

A parenting trend with an anti-guilt clause

[TRALEE PEARCE](#)

The Globe and Mail

Published Monday, Jan. 20 2014, 5:00 PM EST

Last updated Monday, Jan. 20 2014, 5:00 PM EST

Before she had kids, Daisy Auty enjoyed the sense of balance that came with meditating regularly. Then came sleepless nights, loud mornings and a bursting schedule. Now that her eldest is three, she's revisiting the practice – but with a style called mindfulness, which is considered more kid- and chaos-friendly.



Sara Marlowe includes her three-year-old son Beckett in her practice of mindfulness, which encourages being in the moment. (Fred Lum/The Globe and Mail)

She has signed up her 11-month-old up for a new class called Breathe In, Sing Out in the hopes that they'll both learn about staying calm.

"I've been having an internal struggle about the loss of that and really missing it. And needing it more than ever," she says.

The practice of mindfulness revolves around the easily digestible idea of slowing down and paying attention to the present moment. Used in formal meditation practices and clinical settings to help with anxiety and depression, meditation is now used in schools as a tool to help exam-riddled adolescents and teens – and their teachers – cope. And as researchers continue to measure its benefits, anecdotal evidence is mounting that it can help kids build social and emotional skills, including resilience and compassion.

The trend is skewing ever younger, to infants like Auty's. Sara Marlowe, the Toronto social worker and mindfulness teacher whose class Auty joined, offers songs, short age-appropriate activities, breathing exercises and ideas for parents on how to call their kids' attention to happy moments as they happen. She shares ideas, for example, on how to slow down at dinner and ask your children to really notice their food and to chat about good things that happened during the day.

This week, she has her youngest student yet: A three-week-old.

Clearly, a newborn is not a harried creature in need of a coping mechanism. But they are future adults and few of us can claim to be Zen all the time. And parents who think they're too busy to meditate are finding that the kiddie version of mindfulness works for them, too.

"The parents do them with the kids, it is a family activity, spending time together," Marlowe says. "The parents were also getting some practice themselves."

Toronto mother Ashleigh Cranston uses a few mindfulness tenets when her toddler twin girls get into a dispute or have a meltdown. Instead of a timeout, she'll gather them up and stand together holding hands with them and take 10 breaths. "It's a chance to reconnect," she says. "And calm down and smile."

In addition to classes, books offer concrete exercises for parents to try at home, including Eline Snel's *Sitting Still Like A Frog: Mindfulness Exercises for Kids (and Their Parents)*. Jon Kabat-Zinn, the Lexington, Mass.-based pioneer of mindfulness used as a stress-reduction tool, is the force behind the English-language edition of *Sitting Still Like a Frog*. After picking it up in the Netherlands, he took it to a publisher and wrote the forward; his wife voiced an accompanying CD. The Kabot-Zinns are updating their own book on parents-child mindfulness, *Everyday Blessings: The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting*, which should be out by the end of the year.

"It's a very optimistic perspective. You don't have to do anything," he says. "Parents are already unbelievably burdened and people are stressed beyond belief. If you have to do one more great thing to make it all meaningful but you don't have any time for it, then it's just cause for more anxiety and depression.

"But, when you're holding your baby, are you really holding your baby? Or are you texting?" In addition to not being in the moment yourself, he says, your baby is also reading all your cues.

He says mindfulness has been "coming up through the floorboards" in schools across North America. Teachers are spending professional development days learning how to be mindful with their students, students are signing up for after-school programs and instructors are being hired to lead one-off sessions.

Michael Eisen of Toronto's Youth Wellness Network has been invited to teach mindfulness and wellness sessions at various area schools. In the past four years, he says, the interest and uptake in his mostly one-day sessions has spiked.

"Schools are really starved for mental health and emotional programming," he says, adding that he'd like to see mindfulness one day enter the curriculum.

Randy Semple, an assistant professor in the department of psychiatry at the University of Southern California, is currently conducting a study on the effects of a school-based program.

"Kids are a unique population in that about two-thirds of the ones that need help with emotional or psychiatric issues never get it," she says. "They never get into the clinics. I had a light-bulb moment: If these kids aren't getting into the clinics, maybe I should go to them. Where are kids? Kids are in school."

For parents whose kids don't yet have access to these kinds of programs, mindful parenting can be as easy as picking a few times of the day to tune out the noise and tune into each other. On a recent morning, Marlowe says, her son initiated one of the practices she recommends in her classes: ringing a bell and doing a few breaths together before leaving the house.

"My son wanted to do seven breaths. Then, at the end, he took his car and zoomed it into the bell and off he goes," she says. "I don't stress. I follow his lead. If he wants to stop, I don't push it."

A parenting trend with a built-in anti-guilt clause? No wonder it's catching on.