

Best Mindfulness Meditation Practices for Children: A Content Analysis of Evidence-Based Interventions

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Background and objectives

According to recent meta-analytic findings, mindfulness meditation is a promising approach in supporting young children's cognitive and social-emotional development. We found a significant moderate effect of mindfulness practices on executive functions of typically developing children (Takacs & Kassai, under review). Similarly, in another meta-analysis mindfulness meditation was found to be effective in reducing ADHD symptoms: hyperactivity and inattention (Vekety, Logemann, & Takacs, in preparation). In the present study we would like to analyze the content of the evidence-based mindfulness interventions from 19 studies that were included in these meta-analyses.

Methods

In order to investigate the content of the trainings ten program components (based on Zenner et al., 2014) were examined: breath awareness, working with thoughts and emotions, psycho-education, awareness of senses and practices of daily life, group discussion, body-scan, home practices, kindness practices, body practices like yoga and mindful movements, and additional material.

Results

The preliminary analyses revealed that most programs utilize a wide array of different components. The most frequently used components were the following: every program taught breath awareness, for instance, "ocean breath" and "breath counting" exercises (Napoli, Krech, & Holley, 2005), followed by practices with thoughts and emotions (e.g. "cloud head exercise" (Crescentini et al., 2016)) (included in 74% of the programs), and sensation-based meditation which was utilized in 58% of the programs (e.g., "melting ice exercise" (Wimmer, Bellingrath, & Stockhausen, 2010) or mindful eating (Waldemar et al., 2016; Viglas, 2015).

Discussion and conclusion

As compared to methods developed for adults, young children meditation programs teach mindfulness through utilizing several game-like or story-based mindful activities including bodily sensations and less home practice and psychoeducation. It seems that instead of longer sitting meditations, observing one's sensations is a widely used and promising channel for children to learn mindfulness. Exercises targeting different age groups (preschoolers, primary school children), the length of the interventions and tasks for children with developmental deficits will also be discussed. The results of the present content analysis are intended as a guideline for mindfulness program developers, teachers and parents by highlighting age-appropriate exercises from evidence-based interventions.