

# Where You Are

## S5 Episode 5 — Mindfulness For All Kinds of Minds

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**Chris Willard:** Mindfulness should either be fun or helpful, and ideally both. And if it's one, let's keep going. And if it's neither, let's really rethink what we're doing wrong in terms of how we're teaching this beautiful practice.

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**Char Black:** This is Where You Are, a podcast that helps families and their children promote their mental health and wellness. I'm Char Black.

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**Bryn Askwith:** And I'm Bryn Askwith. The meaning behind the term mindfulness can vary significantly from person to person. That's the beauty of it. Today on Where You Are, we sit down with Dr. Chris Willard, to explore what this practice can look like for all kinds of minds and how our young ones can make room for mindfulness in their worlds.

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**Char Black:** So in our mini-sode today, we'll explore ways to adapt mindfulness rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, discuss tailoring techniques to a range of mental health challenges, and talk about different mindfulness practices for kids through arts, games, and more. Let's get into that conversation. Joining us on the podcast today is Dr. Chris Willard, author, international speaker, Harvard psychologist, and two-time TEDx presenter. Dr. Willard's expertise and passion for mindfulness and meditation have made him a leading voice in the field, and his work continues to help individuals and organizations around the world improve their mental health and well-being. Welcome to Where You Are, Dr. Willard. It's so nice to have you. Mindfulness for all kinds of minds, tell us more about the concept as a starting place for our parent and caregiver audience listening to this episode.

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**Chris Willard:** Yeah. I mean, I think one of the things that's been wonderful about watching mindfulness evolve has been seeing it just become more accessible to more different kinds of people. And I think it's a real challenge because in some ways what we don't want to do is water down mindfulness or distort or diminish the origins of many of these practices. But at the same time, we can allow them to evolve with integrity and really help them to reach more and more people and help more and more people. A lot of my work in particular around that has been with families, with children, with teens, with people struggling with mental health. My background is as a clinical psychologist, so I feel really excited watching the movement continue to evolve and to reach more people. And to me that's what it means, mindfulness for all kinds of minds.

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Bryn Askwith: Dr. Willard, some of your work has focused on tailoring mindfulness techniques to a range of mental health challenges like anxiety, depression, trauma, and more. Can you say a little bit more about that and offer some examples?

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**Chris Willard:** Absolutely. I think the easy part and the hard part is that in some ways I'm often asked, well, what is the best mindfulness practice for this kind of kid or that kind of teenager or a kid in a meltdown or a teen with a panic attack? And the fact of it is, the best mindfulness practice for those kids who are struggling or suffering is actually going to be our own. If we can be that caring, compassionate, connected adult while they're really struggling and we're not flailing with our own anxiety or fear or frustration or reactions, then that's going to be the best possible thing for that child, or anybody in that moment is the quality of our compassionate presence. They do really believe in the power of co-regulation, the power of emotional contagion, the fact that we know that nervous system to nervous system we're always kind of communicating beneath the conscious level of awareness. And that the quality of our presence, whether you're a therapist, whether you're a parent or medical professional, whoever you are, the quality of your presence is going to be the most helpful thing for whoever it is that's in front of you having a difficult time.

And then, yes, there are practices that I think that are going to be more accessible to certain kinds of folks who are struggling. So for example, kids that are fidgety, well we can let them fidget a bit more mindfully. We can do mindful movement practices and not demand that they sit in stillness or something like that. Kids who maybe have experienced some trauma in their lives, they're probably not going to feel great about closing their eyes in a room full of strangers. We want to give them choices and options because they probably felt disempowered and without choices and options in their lives. That's part of the traumatic reaction of post-traumatic stress. Likewise, I think anxiety I know a lot of young people I work with have fairly perfectionistic qualities. When I first started teaching this stuff, there's a lot of, "Am I breathing right?" It's like, no, no, no, this isn't, let's slow down and not make this one more thing to feel like we're doing right or wrong. But let's just bring a little bit more fun to this as we think about regulating our breath or exploring different kinds of awareness practices and mindfulness practices.

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**Char Black:** I really liked what you were saying, Chris, because I think generally a lot of people have some pre-existing ideas of what mindfulness is, as if it was only kind of sitting in a corner breathing and meditating. So I really liked your examples of movement and mindfulness and fun playful ways. Can you talk about any more additional benefits of tailoring mindfulness approaches with your child? And do you have any examples and feedback from parents and caregivers you've connected with?

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**Chris Willard:** I think the more we can practice together, the more parents and kids can do anything together, eating together, laughing together, playing games together, reading together, practicing mindfulness together. We know that this increases co-regulation, it increases

connection and bonding and attachment. And then I think what else is really powerful are the ways that our emotions truly are contagious, with mindfulness being one of the most contagious. And so that in families research more recently has found parents who practice mindfulness, their kids are happier, communication in the home is better. Even if it's just one parent practicing. When one parent is practicing, the other parent is happier and says that the other parent is compromising more. So our calm is contagious. That contentment is contagious. And what I hear back from families is that it's not only helping the "anxious kid" who gets into my office or the depressed kid, but then everyone else in the family starts to get a little bit curious about this.

What are they doing that's working? I want me some of that. And I think that's why we've seen mindfulness growing and growing over these past few decades. And then finding these ways to make it playful and integrating it into other things, into games and to play. I mean, what I do with my kids is we play a lot of board games and stuff. We're playing backgammon or something, and I'll kind of pretend a little bit like, oh, this is getting really stressful, and I kind of lean back and I'm like, "I need to take a few breaths just to be able to see the board more clearly and what I should do next". And then I kind of watch my kids start to lean back and take a breath and I'm like, it's working. And different ways to make it fun and not even have to be like, we're going to do mindfulness. Because I think that becomes a stumbling block often, whether you're a teacher or a therapist or a parent to, we're going to do this thing. I know I find that awkward. So just sort of sliding it in a little bit with the kinds of questions that we ask and certainly modeling it for our kids is huge too.

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**Bryn Askwith:** I love all the examples you've been providing, the variety that you're describing and the examples being short, I think, are good for parents who might be listening with younger kids.

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**Char Black:** You are listening to Where You Are, I'm Char Black. Find more information and free resources about mindful approaches to parenting and caregiving on our website at [kelymentalhealth.ca/mindful-approach-parenting-caregiving](http://kelymentalhealth.ca/mindful-approach-parenting-caregiving).

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**Bryn Askwith:** One of the things that we've touched on are clearly the benefits of tailored mindfulness approaches, but I'm just wondering if you can speak to some of the cons or cautions associated with mindfulness, if there are any.

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**Chris Willard:** Yeah. I mean, I think mindfulness is one raft, it's one tool, it's one practice that resonates for me. I think where we make the mistake is when we push it too hard, when we make it a chore, certainly when we make it a punishment that's no good, when we think that it's going to be the be all and end all. I think that's where there's been a corrective in the past few years. A lot of well-meaning teachers over time have said, "Well, just keep sitting. Just keep

sitting. You'll get through it". And I think that we want to be a little cautious about that. We want to see if there are some mental health challenges going on? Is there some trauma here? Is there some neurodivergence here? Is there some cultural challenges that we're facing here in terms of why this is maybe not resonating or helpful for this person?

Or maybe the opposite actually harming this person in the way that we're teaching it. So I think that the field has stepped back a bit and done a little bit of self-examination in some good ways, and I think that that's a real positive. But nothing in the world is without its risks either. So it's just about moving a little bit more cautiously. I think you're probably also referring to, there's a study in the last year about is this mindfulness helping these kids at all or is it doing nothing? And I think a lot of us had to really take a look at that and think, what's going on here? When people were talking about this study saying mindfulness doesn't work, was that one of the pieces as I understand it or as I recall, is that the kids in the study only practiced maybe an average of once in an eight-week program outside of school.

And so what that means to me is we got to make mindfulness a little more interesting. We got to figure out how to engage kids in this so it's not just 15 minutes once a week, but how can we encourage them to bring this into their daily lives? So to me, what I try to do are find ways to make mindfulness fun, make it playful, make it a game. Can we suggest to teenagers pick your favorite song and just listen to one instrument and if your mind wanders off, bring it back to that instrument and bring a bit more kind of concentrated mindful awareness to your favorite piece of music and see if your relationship to that piece of music changes. The study I often talk about is Lev Vygotsky. He did an experiment where he was trying to get nine-year-olds to stand still for as long as he could.

So he gets out a stopwatch. Of course, the nine-year-olds are running around the room, so he calls them back and he says, "All right, everybody, I want you to stand still as long as you can, but this time, imagine that you're a knight guarding a castle". And what happens this time, to no one's surprise, is oh my gosh the kids actually stand still for 15 minutes. And so instead of maybe making the object of attention the breath, which is boring, we make the object of attention play in some way. I remember as a kid being at this camp and they said, we're going to walk like ninjas in the forest so that we can not make a sound. You're not thinking about the past, you're not thinking about the future, you're only thinking about your footsteps and the movement of each muscle and the texture of the ground underneath you. Which is kind of the same instructions as do some mindful walking. These kinds of things invite play, invite visualization, make it easier, make it accessible. So kids need to see the value of it, and my feeling is always like mindfulness should either be fun or helpful, and ideally both. And if it's one, let's keep going. And if it's neither, let's really rethink what we're doing wrong in terms of how we're trying to approach this kid with teaching this beautiful practice.

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**Char Black:** What are some free or low cost resources that you would recommend to parents and caregivers about tailoring mindfulness approaches for their kids?

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**Chris Willard:** Finding ways to integrate this into what kids are doing, arts and crafts and fun. Put some tape down on the carpet and try walking mindfully in a maze or put some chalk down in the driveway and draw a labyrinth or something like that. Take bubble wrap and try to walk on it without breaking the bubbles. That's sort of like a little mindful walking practice. I think things in places that are inherently mindful, being in nature and just checking in with all five of your senses. As a clinician and as a parent, I have a set of Jenga blocks and on those I've just written on the Jenga blocks, do three hot chocolate breaths on one, breathe into your nose smelling blow out like you're cooling it off. Says name three sounds that you can hear, or name three sensations in your feet right now. These are ways to integrate it into the games that we're playing, into the activities that we're doing. Just like we've try to sneak the veggies in as parents, we can sneak the mindfulness in in these ways too.

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**Bryn Askwith:** Just wrapping up this podcast with you, we always ask our guests who join us for any words of wisdom that you might have to our parents listening. Any last words of wisdom?

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**Chris Willard:** Oh my gosh. I'll give you the advice that my parents therapist gave them when I was a anxious, depressed, angry teenager / young adult. Which turned me toward mindfulness actually. But he said to them, "Never give up". I think that's kind of fundamentally it is. We don't give up on our kids and there's times that we want to give up in little ways or big ways. I'm just so grateful that he said that to my parents. And that you don't have to be perfect, but I think this is where self-compassion has been so helpful. It's like we're all human. None of these kids came with instruction books. So just keep doing the best you can and don't be afraid to ask for help. That's a lot of pieces of advice. Ask for help. That's my last one. Okay.

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**Bryn Askwith:** Those are great. Thank you so much, again, for making the time to join us on the podcast today, Dr. Willard.

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**Chris Willard:** Thank you both so much. This has been a really fun conversation.

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**Char Black:** Thanks so much for listening today. Bryn and I are grateful to have you join us each episode.

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**Bryn Askwith:** If you enjoyed the conversation today, please leave us a rating where you might be listening now. Where You Are is brought to you by BC Children's Kelty Mental Health Resource Center. Our show is produced and edited by Jenny Cunningham, with audio engineering by Luke Batiot. Audio production by JAR Audio.

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