad. When we practice mindfulness, we are only aware of the present moment rather than dwelling on the past or worrying about the future. Essentially, focusing our attention is what helps free our mind from the many distractions that cause us stress and anxiety.

There are many different ways to practice mindful meditation, including [breathing techniques](#), yoga, guided imagery, tai chi, Qi gong, and transcendental meditation. All of these approaches involve directing our attention to a specific object, image, sound, mantra, or even our own breath.

Numerous studies over the years have shown how mindfulness improves our health and reduces stress. Additional studies have found that mindfulness helps children feel compassion, empathy, and optimism, improve self-regulation and organizational skills, enhance cognitive and academic growth, and address issues like aggression, ADHD, and anxiety disorder. Mindfulness also improves children's behavior. In schools where the Hawn Foundation's [MindUP](#) mindfulness curriculum is implemented, visits to the principal's office, incidents of bullying, and absenteeism declined.

Another really important aspect of mindfulness is flow, which is directly linked to happiness. [Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi](#), a professor of psychology, was the first to develop this term as "the intense absorption one experiences while working on an activity or task that requires concentration." The unique part of flow is that it leads to a sense of accomplishment and happiness, especially if you are learning a new skill or overcoming a challenge.

Besides the kite that instigated a mindful moment for me, what other old-school toys will lead to a similar effect on our children?

Spinning tops

Spinning tops have been around a very long time. In fact, they are one of the oldest recognizable toys found on archaeological sites. Interestingly, they were developed independently by many different cultures around the world, such as the dreidel used at Hanukkah time. Tops are designed to spin rapidly on the ground. Their motion causes them to remain balanced on their tip because of their rotational inertia. They were traditionally built of wood, sometimes with an iron tip, but are mostly made of plastic today. Simple tops can be spun using our fingers, but there are more complicated versions that use a string or rope coiled around its axis which, when pulled quickly, cause a rapid unwinding that set the top in motion. Staring at a spinning top will certainly grab your child's attention and keep them occupied for quite a while.

Building a house of cards

Have you ever tried to build a house made out of a deck of cards? It is no easy task. It is an activity that takes intense concentration, patience, and a steady hand. One expert site recommends that the builder take deep breaths and add the next card in that brief space between exhalation and inhalation. By incorporating the deep breathing and focus, we can see how mindfulness is essential when building a house of cards.

Dominoes

This is another old-school game that requires immense focus and steadiness. It also teaches children to not get too upset and discouraged if their line of dominoes gets knocked down, because they can rebuild their creation. Dominoes were originally created as a numbers game to align them flat on a surface based on certain rules. Over time, people started standing the dominoes up to design all sorts of patterns that would fall down in succession after the first one was knocked down. This became such a phenomenon that there are world competitions and records to try to break. Playing dominoes is the perfect mindful activity for children, and they will get such a kick out of the many patterns in which they can line them up – in circles, horseshoes, arches, number shapes, etc.

Kaleidoscope

A kaleidoscope is an optical instrument with two or more reflecting surfaces facing each other on an angle so that objects on one end of the mirrors are seen as a symmetrical pattern when viewed from the other end. This happens because of repeated reflection. The reflectors (or mirrors) are usually enclosed in a tube, often containing loose, colored pieces of glass or other materials that are reflected into the viewed pattern. When the kaleidoscope is rotated, the materials move around and create an ever-changing pattern of shapes and colors. I can remember getting so excited to look inside a kaleidoscope as a kid because you never knew what beautiful images you would find. Looking at colorful, mesmerizing patterns can grab anyone's attention for minutes on end, and is another wonderful way for our children to get lost in the moment.

Handheld ball maze

Typically thrown into kids' party favor bags, these toys can sometimes be considered quite junky. However, with a little creativity, they can be used as a wonderful mindfulness tool since they require quite a bit of focus and attention to maneuver that tiny little metal ball either around the maze or to secure it into one of the holes to win the game.

As you can see, we can revive some of the basic toys that we (or our parents and grandparents) played with as kids to help our children enjoy some mindful moments. The other bonus of these toys is that they are all fabulous alternatives to the many electronics that our children are spending way too much time on. Besides the mindfulness benefits, our kids will get a much-needed break from video games and texting to do something creative and hands-on, yet simple and relaxing. Each of these toys can also prompt a discussion about science, such as wind and weather for flying a kite or the physics involved in dominoes or spinning a top.

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