

**Mindfulness strategies** are a part of any quality early childhood education program; they just are not traditionally labeled as such. For example, teachers are employing mindfulness strategies when they *describe* children’s actions aloud, *ask* open-ended questions, and *acknowledge* children’s efforts to engage in their community in positive ways.

When implemented with fidelity, common quality teaching practices such as these encourage mindfulness as a habit of mind that develops and strengthens the brain’s *social, emotional, and cognitive* skills.

Mindfulness strategies support brain development in several ways:

1. **Promotes integration - differentiation and linkage:** development of all parts of the brain as well as building the connections among areas within the brain. When our brains are differentiated, and linked, they are believed to be integrated, a state which supports physical and mental well-being.
2. **Supports executive function skills:** the ability to plan, initiate, organize and carry out tasks while regulating emotions, resolving conflicts and shifting gears when necessary. Focal attention is the key driver to learning and is integral to developing these “school readiness” skills.
3. **Allows for intrapersonal attunement:** tuning into one’s own interior landscape, including thoughts, feelings, and sensations. Noticing “what’s inside.”
4. **Allows for interpersonal attunement:** being able to tune into the mental and physical state of another. Noticing “what’s there.”
5. **Supports the development of the prefrontal cortex:** most notably, attuned communication, fear modulation, physical regulation, emotional regulation, response flexibility, insight, empathy, intuition, morality.

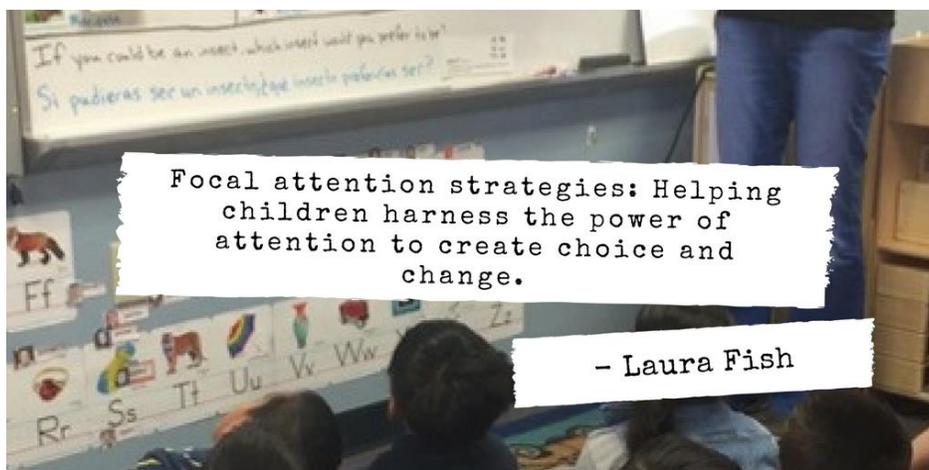
## But What Is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness may be understood as having two components: the quality of **focal attention**, and the state of mind of **openness and receptivity** to what is there. Perhaps more specifically, a way I like to define mindfulness is *paying attention on purpose with non-judgment, compassion, and loving-kindness*.

**Focal attention** is a key component of mindfulness as it promotes learning or affecting change of any kind. When *focal attention* is engaged, the brain generates the growth of new cells, or neurons, and the *connections* between those neurons are strengthened. *Focal attention* is believed to be foundational for the development of the five brain benefits listed above.

**Openness and receptivity** are also key components of mindfulness. When the mind is in an *open, receptive* state, the brain is more integrated, thus promoting health, well-being and the spaciousness that cultivates the strengthening of the mind and brain.

Both components of mindfulness are unpacked here, beginning with **focal attention** strategies, which can be incorporated across daily activities and common preschool routines.

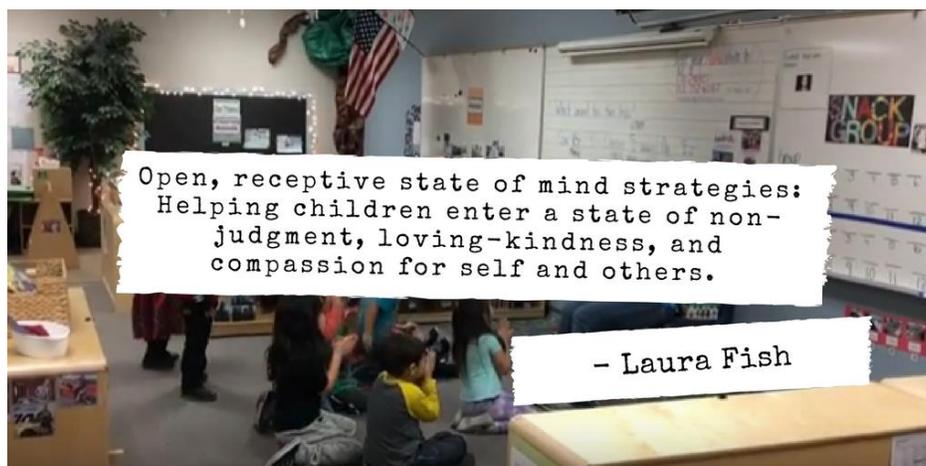


Focal Attention Strategy	Example	Brain Benefit
<b>Narration/broadcasting/parallel talk:</b> describing aloud what the child is doing and/or what they may be thinking/feeling.	Teacher: Looks like Jamie is creating a pizza out of playdough!	Just like adults, children go through many daily tasks on “autopilot,” without really tuning into what they are doing. <b>Narration</b> helps prime the brain to engage <b>focal attention</b> , bringing children into the present moment where they may carry out their play with the awareness, which in turn, promotes learning.
<b>Reflection:</b> repeating back what the child says and/or imitating what the child does.	Child: I am building a huge castle! Teacher: You are building a huge castle!	When teachers engage in <b>reflection</b> , it creates an opportunity for children to activate the brain’s <b>focal attention</b>

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		<p>to track what they are saying or doing and make decisions about their behavior going forward. For example, do they want to continue the play this way, shift gears, say more about something, or clarify when they meant to say or do something different.</p> <p>Children also have a chance to experience the adult being <i>attuned</i> and build upon this connection to continue their play.</p> <p>With the <b>reflection</b> strategy, children are using the power of <b>focal attention</b> to stabilize the information they are taking in long enough to act upon it. Such mental activity potentially strengthens disparate areas of the brain and the connections between them.</p>
<p><b>Child self-talk:</b> describing aloud what he/she is doing, sensing, thinking, and/or feeling.</p>	<p>Child: First, I have to connect the tiles...next I put them on top of the others carefully...now they stick to make the tower!</p>	<p>Did you ever notice when you talk to yourself, it helps you stay on track? It's because the <b>self-talk</b> strategy helps you keep <b>focal attention</b> engaged! The same is true for children. When they describe aloud what they are doing/thinking, that mental activity is kept at the forefront of their awareness, which has the potential to help them track, make decisions, and evaluate their efforts. Once again, children are activating multiple areas of the brain to work in concert to carry out their play.</p>
<p><b>Open-ended questions versus directions and corrections:</b> questioning in such a way to elicit more than a yes/no response and replacing the habit of telling the child to do something or change something.</p>	<p>Teacher: What do we do first, before we go outside? vs. Teacher: It's time to clean up. Put your toys away and line up. or Teacher: You aren't listening. It's time to clean up, not play.</p>	<p>Replacing directions and corrections with <b>open-ended questions</b>, shifts the child's brain from one of passive receiver of information to that of constructing an answer. With the strategy of <b>open-ended questions</b>, adults are engaging the child's "thinking brain" to act rather than just receive information.</p>
<p><b>Priming or prompting:</b> phrasing that encourages the child to consider possibilities and to notice potentials.</p> <p><i>NOTE:</i> this strategy is not designed to serve as a reminder or a redirection.</p>	<p>Teacher: I wonder what might happen if you both tried to make the track together instead of two separate ones?</p>	<p>The <b>priming strategy</b> allows children to consider and plan their play as it unfolds. Taking children off autopilot invites them to access the decision-making centers of the brain. One important outcome for all iterations of this strategy is that children use the power of <b>focal attention</b> to create choice and change.</p>

With the help of **focal attention**, each of these strategies has the potential to lead to one or more of the five brain benefits listed previously. And while the quality of attention is an important component of mindfulness, so too is the *state of mind* with which you attend.

With mindfulness, the practice of engaging focal attention is **coupled** with the intention to notice with an open, receptive state of mind that includes *non-judgment, compassion, and loving-kindness*. And again, such practices are easily woven into the fabric of a quality early childhood program.



Open, Receptive State of Mind Strategy	Example	Brain Benefit
<p><b>Positive, descriptive acknowledgment (PDA) and PDA Plus:</b> using specific and descriptive language to describe the positive behavior children display and at times, connecting it to a feeling state, outcome, or character trait.</p>	<p>Teacher: Andre and Denae, you are sharing the crayons!</p> <p>Or</p> <p>Teacher: Andre and Denae, you are sharing the crayons, you look happy to be sharing!</p> <p>Or</p> <p>Teacher: Andre and Denae, you are sharing the crayons, now you can both color!</p> <p>Or</p> <p>Teacher: Andre and Denae, you are sharing the crayons, you are being friendly with each other.</p>	<p>With <b>PDA and PDA Plus</b> (instead of praise), children receive a description of the positive action they are doing and possibly its impact or outcome. This acknowledgment begins to strengthen the children's internal narrative to include their strengths. A narrative that includes strengths, may help children remain <b>open and receptive</b> when they face challenges instead of dropping into judgment and criticism.</p> <p>When teachers flood the environment with <b>PDA and PDA Plus</b>, children are more likely to return to an <b>open, receptive</b> state of mind throughout the day.</p>
<p><b>Emotional Literacy:</b> identifying, understanding, and expressing emotions.</p> <p>Choose from a variety of strategies such as reading books about feelings, referencing feeling charts, asking children how they feel, scaffolding their feelings, and modeling feelings.</p>	<p>Teacher: Salina, you are jumping as you laugh with your friend! How do you feel?</p> <p>Or</p> <p>Teacher: Looks like you might be angry right now. I see your hands are clenched and your breathing is heavy.</p>	<p>Using the <b>emotional literacy</b> strategy sends the message that all emotions are acceptable. This helps the mind send signals to the brain that it is safe and the process of regulating a strong emotion may begin.</p>

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	<p style="text-align: center;">Or</p> <p>Teacher: Looks like you might be having a strong emotion, do you want to....draw me your feelings so I know what you are feeling; switch your emotion on the feelings chart; have the puppets talk about your feelings with you; tell me what your body feels like right now; do a body scan with me so we can see what your body is telling you about your feelings?</p>	<p>The brain strives to make sense of information, so regardless of the strength of the emotion the strategy of <b>emotional literacy</b> helps the brain call upon the left hemisphere to help name what the right hemisphere is experiencing. The two parts of the brain work together to integrate the emotion, what's often referred to as, "Name it to tame it", where <b>emotional literacy</b> and emotional regulation are working together.</p>
<p><b>Emotional Regulation:</b> using the mind to bring the brain into a more balanced state.</p> <p>As with emotional literacy, a variety of emotional regulation strategies may be offered for children based on individual need, feeling state, and children's abilities or developmental levels. For example, opportunities to: <i>smell a flower/blow out the candle, squeeze a stress ball, do a few wall push-ups, walk like a bear or other animal, receive deep or light pressure on various body parts, name it to tame it, count breaths, allow glitter to settle, draw, listen to music, hug a stuffed animal or a teacher.</i></p> <p>Regardless of strategy, a key component of emotional regulation is the teacher's <b>validation of the child's feeling state</b> both through verbal and nonverbal actions.</p>	<p>Teacher: So, you are feeling really angry because the block area is full right now. That makes sense. I can see why you feel angry about that.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Or</p> <p>Teacher: You are feeling angry about the block area being full. It's so hard to wait. It seems like anger is making your body feel uncomfortable right now. I wonder what might help anger relax its grip on you a little?</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Or</p> <p>Teacher: You are feeling angry because the block area is full? Ahhh...and your stomach feels heavy? So sorry. I have the relaxation kit right here. What strategy might help your tummy soften a bit?</p>	<p><b>Emotional regulation</b> for children includes co-regulation with an attuned other. Meaning, engaging in regulation with an unhurried, calm, receptive, and aware adult.</p> <p>Co-regulating with an attuned other allows children's brains to shift from an emotionally reactive "downstairs brain" to an open, receptive "upstairs brain", and to shift the brain to a state of integration. choose.</p>
<p><b>Conflict resolution:</b> solving problems and resolving conflicts in a systematic way that includes all children being involved in a non-punitive discussion and resolution process.</p>	<p>When possible, each child involved in the conflict contributes his or her perspective at each step with the assistance of the teacher.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Step one: What happened? How does EACH child feel?</li> <li>• Step two: What can we do? (discuss potential solutions, possibly look through visuals of solutions)</li> <li>• Step three: Pick one and give it a try!</li> <li>• Step four: Teacher follows up children.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Resolving conflicts</b> using a step-by-step framework helps children remain open and receptive to working with others to resolve challenges, rather than seeking out retribution.</p> <p>When children describe their view of what happened, connect that to how they feel, and then seek a solution, they are using the mind to access all parts of the brain to collaborate with others.</p> <p>Inherent in this process is <b>non-judgment, compassion</b> for self and others, and <b>loving-kindness</b>.</p>

Now that you understand **both** components of mindfulness, **focal attention** and an **open, receptive state of mind**, can you see how they may be (and likely are) incorporated across daily activities and common preschool routines?

A few last reminders:

1. It's important to note that the foundation of practicing mindfulness strategies is the teacher's commitment to **attuned** communication and relationships with children. Click [here](#) to learn more about attuned communication. Attuned communication maximizes the potential for healthy brain and mind development by creating environments where children feel safe, satisfied, and seen (i.e., connected).
2. All of the mindfulness strategies offered here must be adapted to meet the needs, abilities, and/or developmental levels of the children. The key is for teachers to use discernment to develop a culturally and developmentally appropriate approach for all children to cultivate the components of mindfulness at their own pace.

To learn additional strategies to promote mindfulness in your classroom, please check out part two of this series, "*Moving Beyond Traditional Mindfulness Practices in the Early Childhood Classroom.*" Click [here](#) to access the blog post.

For more about promoting social and emotional development and preventing challenging behavior through the lens of developing the mind and brain in the context of relationships, please visit my website [www.laurafishtherapy.com](http://www.laurafishtherapy.com).