



The
POWER
of
PRESENCE

A Guide to
Mindfulness Practices
in Early Childhood

Elizabeth Joy Erwin, EdD

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Mindfulness Practices
in Early Childhood**

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For children everywhere
As we plant seeds of joy and justice together
World peace begins with us





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Preface

The unacceptable has now become acceptable. I had just returned from an annual international conference on equity and early childhood education and care—this time in Copenhagen—when it dawned on me that we have entered into uncharted territory. How has the unacceptable become so tolerable?

Those were the very first words for the original introduction to this book: “The unacceptable has now become acceptable.” Who could have predicted that they would take on a whole new meaning when a global pandemic changed our planet forever? When I started writing this book, I had no idea a new reality would impact virtually every human being in the world just months later. At the time of printing, COVID-19 has required us to completely change the way in which we live. We work remotely (or not at all), schools are closed and classes are held online, nonessential travel has ceased, and public spaces are empty. People are grappling with how to feed their families and how to deal with a staggering loss of life within one’s own inner circle.

At the same time, people are rising to meet the unexpected demands of this new reality together and with optimism and strength. People are finding creative ways of staying connected to loved ones virtually. There is an unprecedented outpouring of public appreciation for brave medical personnel, first responders, and other everyday heroes. We are seeing tremendous individual and collective generosity from within our communities and across the globe, reflecting, in my opinion, the heart and soul of humanity. I wonder if this global crisis has presented us with an unprecedented opportunity to turn our attention inward as we face uncharted waters and navigate them together. It seems like now is the time to slow down, invite silence, and to (re)mind ourselves that there is no place like home. The home to which I am referring is the place within ourselves where we can find comfort, ease, and inner peace despite what is happening all around us. It is my hope that the practices and ideas offered on the following pages will spark joy, elevate well-being, and promote a deeper sense of personal inquiry as we collectively and consciously plant seeds of mindfulness at home and around the world. It’s about time.

Before COVID-19, one of the concerns I grappled with was how the education and care of young children has become utterly unrecognizable. As a mother for twenty-four years and a teacher educator for more than thirty years, I feel as if words are completely inadequate to describe the precious gifts that children are. And yet young children, who deserve to be the most protected and nourished, do not have the kinds of spaces, places, and positions they deserve in our schools, particularly in Western societies.

I remember visiting an early childhood center in Copenhagen and seeing the words for *kindergarten* in Danish beautifully handpainted on the wall. The words translate to “gardens where children grow.” I recall smiling as I thought about how the early years of childhood are a celebration of unbridled joy, but then found myself wondering when such a party begins for children in the United States, given the increasing expectations placed on teachers to endorse standardization and conformity in their classrooms. The early years (from birth to age eight) are a magical time when wonder, curiosity, discovery, and creativity thrive. And yet teachers, families, and others knowledgeable about early childhood are increasingly facing pressures to remove the very pillars that make young children feel safe, joyful, confident, and competent.

The opportunity to write this book and confront many of these issues could not have come at a more perfect time. When the editors at Gryphon House approached me about writing a book to translate research into practice on the topic of mindfulness, I jumped at the invitation. At the same time, I recognized that addressing the concept of being present within an early childhood context requires an in-depth, critical examination of larger, complex issues in the world today. Luckily, the team at Gryphon House agreed, and *The Power of Presence* was conceived.

There seem to be numerous books on mindfulness and children flooding the internet and bookstores, but this is the first one (as far as I know) that offers an in-depth inquiry into mindfulness practices and early childhood education framed within a social-justice perspective. So, if you are curious to know even a little more or are a seasoned student (or teacher) of mindfulness practices, then it may be no accident this book has crossed your path.

The vision for this project is to deepen our lifelong journey of inquiry and to transform our teaching by exploring the practice of being present. The target audience is early childhood professionals, with a distinct focus on teachers of all backgrounds and experience levels, including global neighbors, who are invested in early childhood education and care.

Additionally, I hope this book will reach and appeal to other adults who care deeply about young children, including parents; grandparents; caregivers; practitioners across a variety of education-related disciplines, such as psychology, occupational therapy, nursing, and so on; yoga teachers; and university students. Especially in the West, teachers are encountering growing pressures inside the classroom with an increasing focus on academics and assessments. They are also facing pressures from outside the classroom as they engage in work that is undervalued in pay and esteem. This book has been

designed for early childhood educators and others who are often faced with unrealistic demands that affect how they teach and take care of young children.

Many of the ideas are sparked by wisdom from ancient and native cultures, which I have learned through travel and teaching around the world. I wonder if one of the reasons there is growing interest in mindfulness is because people, particularly in the West, feel like they have lost their way. I imagine a world in which we would not need calming kits or quiet spaces in our early childhood settings because an understanding of mindfulness is deeply embedded into the fabric of daily living, as it has been in ancient traditions and contemplative practices for thousands of years. It is possible to challenge the unacceptable in early childhood. I remain optimistic that early childhood education and care can be the healthy and flourishing gardens for young children they were always intended to be.

My sense is that not only is this possible, it is nonnegotiable. It's about time.

Acknowledgments ○○○

It has been said that when the student is ready, the teacher appears. I have also heard that when the teacher is ready, the student appears. That is exactly what happened the day Andrea Wesol was hired as my graduate assistant. The impeccable timing, which coincided perfectly with the writing of this book, was no accident. We had wanted (and planned!) to work together two years earlier when Andrea first began her graduate studies at Montclair State University. As synchronicity would have it, things did not work out at the time, but fortunately everything fell into place when it needed to. Andrea was the perfect match for this project, given her passion for teaching, curiosity about early childhood, and her commitment to social action. She never missed a beat even though the pace was fast, the timelines were short, and the literature reviews dense. I relied on her meticulous research skills and attention to detail, while also appreciating her warmth, intelligence, dependability, and focus. Not only is Andrea a fast learner and a deep thinker, but she also openly shared her thoughtful insights and constructive criticism throughout all stages of the writing process. Deep gratitude goes to Andrea for all of this and so much more. I think of her now as a treasured friend.

I realize how fortunate I am to be surrounded by a wide circle of friends who inspire me through their own mindfulness practices. The diverse voices from the field, many from caring confidants and amazing former students, brought to life the chapters of this book and, I think, added an important personalized perspective. Heartfelt thanks goes to everyone who took the time to share their candid personal stories, which added a dimension of depth and clarity to this entire project: David Aveta, Alan Berger, Christina Bernal, Alyssa Blackman, Donna Bogart, Karen Carter, Bianca Fairley, Gabriella Gonzales, Corrine Harney, Sandra K., Alyssa Kovach, Yajaira Leon, Dana Lowe, Gabriella Martucci, Carissa Olivi, Minal Rosenblum, Ana Sanchez, Natalie Traverso, Sarah Veniero, and Andrea Wesol. Many thanks go to graduate assistant Lisa Bethel, who was a huge help in the final stages of editing and whose patience, perseverance, and good humor on Zoom calls were invaluable. The stunning artwork by Liana Chenik, also a former graduate student, impeccably brings to life the wonder, joy, and beauty of childhood. I am deeply honored that Liana chose to share her exquisite drawings with all of us in this way. Thank you, Liana. Wholehearted gratitude also goes to the longtime and trusted friends who were kind enough to offer feedback on early drafts of the manuscript or provided important original contributions on mindfulness practices for this book: Annie Bien, Donna Bogart, Gerry Costa, Lindsay Hilscher, Debby Kaminsky, Priya Lalvani, Susan Lederer, and Christer Ohlin. Thank you for your friendship and generosity in sharing your expertise so others can learn from you like I have.

Recognition is due to dear friends Leslie Soodak and Stephanie Teague, whose guidance nourished me when I needed it most. Were it not for the love, wisdom, and generosity of others whose friendship provided the perfect balance of support and care to carry me through this year, it is hard to imagine where I would be. Although too many to

acknowledge by name, a gigantic and sincere thank you to the many circles that continue to nourish my soul: BEMER family; Ashtanga yoga community; academic and international colleagues; and, most importantly, the steadfast, loving, and dependable bonds of a wonderful extended family.

The road across one's lifetime is never driven alone, and so I wish to acknowledge all the wise teachers—past and present—who have helped me navigate and steer through triumphs, speedbumps, and everything in between. A special thank you to Eddie Stern and Jeffrey Lally. The well of gratitude is not deep enough to express what their teachings and inspiration have meant to me for more than a decade. And to the many graduate students along the way who have served as copilots during the journey—a warm and sincere thank you.

Working with Gryphon House has been exceptionally smooth, exhilarating, and a delightful experience. Of particular note, Executive Editor Stephanie Roselli was simply first-rate. Not only was she incredibly knowledgeable, efficient, and responsive, Stephanie also provided everything an author could ever want. Whether it was resources, guidance, clarity, and much more, Stephanie always delivered with warmth and a sense of humor. I feel extremely fortunate to have had this incredible opportunity to work with Stephanie and the amazing team at Gryphon House.

Although unconventional, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the musical sensation Train for the powerful reminder that no one travels alone on this planet. So when I look to the sky—thank you to Mom and Dad for their loving presence, then and now. Profound gratitude goes to Michael's love for making me smile and Bill's gift for always showing up and lending a helping hand. Bill is my hero because most run from burning buildings, but Bill runs toward them. It is a total privilege to have in my life a daughter like Alyssa Beatrice Blackman. I appreciate her brutally honest feedback and tremendous encouragement (YGTM) throughout the writing of this book. Our shared love of teaching, learning, travel, yoga, children, books, culinary adventures, and much more has brought magical moments of laughter and tears of joy, and for that I am eternally grateful.

Introduction ○○○

How This Book Is Organized

The central organizing idea for this book is time. The following anchoring principles are deliberately, yet delicately, threaded throughout each chapter:

- Mindfulness is a practice, an ongoing journey, not an end goal or destination.
- Teaching and learning are intricately connected; there cannot be one without the other.
- Reflective personal inquiry is an integral part of any mindfulness practice in which beliefs, thoughts, and questions are critically examined and reexamined.
- It is not possible to teach mindfulness practices to young children if we do not have our own personal mindfulness practice, but it is best to learn about being present from young children themselves.
- Families are the most important and steady aspect of a young child's life. Home-school partnerships are at the very heart of early childhood education and care.
- The term *classroom* is used throughout this book as a metaphor for where young children learn and grow. The classroom is not meant to be narrowly conceptualized as only the four walls in a school, but rather as representative of the larger world in which children learn and grow.
- Young children live in a state of presence and joy when they are nurtured and loved.

The Power of Presence is organized in eight chapters within three distinct sections. Although each chapter can be read and understood on its own, I suggest you read the book sequentially because each chapter sheds new light on key ideas. At the beginning of each chapter, a special quote introduces the chapter content and inspires questions about what is to come. Each quote has been purposely selected based on the personal meaning it holds in my life, as well as the intersecting connections it has to concepts and ideas presented in the chapter.

Throughout each chapter, I offer an original and authentic perspective on being present. I translate research into practical applications and highlight diverse voices from the field about the intersection of mindfulness, teaching, and learning. Chapters also include a compilation of recommended resources, a menu of options for teaching inclusively, mindfully, and equitably:



Children's Corner: children's books to inspire, elevate, and educate young learners throughout the early years through the use of children's literature



Caregivers' Corner: a treasure chest of resources and tools geared to families, teachers, and others who care about the well-being of children



Take It to the Classroom: simple child-tested ideas that can be easily implemented and adapted for home or classroom use

These resources provide a wide variety of practical teaching ideas and innovations and correspond to chapter content.

This book is an invitation to embark on a journey together—a journey of being present for and with young children. When we broaden our understanding of the complex landscape of early childhood education and care, we inform our teaching and mindfulness practices. As we recognize what is at stake, we can (re)turn to what really matters.







breathe in blue skies

The early years are a magical time when curiosity and creativity blend into learning and discovery. And yet families and early childhood educators face growing pressures that jeopardize how children naturally live, learn, and flourish. It is about time that we promote and preserve young children's safety, confidence, joy, and meaningful connection to the world.

The Power of Presence: A Guide to Mindfulness Practices in Early Childhood offers insight and information to transform our teaching by learning how to pause, notice other beings and surroundings, and simply be. Learn ways to cultivate joy, elevate well-being, and engage in a deeper sense of inquiry, both personally and with others—young and old. Learn ways to consciously plant seeds of mindfulness at home, in the classroom, and around the world. Learn how to:

- develop and foster a deeper sense of awareness,
- cultivate a culture of mindfulness and climate of joy in your classroom and beyond,
- maintain an inclusive classroom community where all children matter and thrive, and
- engage in critical conversations and practices of justice, dignity, and humanity.

By working in partnership with young children, we can create a brighter and healthier planet—one that is rooted in justice and joy. Through individual self-reflection and collective mindfulness practices, children and the adults in their lives will experience a greater sense of calm, awareness, and focus in learning and in life. Together with young children we will be able to breathe in blue skies and soar to new heights.



Elizabeth Joy Erwin, EdD, is professor of education in the Department of Teaching and Learning at Montclair State University. Her research and teaching focus on early childhood inclusive education and mindfulness practices. She is published in prestigious academic journals and has authored multiple books and chapters on advancing justice for young children with disabilities, partnerships with families, and global educational initiatives. She currently lives in New York City, where she practices yoga and meditation every day.


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