



Make the Connection

Nurturing Experiences and Toxic Stress

5 Steps for Brain-Building Serve and Return

Step 1: Notice what your child is looking at, pointing to, listening to, etc., and show them that you are paying attention too.

Step 2: “Return the serve” with comforting words and hugs/kind body language that show you care and notice.

Step 3: Name what is going on. Say the name of what your child is doing, what they are eating, what they are looking at, how they are feeling, whom they are talking to, etc.

Step 4: Take turns, making sure to give your child time to think and say something else back to you.

Step 5: Practice and reinforce endings and beginnings of activities, helping your children recognize the start and stop and sequence of events through the day by saying things such as “all done!” or “now we are starting to tie our shoes!”

Mindfulness for You!

- Deep belly breathing: put your hand on your belly and inhale deeply as you count to four, feeling your belly rise. Pause at the top of your inhale, then exhale for a count of six, feeling your belly contract. Repeat five times.
- Progressive relaxation: intentionally contract all of the muscles in your body. Beginning with your toes and moving up to your head, relax your muscles.
- Mental body scan: beginning with your toes and moving up to your head, notice any tension in your body and intentionally relax those areas. (This technique is especially helpful to ensure that you are calm and ready before attending to a task such as a diaper change.)
- Intentional refocusing: take a few moments to bring your mind into the present. For example, without moving, notice 10 items of the same color. Or, using your five senses, notice the sensations you’re experiencing.
- Experiment with being present during an everyday activity, such as washing the dishes. Notice the temperature of the water, the feel of the suds, and the sound the water makes on the dishes. Focus your attention on your physical movements.
- Sit for five minutes during the day and close your eyes. Pay attention to the sensations of your breathing. Count your breaths up to 10, and repeat until the five minutes are up. If your mind wanders—which it probably will—acknowledge the thoughts and bring your focus back to your breath. Try not to judge your thoughts, feelings, or sensations.

Mindfulness for Children ☺!

- **Fire-Breathing Meditation**

Goals: to notice breathing and hone visualization skills

Invite children to sit with eyes closed. Encourage them to inhale slowly, imagining warm air filling their lungs like a soft breeze. Then tell children to exhale slowly, as if they are releasing a spark into the air. With each inhalation, children slowly breathe in warm air, and with each exhalation they transform the tiny spark into a fire.

In a gentle voice, ask children to picture the glowing fire in their minds.

After several breathing cycles, change the image.

Now ask children to slowly breathe in cool air and exhale a cloud hovering over the fire. With another exhalation, imagine rain slowly falling from the cloud to extinguish the fire. Add a “sss” sound to the breath to hear the sizzle of the fire burning out.

- **Down to the River**

Goals: to become aware of physical sensations in the body and hone visualization skills

A ‘body scan’ helps children visualize the gradual movement of sensations throughout the body, zeroing in on physical sensations as they move from toes to head. In this body scan, children take an imaginary walk to a river.

Have children lie down on their backs in a comfortable place with eyes closed. Ask them to breathe slowly and imagine that they have turned into an aquatic creature like a beaver or a frog.

Guide children through an adventure in the water (what plants or other kinds of animals might they encounter? Where might the current take them?), bringing attention to the sensation of water on their toes, feet, legs, belly, chest, shoulders, arms, hands, fingers, and cheeks as you do.

Ask them to think about the temperature of the water and the way it might feel to swim as this kind of animal.

When the exercise is done, slowly direct children back to shore with a few centering breaths before they open their eyes.

Then, invite children to share details of what they imagined on their journey.



- **Animal Yoga**

Goals: to bring awareness to the body, develop balance, and strengthen muscles

Combine slow, intentional breathing with yoga poses adapted for children. The cobra, down dog, tree, and child poses are perfect to introduce strengthening and breathing.

Help the children visualize each plant or animal as they do the pose and breathe.

- **Breathing Buddies**

Have each child lie down on the floor on their backs, and give each of them a stuffed animal. Tell them to place the stuffed animals on top of their bellies. Have them breathe in silence for one minute, and feel how their stuffed animal ("breathing buddy") slowly moves up and down with their breath. Have them also note any other sensations that they feel.

Have the children imagine their passing thoughts turning into bubbles and floating away. Having a "breathing buddy" will make this form of meditation friendly for the children, allowing them to see that they can have fun without being wild.

- **The Squish and Relax Meditation**

While the children are lying down with their eyes closed, tell them to tighten each muscle in their bodies, starting with their toes and moving all the way up to their heads. Have them hold each tightened muscle for a few seconds before fully releasing it and relaxing their bodies. This activity will help the children loosen up their bodies and minds. This is also a very effective method to teach children how to stay in the present moment.

- **The Heartbeat Exercise**

Ask the children to jump in place for 60 seconds. Have them sit down and feel their pulses with their fingers. Tell the children to close their eyes while feeling their heartbeats, focusing on their breath and seeing what else they notice changes within their bodies.

- **The Bell-Listening Exercise**

To do this exercise, ring a bell and ask the children to listen to the noise of the ringing as it slowly decreases in volume. Have the children raise their hands when they feel like the ringing has completely stopped. Then have the children continue to remain silent for one minute, paying close attention to any other sounds that are present in the room once the bell is no longer making any noise. Afterward, ask each child one by one to tell you every sound that they noticed during that time. This exercise helps teach children how to connect to the present moment and pay close attention to their senses.



Resources

Serve and return

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/serve-return-interaction-shapes-brain-circuitry/>

<https://www.albertafamilywellness.org/resources/video/serve-and-return>

<https://meltdownstomastery.wordpress.com/tag/serve-and-return-interactions/>

Toxic Stress

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/three-core-concepts-in-early-development/>

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/toxic-stress-derails-healthy-development/>

Mindfulness

<https://www.rd.com/health/brain-myths/>

<http://kidsrelaxation.com/uncategorized/spider-man-practicing-mindfulness-and-increasing-focus/>

<https://positivepsychologyprogram.com/mindfulness-for-children-kids-activities/>

<https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/mar2018/rocking-and-rolling>

<https://www.developgoodhabits.com/how-to-practice-mindfulness/>

APPS

1. Aura

This is a great app for people who are on the go. Every day, it delivers quick three-minute meditations for people to get the short burst that they need.

2. Breethe

You can use Breethe all day for motivation and guidance in your mindfulness practice. Breethe helps users keep up with their mindfulness from when they wake up to when they go to sleep.

3. Buddhify

This app offers a variety of meditations that have different themes. You can pick a meditation that matches your current feelings. For example, if you are feeling overwhelmed, you can pick a meditation that addresses that. If you are feeling anxious, you can listen to a calming meditation to help you ride it out.