

Mindful Eating for Whole Health and Well-Being

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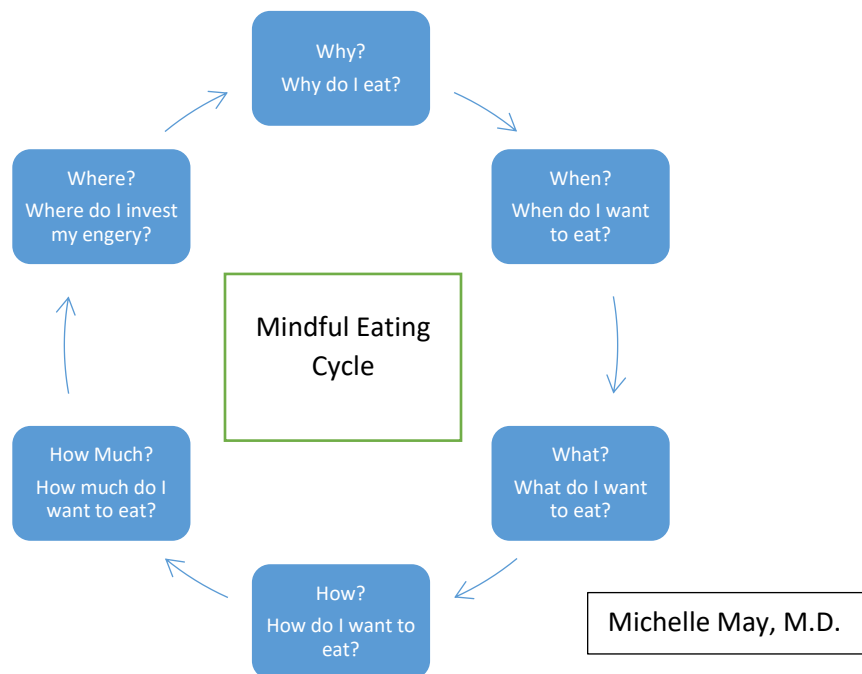
One may wonder why a yoga mindfulness-based early childhood program would include mindful eating. We included this component because yoga and mindfulness aim to address whole health and well-being. Eating is a wonderful way to practice mindfulness as a healthy practice to care for our bodies. Beginning these healthy mindful practices early is especially important as eating practices begin very early for children. Eating can be a joyful experience for both children and the adults caring for them. As a caregiver the guidelines to follow *when feeding children are to provide the time, place, and food* for children's meals. As an early childhood teacher, you may not provide the food, but you can be an important model and share education with parents and families for healthier food choices to provide to children. The child needs to decide if she is going to eat and how much. This is referred to as the *division of responsibility*. Some helpful tips to remember in feeding children to support them in mindful eating:

- Children (birth – 5 years) are typically born with the ability to regulate their food intake to meet their energy needs - respect their hunger and fullness cues
- Do not use food as a reward
- Do not force children to finish all of the food on their plate or in their lunch bag
- Model enjoyment in eating and savoring the food
- Sit and eat with the children during mealtimes
- Use phrases that help not hinder children's mindful eating of food

What is mindful eating? When we talk about mindful eating we refer to the practices of paying attention in the present moment, without judgement and with curiosity, when choosing,

preparing and eating food¹. When you practice mindful eating you experience each bite of your food because you are eating with presence, intention, and awareness. As adults, the goal of engaging in mindful eating is to recognize our non-hunger triggers for eating, identifying non-hunger needs in more effective ways rather than eating, eating for satiety, and choosing food for nourishment and enjoyment. With adults, mindfulness training is associated with decreased food cravings, food binge eating episodes, and improved dietary intake. In one study of women, paying attention to the food eaten, mindfully eating, was found to reduce the amount of high-energy dense food items eaten and decreased energy intake compared to women who did not receive any instructions for tasting the food². It may be helpful to begin your journey with mindful eating by using the “Mindful Eating Cycle” developed by Michelle May, M.D., who developed Am I Hungry?[®] Mindful Eating Programs and Training.

Mindful Eating Cycle



What about mindful eating for children? Children learn that sweet foods are not bad for you (i.e., removing the judgement) but instead learn how to consume food in healthy ways and with healthy portions. When you engage in eating food mindfully, you invite children to bring awareness to the foods they are choosing, preparing and eating. Children learn that food is more than just filling you up. You then engage your senses to explore, savor, and become curious about food. This exploration and curiosity can then lead to more enjoyment with food.

¹ Pierson, S., Goto, K., Giampaoli, J., Wylie, A., Seipel, B., & Buffardi, K. (2016). The development of a mindful-eating intervention program among third through fifth grade elementary school children and their parents. *Journal of Health Promotion, 14*, 3, 70-76.

² Alliro X., Miragall, M., Perdices, I., Banos, R.M., Urdaneta, E., & Cebolla, A. (2018). Effects of a brief mindfulness eating induction on food choices and energy intake: External eating and mindfulness state as moderators. *Mindfulness, 9*, 3, 750-760.

Mindful eating also supports listening to your body cues and signals for fullness and hunger. Teachers model and children learn that to pay attention to these cues to know when they should start and stop eating.

What are the benefits of mindful eating? Research suggests that mindful eating interventions with elementary school children, teens, and adults can strengthen attention to hunger and fullness cues, reduce emotional eating, and is associated with enjoyment of preparing and eating food. These benefits of practicing mindful eating may also extend to improvements in self-management and self-acceptance. Mindfulness helps to move away from viewing food as “good” or “bad” but instead helps to view food as eating for nourishment and with enjoyment, which can lead to a healthier relationship with food³.

It may be helpful to remember to support your own and the children you care for in practicing mindful eating by incorporating the SAGE mindful eating approach. We have provided suggested activities to do with young children to learn these mindful eating practices following the SAGE approach.

SAGE – Savoring, Active Contribution, Gratitude, Education

developed by Helen Maffini with MindBe Education, modified with permission.

<https://mindbe-education.com/mindful-eating-with-children/>, retrieved on December 26, 2018.

Savoring – Children are naturally curious and will share their reactions about the food they eat. As an adult we can become reactive about children’s likes and dislikes for food. In modeling the non-judgement part of mindful eating, it can be helpful for you, the adult caregiver, to pause and not offer an immediate response. Model healthy eating with curiosity. Focus on your own eating. For example, slowly put the broccoli into your mouth and chew it carefully. Comment what you are noticing. For example, you can say, “This green broccoli is crunchy.” If a child does not want to eat the broccoli, simply notice, and ask the child what they observe about the broccoli or other foods on their plate. In a study of 3-10 year old’s participating in a 4 week mindfulness intervention of having children savor their food and mindfully eat their food for 4 days each week was associated with young children consuming more typically not preferred unfamiliar foods (celery, cauliflower, and garbanzo beans) compared to children who did not receive mindfulness prompts⁴. Part of engaging in mindful eating is eliminating distractions during meal times. Turn off the TV and actively model bringing all of your awareness to the feeding experience.

Ideas to practice:

- Have each child complete the Mindful Eating Activity – Savoring Your Food Worksheet

³ Brewer, J.A., Ruf, A., Beccia, A.L., Essien, G.I., Finn, L.M., van Lutterveld, R., & Mason, A.E. (2018). Can mindfulness address maladaptive eating behaviors? Why traditional diet plans fail and how new mechanistic insights may lead to novel interventions. *Frontiers Psychology, 9*, 1418.

⁴ Hong, P.Y., Hanson, M.D., Lishner, D.A., Kelso, S.L., & Steinert, S.W. (2018). A field experiment examining mindfulness on eating enjoyment and behavior in children. *Mindfulness, 9*, 6, 1748-1756.

- Have a Mindful Snack
 - During snack have different items in a bowl or bag for the children to see. Have each child pick one thing from the bag or bowl. Invite the child to pause, observe it, smell it, and taste it slowly.
 - Invite the children to close their eyes and then ask them what does it taste like?
 - You can offer berries and nuts and then have them talk about the different aspects of these foods.
 - Mix them up and then ask, what happens to the taste when they are mixed together?

Active Contribution – Research supports increasing children’s likelihood of trying and eating foods when they are asked to help prepare and grow these foods. Along with practicing fine motor skills when cutting vegetables and fruits, young children can practice mindfulness. You can ask children to notice the colors, textures, and aromas of food as they grow and prepare the food. This will help young children learn about the different ways that food changes as we process food. Children can be involved by setting the table, tossing the salad or washing produce.

Gratitude – Cultivating young children’s awareness of appreciation for the food they eat is a wonderful mindfulness practice. While eating snack or a meal ask the children to think about all of the people and things that contributed to the food. Ask them to say a thankful message for these people, the sun, and possibly the water that helped to grow the food. Say thank you to the farmers that helped grow the food. For example, you can say, “I am thankful for our cook for preparing our lunch”.

Education – As mentioned in the beginning, it is important to develop healthy eating practices while also eating food with enjoyment. Part of developing these healthy eating practices is becoming informed of the nutritional qualities of food and bringing more awareness, without judgement, to why we eat certain foods. Research supports avoiding food as a reward. Remember that in practicing mindful eating we are removing judgement. When you say, “If you eat your vegetables, you can have the cookie”, this may imply that the child should eat something unpleasant or gross in order to eat something delicious and yummy. Instead model how yummy vegetables taste.




Think about the eating habits you have developed. Are there eating habits you want to change? How do certain foods make you feel? Again this focused attention on what and how much you are eating, your eating habits, is not to bring about guilt or shame. It is a way to become curious about the choices you make and the choices of the children you care for.

For young children, think about the ways that you are providing healthier choices during snack and mealtimes. The USDA Choose MyPlate has resources for providing balanced foods and ideas for engaging children in healthy eating practices.

<https://www.choosemyplate.gov/MyPlate>

Mindful Eating Activity – Savoring Your Food

When you practice mindful eating, think about how your food looks, tastes, sounds, feels, and smells.
You can draw pictures of what you notice or write words that come to mind.

<p>Taste How does the food feel in your mouth? What does it taste like?</p> 	
<p>Smell What does your food smell like?</p> 	
<p>See What colors and shapes do you see?</p> 	

Touch

What does the food feel like?



Sound

Does your food make a sound?
When you eat it is it crunchy?

