Q: I've heard a lot of talk about mindfulness. How can I start to practice it in my own life?
A: In its basic form, mindfulness can be described as simply being aware of your thoughts without getting caught up in them. Mindfulness allows you to slow down and become aware of the thoughts instead of reacting in a habitual manner. By being aware of your thoughts, you can make conscious choices and become more intentional and less impulsive.

When it comes to mindfulness, it is important to understand that you have two modes of mind, “being” and “doing.” “Doing” mode means you are going from one thing to the next without being aware of what is occurring moment by moment, which is similar to running on autopilot. The “being” mode of mind is the exact opposite. Through mindfulness, you become aware of what is happening in each moment and not getting wrapped up in your thoughts. Mindfulness helps draw you out of “doing” mode and helps you become more in tune with “being” mode.

Now that you have a basic understanding of mindfulness, you can begin to incorporate it into your daily life through formal and informal practices.

Formal mindfulness practice is when a person engages in some type of guided meditation, such as a body scan or a deep breathing meditation. Mindfulness apps on cellphones are a great way to start incorporating formal mindfulness practices into daily life.

Mindfulness can add to the quality of our lives in numerous ways, from nurturing a sense of inner peace to improving the quality of a workout, from enhancing self-confidence to facilitating deeper and more meaningful relationships with others.

Children as young as preschool age have successfully completed mindfulness exercises and enjoyed their experiences as well.

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Mindfulness, on Back
The Superman: This pose is practiced by standing with the feet just wider than the hips, fists clenched, and arms reached out, stretching the body out as long as possible.

The Wonder Woman: This pose is struck by standing tall with legs wider than hip-width apart and hands or fists placed on the hips (Karen Young, 2017).

SPIDEY SENSES
While you’re on the subject of superheroes, there is a fun and easy way to introduce your kids to paying attention to the present. Instruct your kids to turn on their “Spidey senses,” the super-focused senses of smell, sight, hearing, taste, and touch that Spiderman uses to keep tabs on the world around him.

This will encourage them to pause and focus their attention on the present, opening their awareness to the information their senses bring in (Karen Young, 2017).

THE MINDFUL JAR
This activity can teach children about how strong emotions can take hold, and how to find peace when these strong emotions come up.

First, fill a clear jar almost all the way with water. Next, add a big spoonful of glitter glue or glue and dry glitter to the jar. Put the lid back on the jar and shake it to make the glitter swirl.

Say to your child: “Imagine that the glitter is like your thoughts when you’re stressed, mad or upset. See how they whirl around and make it really hard to see clearly? That’s why it’s so easy to make silly decisions when you’re upset – because you’re not thinking clearly. Don’t worry this is normal and it happens in all of us (yep, grownups too).”

Place the jar in front of the child and say: “Now watch what happens when you’re still for a couple of moments. See how the glitter starts to settle and the water clears? Your mind works the same way. When you’re calm for a little while, your thoughts start to settle and you start to see things much clearer.” (Karen Young, 2017).

This exercise not only helps children learn about how their emotions can cloud their thoughts, it also facilitates the practice of mindfulness while focusing on the swirling glitter in the jar.

SAFARI
On your next walk, tell the kids that you will be going on a safari, and their goal is to notice as many birds, bugs, creepy-crawlies, and any other animals as they can. Anything that walks, crawls, swims, or flies is of interest, and they’ll need to focus all of their senses to find them, especially the little ones (Karen Young, 2017).

A similar exercise for adults is the mindfulness walk. This exercise provokes the same response in children that the mindful walk brings out in adults: a state of awareness and grounding in the present.

Plenty of research shows that mindfulness is capable of improving mental health and well-being, attention, self-regulation, and social competency when well taught and practiced in children and adolescents.

Introducing mindfulness-based programs in schools and in everyday practice can have a life-long impact on the psychological, social, and cognitive well-being of children and teens.

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IN CHILDREN SPECIFICALLY, MINDFULNESS HAS BEEN FOUND TO:

• Mitigate the effects of bullying (Zhou, Liu, Niu, Sun, & Fan, 2016)
• Enhance focus in children with ADHD (Zhang et al., 2016)
• Reduce attention problems (Crescentini, Capurso, Furlan, & Fabbro, 2016)
• Improve mental health and wellbeing
• Improve social skills when well taught and practiced in children and adolescents.