



Mindful Learners

— MONTESSORI STUDIO —

Mindfulness for Toddlers

Simple breathing exercises and quiet-time activities for emotional regulation

A PRACTICAL CAREGIVER GUIDE + PRINTABLE CALMING TOOLS

Prepared by Mindful Learners Montessori Studio

TODDLERS BORROW CALM BEFORE THEY CAN CREATE IT

Mindfulness Begins With Connection

For toddlers, mindfulness is not a long meditation or a demand to become quiet. It is a brief, concrete experience of noticing the body, the breath, the senses, or the present moment while a trusted adult provides safety and support.

Co-regulation comes first

A young child usually cannot use a calming strategy independently when fully overwhelmed. The adult steadies the environment, protects safety, lowers demands, and offers calm presence. Breathing or quiet-time activities are invitations that may help - not tests the child must pass.

What this guide helps you practice

Body awareness Simple language for noticing breathing, muscles, movement, hunger, fatigue, and other body signals.	Gentle breathing Short, playful exhalation-focused activities without breath holding or complicated counting.
Quiet attention Brief sensory activities that help a child pause, observe, and reconnect with the present moment.	Emotional language Words and pictures that connect feelings with needs, sensations, and safe choices.
Calm routines Predictable moments for practice before rest, after active play, or during transitions.	Caregiver observation Tools for noticing which strategies help, which increase distress, and when more support may be needed.

The purpose is not to eliminate strong feelings. The purpose is to help the child experience feelings safely, with support, and gradually learn what helps the body recover.

KEEP IT PHYSICAL, PLAYFUL, AND BRIEF

What Mindfulness Looks Like at This Age

Toddlers learn through movement, imitation, repetition, sensory exploration, and warm relationships. A successful practice may last only one or two breaths, one sound, or thirty seconds of quiet attention.

Toddler-friendly	Usually too demanding
Copying an adult who slowly smells a pretend flower.	Sitting still for a long guided meditation.
Listening for one sound until it ends.	Explaining emotions with abstract questions.
Feeling a stuffed animal rise on the belly.	Following complicated inhale-hold-exhale counts.
Pushing hands together, stretching, or carrying something heavy.	Using quiet as a punishment or withholding connection until calm.
Choosing between two familiar calming options.	Expecting the child to select a strategy while fully dysregulated.

Use the child's attention as the guide

- Stop while the activity is still pleasant; more is not always better.
- Repeat familiar activities instead of introducing many new techniques.
- Let the child watch without participating.
- Accept movement, laughter, wandering, and imperfect imitation.
- Practice during calm or mildly unsettled moments, not only during crises.

A useful definition

For a toddler, mindfulness can be as simple as: "We are here. I am with you. Let us notice one thing together."

YOUR PACE IS PART OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Prepare the Adult First

A child notices the adult's voice, face, speed, posture, and breathing. Before offering a technique, take one moment to regulate your own body enough to respond safely and clearly.

A ten-second caregiver reset

Step	Quiet action	Purpose
1. Ground	Feel both feet or the chair beneath you.	Reduce rushing and orient to the present moment.
2. Exhale	Let one slow breath out; do not force a large inhale.	Soften your pace and voice.
3. Scan	Check immediate safety, hunger, fatigue, pain, and sensory load.	Address needs before adding instructions.
4. Simplify	Choose one short sentence and one next step.	Make your support easier to understand.
5. Connect	Move near, lower your body, and use a warm, neutral expression.	Communicate safety without demanding eye contact.

Helpful caregiver phrases

- “I am here. Your body is having a hard moment.”
- “You are safe. I will help.”
- “We can breathe together, or we can sit quietly.”
- “You do not have to talk yet.”
- “First we get safe. Then we decide what comes next.”

Do not perform calmness

A steady response does not mean ignoring your own feelings. It means pausing long enough to choose a safe, proportionate action. Caregivers also need rest, support, and repair after difficult moments.

CALMING STRATEGIES SHOULD NEVER CREATE DISTRESS

Safety, Comfort, and Consent

Breathing and quiet-time activities should feel gentle and optional. They are not appropriate substitutes for medical care, developmental evaluation, trauma-informed support, or immediate protection from danger.

Breathing safety

- Use ordinary, comfortable breaths. Do not ask toddlers to hold their breath.
- Keep practice to a few breaths and stop if the child coughs, becomes dizzy, appears frightened, or says no.
- Do not cover the child's nose or mouth, blow directly into the face, or use small loose objects that could become choking hazards.
- Children with breathing, cardiac, neurological, trauma-related, or other health concerns may need individualized guidance from a qualified clinician.

Quiet-space safety

- The space remains visible, accessible, and supervised; it is never used for isolation or punishment.
- Use age-appropriate materials and inspect them for choking, strangulation, tipping, and entrapment risks.
- Allow the child to leave the space unless an adult must maintain a safety boundary.
- Avoid scented products when allergies, asthma, sensory sensitivities, or family preferences make them unsuitable.

Seek qualified help

Talk with the child's pediatric clinician or an appropriate developmental or mental health professional when intense distress is frequent, worsening, dangerous, linked to possible trauma, disrupting sleep or daily life, or accompanied by developmental concerns. Call emergency services for immediate danger or serious breathing difficulty.

PRACTICE BEFORE THE CHILD NEEDS THE STRATEGY

Teach Skills During Calm Moments

A toddler is more likely to use a familiar action than a new one during stress. Introduce each activity when the child is fed, rested, connected, and mildly interested.

The three-step teaching cycle

1. Demonstrate	2. Invite	3. Close
Use very few words. Show one slow, visible action.	"Would you like to try?" Accept yes, no, watching, or partial imitation.	End with a simple phrase: "Our breathing is finished. Let us put the card back."

Build a tiny routine

- Choose one dependable time: after outdoor play, before rest, after bath, or before a story.
- Use the same place, visual card, short phrase, and ending.
- Begin with ten to thirty seconds.
- Repeat one activity for several days before evaluating it.
- Let the child lead the length and intensity.

Example

After active play

"Our bodies moved fast. Now we will listen to one bell." Ring a soft bell once. Listen together until the sound disappears. Say, "The sound is finished. Now water and snack."

FOCUS ON A SOFT, LONGER EXHALE

A Gentle Approach to Breathing

Breathing exercises for toddlers should use normal breathing, playful imagery, and a relaxed exhale. The goal is not a perfect technique. One comfortable breath copied from a calm adult is enough.

Simple breathing pattern

Notice	Breathe in	Breathe out	Finish
"Feel your belly or shoulders."	Take a small, easy breath through the nose if comfortable.	Let the air leave slowly through relaxed lips, like cooling warm food.	Return to ordinary breathing and notice the body.

Keep these principles

- Model instead of repeatedly instructing.
- Use one to three breaths, then pause.
- Never compete over who can breathe the deepest or longest.
- Skip counting when it makes the exercise rigid or confusing.
- Stop if the child becomes more activated; movement or connection may be a better tool.

The exhale is the playful part

Toddlers often understand "cool the soup," "move the feather," or "make the pinwheel turn" more easily than "take a deep breath." Use only large, safely supervised props and keep them out of the mouth.

A FAMILIAR FIRST BREATHING GAME

Flower and Warm Soup Breathing

This activity pairs a comfortable inhale with a slow, gentle exhale. It can be practiced with imaginary objects, pictures, or a real unscented flower held safely by an adult.

How to offer it

Step	Adult model	Toddler cue
1. Flower	Hold an imaginary flower near your own nose and take a small, easy breath.	"Smell the flower."
2. Soup	Lower your hand like a bowl and slowly breathe out across it.	"Cool the warm soup."
3. Repeat	Pause and repeat once or twice only if the child remains comfortable.	"One more, or all done?"
4. Notice	Relax your shoulders and return to ordinary breathing.	"Our bodies are resting."

Variations

Smell the orange Pretend to smell a peeled orange, then softly cool a warm muffin.	Garden walk Pause at one safe plant, notice its shape or color, and take one ordinary breath.
Picture card Use a simple flower-and-bowl card when real objects would distract.	Adult-only model During mild frustration, quietly demonstrate without asking the child to copy.

Avoid forced inhalation

Do not tell the child to pull in the biggest breath possible. A small, comfortable inhale and soft exhale are sufficient.

OFFER PLAYFUL CHOICES WITHOUT BREATH HOLDING

Bunny, Bee, and Lion Breaths

Animal imagery can make breath awareness inviting. Keep each version gentle and short, and choose the sound that matches the child's sensory needs.

Breath	How to model	Best for
Bunny sniff	Take two or three tiny, comfortable nose sniffs, then one soft exhale. Do not repeat if the child becomes lightheaded or overexcited.	Playful practice during calm moments.
Bee hum	Take an ordinary breath and hum softly on the exhale. Keep volume low and stop if vibration is uncomfortable.	Children who enjoy sound and vibration.
Lion sigh	Open the mouth gently and let out a quiet “haa” while relaxing the shoulders. No roaring near another person.	Releasing tension after active movement.
Mouse breath	Take a very quiet ordinary breath and listen for nearby sounds.	Settling before a book or rest.

Offer only two choices

- “Bunny breath or bee hum?”
- “One breath or just watch?”
- “Sit with me or stand beside me?”
- “Use the card or use our hands?”

Match the child

Some children become more excited by animal sounds. For them, choose a quieter sensory activity, slow pushing work, or simple connection instead of breath play.

MAKE THE MOVEMENT OF BREATH VISIBLE

Belly Breathing With a Stuffed Animal

A soft toy placed on the abdomen can help a child notice that breathing moves the body. This is a calm-time activity, not a requirement during distress.

Set up

- Choose a small, lightweight stuffed animal that is age-appropriate and intact.
- Invite the child to lie comfortably on the back, recline, or watch the toy on the adult's belly.
- Place the toy gently; never add pressure or restrain the child.
- Take two or three ordinary breaths and watch the toy rise and fall.

Simple script

Ride on the belly

"Bear is riding on my belly. Up a little...and down. Would your bear like a ride? We can watch one breath."

Other ways to notice breathing

Hand on belly

The child may place a hand on the body, or simply watch the adult's hand move.

Scarf on belly

Use only a large scarf under close supervision and remove it immediately after the activity.

Mirror fog

An older toddler may gently fog a child-safe mirror held by the adult; do not share mouth-contact items.

Shoulder check

Lift the shoulders slightly, let them soften, and notice ordinary breathing.

Respect body boundaries

Some children do not want objects or hands on their body. Watching the adult is a complete participation option.

A PLACE FOR SUPPORT, NOT EXCLUSION

Create a Calm Corner

A calm corner is a small, comfortable place where a child and caregiver can reduce stimulation, reconnect, and choose a familiar regulating activity. It should remain part of the shared environment rather than a place the child is sent away.

Possible materials

Comfort A washable cushion, small mat, or child-sized chair that does not tip easily.	Visuals Two to four simple cards: breathe, hug, push wall, listen, drink water, or rest.
Sensory One soft fabric, sturdy board book, or sealed visual bottle appropriate for the child.	Connection Space for an adult to sit nearby without crowding the child.
Organization A small basket or low shelf with only a few carefully chosen items.	Lighting Soft natural or room light; avoid candles, unstable lamps, or flashing devices.

Introduce the space

- Visit during a calm time and explore one item together.
- Say what the space is for: "This is a place to rest with a grown-up."
- Practice entering and leaving freely.
- Restore the materials together after use.
- Change or remove any item that increases throwing, mouthing, fear, or overstimulation.

Never a punishment chair

Do not require the child to stay until calm, apologize, or perform a breathing exercise. Safety limits may still be necessary, but connection and dignity remain intact.

NOTICE ONE THING AT A TIME

Quiet-Time Sensory Activities

Sensory mindfulness gives the toddler a concrete object of attention. The adult keeps language simple and allows the child to move on when interest ends.

Activity	How to offer it	Safety / adaptation
Listen to one sound	Ring a soft bell once or listen for a fan, bird, rain, or clock until the sound changes or ends.	Keep sound gentle; avoid startling or loud tones.
Color hunt	Find one green item, then one warm-colored item in the room.	Use only visible objects; do not require gathering.
Texture touch	Compare a smooth cloth and a bumpy cloth with fingertips.	Use large, clean, non-shedding materials.
Slow water watch	Watch water pour from a small pitcher into a bowl.	Adult controls water amount and supervises closely.
Window pause	Notice one moving thing outside: a leaf, cloud, person, or vehicle.	Use a secure window area away from cords and climbing hazards.

Language to use

- “I hear a low sound.”
- “This cloth feels smooth.”
- “The water is moving slowly.”
- “You noticed the light.”
- “The sound is finished.”

Describe more, quiz less

Instead of repeatedly asking “What color is it?” or “What do you hear?” offer a calm observation and leave room for the child to respond in any way.

SOME BODIES REGULATE BY MOVING FIRST

Mindful Movement

A child who is highly active, angry, or restless may not be ready to sit. Slow, purposeful movement can provide the body with organized sensory input before quiet attention.

Movement	Simple invitation	Use
Wall push	Place hands on a clear wall and push steadily for three seconds, then rest.	Strong body work without throwing or hitting.
Animal walk	Move slowly like a bear, turtle, or elephant for a short distance.	Transition from fast play to slower movement.
Carry and place	Carry two books, a small laundry item, or a light basket to its home.	Purposeful contribution and heavy work.
Stretch tall / small	Reach up like a tree, then curl gently like a seed.	Body awareness before rest.
Slow march	Take five deliberate steps while the adult quietly counts or names each foot.	Orientation during transitions.

Movement boundaries

- Clear the floor and supervise closely.
- Keep movements within the child's ordinary abilities; do not force stretches or poses.
- Stop if there is pain, dizziness, unusual fatigue, or fear.
- Use movement to support regulation, not as a consequence for behavior.

Sequence idea

Move first, then pause: "Five slow pushes. Hands rest. Now let us listen for one sound."

EMOTIONAL LITERACY GROWS THROUGH REPEATED LANGUAGE

Name Feelings and Body Clues

Toddlers benefit from simple words that connect an observable body state with a possible feeling or need. The adult does not need to guess perfectly; use tentative language and remain open to correction.

What you observe	Possible language	Possible need
Tight fists, loud voice, pushing	"Your hands are tight. You may be angry or frustrated."	Safety, space, help, movement, or a clear limit.
Crying, reaching, clinging	"You want me close. This feels hard."	Connection, comfort, rest, or help with separation.
Covering ears, turning away	"That sound may be too much."	Lower volume, distance, predictability, or a quieter place.
Running, laughing, unable to slow	"Your body has a lot of energy."	Movement, fewer demands, food, water, or a slower transition.
Drooping, rubbing eyes, falling	"Your body looks tired."	Rest, reduced stimulation, nourishment, or an earlier routine.

Avoid turning feelings into behavior labels

- Say "You are having a hard time," rather than "You are bad."
- Say "You wanted the toy," rather than "You are selfish."
- Say "Your body is not ready to stop," rather than "You never listen."
- Hold the safety limit while acknowledging the feeling.

Tentative language

Try "I wonder if...", "It looks like...", or "Maybe your body needs..." This teaches observation without claiming certainty about the child's inner experience.

CONNECT, PROTECT, AND REDUCE DEMANDS

During a Tantrum or Overload

When a toddler is fully overwhelmed, reasoning and new instructions are often ineffective. The immediate work is safety and co-regulation. A breathing exercise may be modeled quietly, but it should not become another demand.

A practical sequence

Step	Adult action	Brief language
1. Protect	Block hitting, move hazards, reduce the audience, and maintain necessary boundaries.	"I will not let you hit."
2. Reduce	Lower noise, questions, choices, and verbal explanations.	"Fewer words. I am here."
3. Connect	Stay nearby at a safe distance; offer closeness without forcing touch.	"Near or a little space?"
4. Model	Take one soft exhale or press your own hands together.	"I am slowing my body."
5. Recover	Offer water, toileting, food, rest, or a quiet activity after intensity decreases.	"Your body is settling. We will go slowly."
6. Repair	Later, name what happened and practice one safe alternative.	"You were angry. Hitting hurts. Next time we can push the wall."

Do not require immediate reflection

A toddler does not need a lecture, forced apology, or detailed discussion at the peak of distress. Teach and repair after the nervous system has recovered.

ATTACH PRACTICE TO PREDICTABLE MOMENTS

Use Mindfulness in Daily Transitions

Brief practices are easier to remember when they occur at the same transition. Choose moments that already need a pause rather than adding another separate activity to the day.

Transition	Ten- to sixty-second practice	Closing cue
After outdoor play	Five slow wall pushes, then one drink of water.	"Body work is finished. Shoes away."
Before meals	Notice one smell or color; take one ordinary breath.	"Now we eat."
Before rest	Stuffed-animal belly watch or one quiet hum.	"Bear rests. Book begins."
After separation	Sit together, feel feet on the floor, and name one thing in the room.	"We are together again."
Before leaving	One flower-and-soup breath while the adult holds the bag.	"Breath finished. We walk to the door."
Before bedtime	Stretch tall, curl small, and soften shoulders.	"Body is ready for the story."

Keep routines recognizable

- Use the same short words each time.
- End clearly; do not keep extending the exercise to chase perfect calm.
- Allow the child to participate by watching.
- Preserve the routine when possible, but skip it when the child needs food, sleep, medical attention, or immediate movement instead.

Mindfulness should support the transition

The practice is useful only when it makes the next step more humane and manageable. It should not become an additional barrier the child must complete.

A FLEXIBLE SEQUENCE FOR HOME OR CLASSROOM

A Five-Minute Quiet-Time Routine

This example can be shortened to one minute or extended slightly for an interested older toddler. The order is more important than the clock.

Approx. time	Activity	Adult role
30 seconds	Arrive: sit together or stand on the mat.	Lower voice and name the routine.
45 seconds	Move: two stretches or three wall pushes.	Demonstrate slowly and protect space.
30 seconds	Breathe: one or two flower-and-soup breaths.	Model; do not insist.
60 seconds	Notice: listen for one sound or observe one object.	Describe one detail and allow silence.
90 seconds	Quiet choice: board book, soft fabric, or simple picture card.	Remain nearby and follow interest.
45 seconds	Close: restore one item and name the next activity.	Provide a clear ending.

Sample language

Beginning to end

"We are taking a quiet pause. First our bodies push. Then one soft breath. I hear the fan. You are looking at the book. Quiet time is finished. Put the book in the basket, then we have snack."

Signs to shorten or stop

- The child repeatedly turns away, protests, or becomes more activated.
- The materials invite throwing, mouthing, or conflict.
- The child needs toileting, food, water, sleep, movement, or connection first.
- The adult is using the routine to delay an unavoidable need or boundary.

FOLLOW ABILITY, INTEREST, AND INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

Adapt by Age and Development

Age ranges are approximate. Language, motor development, sensory processing, temperament, disability, culture, and experience all shape how a child participates.

Stage	Good starting practices	Adult support
12-24 months	Watch the adult exhale; listen to one sound; touch one texture; one stretch; brief cuddle or side-by-side rest.	Use imitation, gestures, and one-step language. Expect very short participation.
24-36 months	Flower-and-soup breath; wall push; belly toy; two calm choices; simple feeling words.	Repeat familiar scripts, limit choices, and protect movement needs.
3-4 years	Two or three breaths; short body scan; sound hunt; simple calm sequence; help prepare the calm corner.	Invite reflection after recovery and involve the child in selecting tools.
Mixed ages	One shared opening, then individual choices such as movement, listening, or resting.	Avoid comparing performance; provide separate space and materials as needed.

Adapt for communication differences

- Use photographs or simple line pictures instead of verbal instructions.
- Demonstrate the action beside the child rather than requiring eye contact.
- Offer a gesture, object cue, or first-then card.
- Treat refusal, leaving, pushing away, or covering ears as communication.
- Consult the child's qualified providers for individualized sensory, developmental, or trauma-related needs.

Participation may look different

Watching, moving nearby, holding the card, choosing "all done," or returning later can all be meaningful participation.

CUT APART AND INTRODUCE ONE CARD AT A TIME

Printable Breathing Cards

Print on sturdy paper if possible. Present only one or two familiar cards. Adult supervision is required; these cards are not toys for mouthing.

FLOWER + SOUP Smell the flower gently. Cool the warm soup slowly. One or two comfortable breaths. No breath holding.	BEE HUM Breathe normally. Make one soft hum as the air goes out. Keep the sound quiet. Stop if vibration is uncomfortable.
BELLY RIDE Watch a small stuffed animal rise and fall on the belly. Watching the adult is always an option.	LION SIGH Let out one quiet “haa” and soften the shoulders. No loud roaring near other people.

Caregiver note

- Model the card during calm moments before using it during stress.
- Do not require the child to finish a card before receiving comfort or help.
- Retire any card that consistently increases distress or excitement.

OFFER TWO OPTIONS, NOT THE WHOLE SET

Printable Calm Choice Cards

These choices support co-regulation. The adult may select the two options that fit the moment and environment.

PUSH Push the wall slowly. Rest the hands. Clear the area and supervise.	LISTEN Listen for one sound until it changes or ends. Use gentle everyday sounds.
REST NEAR Sit or lie near a trusted adult. Touch is optional.	DRINK WATER Take a small drink, then pause. Use the child's usual safe cup.

How to present a choice

Two clear options

Place two cards where the child can see them. Say, "Push or rest near?" Wait quietly. If the child cannot choose, the adult may say, "I will sit near while your body settles."

BUILD CONSISTENCY THROUGH VERY SMALL REPETITIONS

Weekly Practice Planner

Choose one breathing activity and one non-breathing activity for the week. Practice at one calm daily transition. Keep notes brief.

Day	Transition / time	Practice offered	Child response	Next adjustment
Monday				
Tuesday				
Wednesday				
Thursday				
Friday				
Saturday				
Sunday				

Weekly reflection

☐ The child watched or participated without added distress.

☐ The adult kept the practice brief and optional.

☐ The transition became smoother, stayed the same, or became harder.

☐ A basic need - food, water, sleep, toileting, movement, pain relief, or connection - mattered more than the technique.

What should we keep, change, or stop next week?

THE CHILD'S RESPONSE IS THE MOST IMPORTANT FEEDBACK

Observe, Adjust, and Know When to Ask for Help

No single strategy works for every child or every moment. Track patterns, remove techniques that increase distress, and keep the focus on relationship, safety, and developmentally realistic expectations.

What you notice	Possible interpretation	Try next
Breathing games create silliness or faster breathing.	The activity is activating rather than settling.	Switch to wall pushes, carrying, water, or quiet connection.
The child refuses every calm card during distress.	The child may be too overwhelmed to choose.	Reduce language; protect safety; choose one supportive action yourself.
The calm corner becomes a throwing area.	Materials or timing are mismatched.	Remove most objects; use the space together during calm times.
Strategies work only with one caregiver.	The routine, language, or relationship cue may not yet be familiar with others.	Use the same brief script and practice with each trusted caregiver.
Distress is frequent, severe, worsening, or disrupts daily life.	The child or family may need individualized support.	Discuss observations with the pediatric clinician or qualified developmental/mental health professional.

Selected sources and further reading

American Academy of Pediatrics - HealthyChildren.org. "Why Kids Act Out: Tips to Help Your Child Cope With Stress" (updated May 17, 2024) and "4 Play Activities to Help Children Manage Emotions" (Dec. 19, 2023).

Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. "Serve and Return: Back-and-Forth Exchanges" and "Toxic Stress."

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Head Start. "Promoting Children's Self-Regulation with Tucker the Turtle," "Connecting with Your Child During Challenging Moments," and "Fostering Emotional Literacy in Young Children."

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Positive Parenting Tips: Toddlers (1-2 Years)" and "Toddlers (2-3 Years)," plus "Learn the Signs. Act Early." developmental resources.

Educational notice

This guide provides general educational information and is not medical, mental health, developmental, or emergency advice. Individual children may need different supports. Consult qualified professionals when you have concerns, and seek immediate help for danger or serious breathing difficulty.

Mindfulness for toddlers is not perfect stillness. It is a repeated experience of being noticed, protected, and gently guided back to the present moment.