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Finding Ecohappiness in the Classroom

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By **Sandi Schwartz**

Children are struggling with mental health issues like stress and anxiety. In fact, child and adolescent mental health disorders are the most common illnesses that children experience under the age of 18. Prior to COVID-

19, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that one in five children had a mental disorder including stress or anxiety, and this has only worsened as the pandemic continues.¹

While much of these issues need to be addressed at home, there are numerous ways to incorporate effective stress reduction activities in the classroom to help children feel happier and calmer throughout the day. Nature-related mindfulness activities are particularly soothing, enjoyable, and easy to weave into the daily classroom routine. Students will hopefully carry these ecohappiness experiences with them beyond the classroom to use in their everyday lives to reduce stress and improve their mood.

Linking mindfulness and nature

Mindfulness is the act of being fully present in the moment in a non-judgmental way, according to Jon Kabat-Zinn,² the leading expert on mindfulness and creator of the Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. As children practice mindfulness, they begin to understand their bodies and minds better and learn how to be less reactive to thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations. They can develop a quality of attention and be present no matter what is happening around them. This helps them have more peace, ease, and balance in their lives.

Numerous studies over the years have shown the incredible impact mindfulness can have by helping to reduce stress and anxiety and increase attention and focus. Scientists have actually witnessed people's brains thicken in areas in charge of decision making, emotional flexibility, and empathy during meditative practices.³ The brain constantly evolves during our lifetime, most quickly during childhood. By helping children develop a mindfulness practice, we can equip them with an exceptional tool that will help them make better decisions, regulate emotions, and improve their understanding of the world throughout their lives.

Nature inherently induces mindfulness. Simple experiences like catching a glimpse of a vivid bird flying by the classroom window or observing a squirrel climb a tree spur mindfulness in kids. Nature is filled with features — such as colors, textures, patterns, scents, and sounds — that provide a multi-sensory

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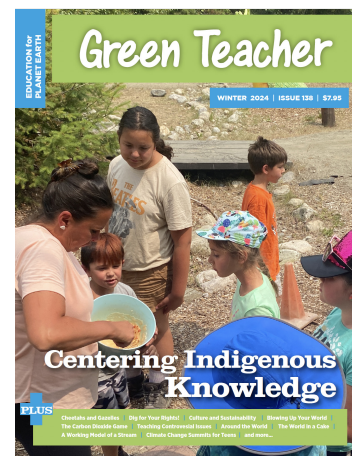
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experience. When observed in a mindful way, they can be quite soothing to children and give them a much-needed break during an otherwise hectic school day.

Teaching children this special technique of focused, mindful attention can help them in so many ways throughout their lives. By being aware of their emotions and learning how to shift their concentration, they will be empowered and feel in control of their thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations. From an early age, we can start to introduce some fun ways for kids to build up their mindfulness muscle. Focusing on awe-inspiring scenes of nature — whether in-person or through pictures, videos, and recordings — can engage children's attention and help them feel more mindful and relaxed.

How to add nature-based mindfulness to your lesson plans

You are probably wondering how you will find time for mindfulness given your already full schedule. Fortunately, there are many ways to easily work in nature mindfulness exercises throughout the day, including meditation, guided imagery, writing, background sounds, and more. The best part is that by taking a couple of minutes here and there for these breaks, the children will be rejuvenated and ready to focus on schoolwork again, as research shows that nature connection boosts creativity, curiosity, focus, productivity, and even test scores. Plus, there are many ways to use nature mindfulness as a bridge to subject-specific assignments.

Play nature sounds

A simple way to encourage nature mindfulness is to play some nature sounds in your classroom either during creative time or when transitioning from one subject to another. Birdsong, ocean waves, trickling water, calm rain, noises from a rainforest, and gentle wind are some of the most relaxing types of nature sounds.

You can bring the serene sounds of nature into your classroom by using nature meditation CDs, apps, or YouTube videos. For birdsong, check out <https://www.allaboutbirds.org> and <https://www.audubon.org>. Try out a few different kinds to see what the kids prefer. Some have music along with nature sounds and others are just the natural sound like rushing water or chirping birds.

You can also record your own nature sounds and play them in your classroom. This would make a great homework assignment: ask the kids to take along a recording device during a nature walk in their neighborhood or to a local park, or maybe during a longer school break when they are traveling to various places (e.g., a beach) on vacation with their family.

For a mindful break before starting a new task, ask your students to sit back and close their eyes while they listen to the relaxing noises they hear. Teach them how to use visualization techniques and their own imagination to feel the full effect of the nature sounds they hear. Take it one step further by asking them to write or work on a creative art project that reflects how the nature sounds made them feel and what they envisioned while listening to them.

Create a mindful nature connection corner

What do you do when kids are finished with their work early or just need a time out for disciplinary reasons? Having a spot in the classroom — a mindful nature connection corner — can do just the trick. Some schools now send students to a mindful-moment room instead of the principal's office for behavioral issues. While in the room, kids are encouraged to try deep breathing exercises and meditation to help calm themselves down and regain a sense of inner balance before going back to the classroom. You can create a special place in a corner of your classroom for students to decompress while engaging mindfully with nature.

Some elements to have on hand in this nature connection zone include the following:

- bowls filled with colored sand for kids to put their hands in and sift through
- small plants, as research conducted in schools has found that plants can lead to more positive moods, improved attention and concentration, and feelings of comfort⁴

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STAY CONNECTED



RESOURCE



- tabletop Zen garden to rake the sand
- box filled with a variety of natural textures that provide a soothing sensory experience, such as rocks, stones, wool, silk, sticks, pinecones, seashells, leaves, flower petals, and feathers
- books and magazines about nature
- animal and earth flash cards
- index cards with nature poems and quotes
- mindful coloring books with a nature theme
- essential oils to smell

Go on a nature poetry walk

Taking your class on a nature poetry walk is such a relaxing, creative, and mindful experience. The main goal of a nature poetry walk is to soak in the beauty of the surrounding environment and then turn that experience into something creative. Writing poetry requires inspiration, and nature is the perfect backdrop to find that spark.

A nature poetry walk has numerous benefits besides getting students' creative juices flowing. It gets them outside in the fresh air moving around a bit, teaches focus and how to be in the moment, and reduces stress. The key is to ask the children to use their five senses throughout the experience.

Here are a few pointers to get you started:

1. Before you go on the nature poetry walk, introduce your students to some nature poetry to get them interested and inspired.
2. Be sure to bring the following supplies: notebook or journal; pencils and pens; colored pencils, markers, or crayons (if they want to sketch the scene they are writing about); and a phone or camera to snap some photos.
3. Choose a destination for your walk. Try different types of places each time you go, such as different paths throughout the school grounds or a quick trip to a local park or nature preserve.
4. Once you arrive at the spot, explain to the kids that they should try and stay quiet and walk slowly. Stop along the way to ask them what they are experiencing through each of their five senses. It's helpful if they start to write down these observations in a chart sectioned off by each sense: sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste.
5. Enjoy the walk and go with the flow as far as what you do along the way and where you end up.
6. At the end of the walk, pick a place to sit down and let the group spend some time either writing their poetry or talking about it, especially if they are young and need some guidance. You can also wait until you are back in the classroom for the poetry writing time, but it is probably more effective if they at least start writing outside in nature.
7. To add some more creative flair to the nature poetry experience, they may enjoy drawing or painting a picture to reflect the scene depicted in their poem. Maybe they love singing and want to turn the poem into song lyrics. You can also snap pictures during your nature poetry walk and use those photos in a slideshow or as part of a collage around the poem.
8. Finally, enjoy sharing everyone's creations with each other and talking about the experience.

Use guided imagery meditation

Instead of just reading a typical story to your class, consider choosing a nature meditation for a multi-faceted experience that targets one or more of the senses and emotions to help children feel still and relaxed. Nature provides so many opportunities to stimulate mindfulness and engage the imagination. Children can easily feel the beauty and peace of nature when they read or listen to a descriptive story about it. The best part is that nature meditation does not always have to be performed outdoors. From visualizations to nature sound apps, there are so many ways to experience mindfulness using nature, even from inside the classroom. A great idea is to read a few guided imagery meditations focused on

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nature to your students and then task them with writing their own that can be shared with the class during future nature breaks.

Here is an example of a guided imagery nature meditation provided by Mellisa Dormoy, best-selling author, guided imagery expert, and founder of ShambalaKids. Simply read the following words in a soothing voice with a gentle pace, pausing often.

Incorporate nature games into the curriculum

There are many ways to instill mindfulness in children without them necessarily even realizing it. You can incorporate some nature games into the school day that also tie into the curriculum. Many of these activities require children to pay close attention to their surroundings so they can make observations about science and the environment.

Here are some activities to consider:

- Play the Cloud Imagination Game. Ask your students what they see in the clouds, such as animals, shapes, people, or other objects. Take it one step further and challenge them to create a story about the cloud images or paint/draw a picture of what they see.
- Watch for Wildlife. Stand by a window or take the class for a walk to look for birds, ducks, squirrels, rabbits, bugs, butterflies, and other wildlife. Have them record and group their observations. You can turn this exercise into a science report by having the students choose something they saw and then do research on it to share with the class. You can also bring along a bird or wildlife guide to look up different animals as students notice them.
- Play Nature Bingo or I Spy, or do a Scavenger Hunt. These are great ways to encourage children to be observant of nature as they try to identify different animals and natural elements on the list.
- Nature Math. Collect flowers, rocks, acorns, pinecones, sticks, leaves, etc. and use them for math lessons in which the children need to focus on the specifics, such as the orange leaf or the sticky pinecone.

Now that you recognize how beneficial nature mindfulness activities can be for your students, hopefully you will consider incorporating some of them into your lessons plans. Not only are these creative ways to teach children about core subjects like math, science, literature, writing, etc., but students will also find some ecohappiness during an otherwise busy and stressful school day.

Sandi Schwartz is an author, journalist, and mother of two. She has written extensively about parenting, wellness, and environmental issues. Her new book, *Finding Ecohappiness: Fun Nature Activities to Help Your Kids Feel Happier and Calmer*, is available now. Learn more at www.ecohappinessproject.com.

Endnotes:

- 1) Child Mind Institute, *Children's Mental Health Report*, 2021, <https://childmind.org/awareness-campaigns/childrens-mental-health-report/2021-childrens-mental-health-report>.
- 2) Jon Kabat-Zinn, Mindfulness.com, <http://www.mindfulnesscds.com/pages/about-the-author>.
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- 4) Yun-Ah Oh, Seon-Ok Kim, and Sin-Ae Park, "Real Foliage Plants as Visual Stimuli to Improve Concentration and Attention in Elementary Students," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 16, no. 5 (2019).
- 5) Mellisa Dormoy, "Guided Relaxation: Peaceful Butterfly Meditation," *Green Child Magazine*, March 12, 2021, <https://www.greenchildmagazine.com/guided-relaxation-peaceful-butterfly>. [Permission given to reprint meditation.]

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Contact information

Green Teacher
81 Cortland Way
Brighton, ON K0K 1H0
Canada

1-888-804-1486
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