

Sitting Still Like a Frog
An Online Course in Teaching Mindfulness to Kids
Taught by Eline Snel

Talk One, Part 2: Mindfulness Begins with You

ELINE: When teachers start wanting to teach mindfulness to children, it's important to know something about your own motivation. Why are we wanting this? Why do we wish to teach children mindfulness? Is that something we want, or is it something they need? What kind of answers could be about it? So I would like to ask you to get some paper and a pen for yourself. It's a kind of writing exercise. This is about our own motivation: why we want to teach children mindfulness.

The first question is . . . Don't think too much about the answers; it's just for yourself; just let the question resonate with your own inner wisdom and then just follow, in a way, the inner answer that's coming up. Don't think intellectually about this question; just let the question resonate with something inside you. The first question is, why is mindfulness important for kids? Why is mindfulness important for kids? Take all the time you need for a kind of answer.

You can just stay with this calmness yourself and let come up by itself an answer on the following question: is mindfulness important for every child? Is mindfulness important for every child, and why, or why not?

Then there's a third question: when you would be the mindfulness teacher or the mindful parent, what do you want your kid or the kids in your class to learn from you when mindfulness is practiced at home or in the school? What do you want the kids to learn from you? What do you want to teach them?

Then maybe a last question: what inner attitude do you need to support the children at home or your classroom? What inner attitude do you need to support the children?

OK, Hank, I think you need the microphone again, because it can be nice to hear from each other some answers about, for example, the first question: why is mindfulness important for kids? Why should we do that? Who wants to share something about this question? Why should we teach children mindfulness?

STUDENT 15: I think it's important to help them stay calm, to help them get in touch with what's now, to allow them to have more authentic relationships with people, and I believe it would reduce the anxiety, which is ever increasing in their worlds.

ELINE: To reduce anxiety. Mhm. Thank you very much.

STUDENT 16: Well, I think that kids are now living in an environment that is . . . They're just overstimulated, in so many aspects of their life, that there's just really not much time for them to sit and be comfortable with just sitting.

ELINE: Doing nothing.

STUDENT 16: And that's it, you know? Parents want their kids to be involved in so many things, and just from activity to activity and then to bed and then to school, and they just really don't have time to just sit and—

ELINE: Do nothing.

STUDENT 16: Do nothing.

ELINE: Yes. Thank you very much. That's a very important point, I think, that children in these times—we know that they get such huge amount of stimuli, and there's no moment that they don't need to do anything and get bored. It's so interesting when children say in the class, "This is boring. This sitting still like a frog—it's boring." Then when we start asking them, "Where do you feel your body, that boring feeling, and what is being bored?" Then they start to be really interested again. They never ask themselves what . . . "It's just a word. This is *boring*." But when they are exploring the experience of being bored, they start to be very interested in that word. Yeah, thank you.

STUDENT 17: Yeah, I would say also it helps them listen to music, if they're mindful. I teach music, and I notice that attention span for listening to certainly longer pieces of music has gone really down.

ELINE: Mmm, yes. Oh, that's lovely, to teach music, and mindfulness can help them to be able to just listen to all those different tones and rhythms. Without thinking what kind of piece or what kind of performer is he or her that is making this music—just listen to the music.

STUDENT 17: Right, or without having to do something else at the same time.

ELINE: Yeah, just listening.

STUDENT 18: So I took a little different tack in that I said, “Is mindfulness important for kids?” I said I’m not even sure it is, and the reason I ask that is I said, “If mindfulness can help them be more aware of their feelings and be more aware of their mind, how their mind works and their connection to their bodies, then perhaps.” But I said, “In some ways, children will learn mindfulness by observing adults being mindful. If adults are calm, thoughtful, kind, exhibiting right speech and right action, then children will learn this.”

ELINE: Yes.

STUDENT 18: So I had a little resistance to adults teaching kids to be mindful when they themselves may not have fully embraced that, and yet I know that so much of the mindfulness teaching has gotten to the point of if we’re going to teach mindfulness, we have to be living the mindfulness ourselves.

ELINE: Yes. That’s a very important point, because children copy their parents; they copy their teachers, and when you have a mindful teacher in the class, there is immediately a difference in atmosphere.

STUDENT 18: Can I just add one more? I heard some people that teach in the Waldorf system, and they actually resist this quite a bit, because they actually don’t think it’s developmentally appropriate for kids to be turning so much attention inward—that it’s actually . . . Childhood is very much an external process. So I kind of have a little bit of agreement with that. Again, I think that the little dropping in and then enough adults modeling it is really of the highest value, as opposed to think we’re going to put it into them in some way. I don’t know if you’ve . . . Because I imagine you’ve run into some people in the Waldorf systems, I don’t know if you have, so I just . . . Maybe you can answer that question later.

ELINE: Yeah, we call it in Holland the “Rudolf Steiner method,” and in fact there are not so many Rudolf Steiner schools in Holland that give the mindfulness lessons, because they have Rudolf Steiner.

[*Laughter*] So that’s another method, yeah. But you’re right. Of course mindfulness always begins with yourself as an adult. It was my first introduction: mindfulness with kids start with the adult—with you, as

we are sitting here—and when your child is getting a mindfulness course in school and at home he learns to yell to each other and to use all kind of words, then it becomes a trouble instead of something else. But there are also children that live in a very violent environment at home, and they get mindfulness in schools—in their classroom—and that brings them so much that they have a kind of very valuable . . . I don't know exactly the word, but maybe you feel what I mean. They have something in their heart and in their mind that they can use as a tool—as a life skill—and they don't have the parents that give them the love they need; they don't sometimes have a teacher that is very being there for them, but they have something learned from themselves, and that helps a lot. Yeah.

STUDENT 19: One of the things I thought of in terms of myself with mindfulness is it's helped me (and I'm only guessing it would help children) become more aware of the spaces. There's a lot of space in life between action to action or words that we say to the next thing we say, and I think for me mindfulness has helped me really appreciate and bring much more awareness to all those spaces. I remember hearing recently about a famous musician; he plays this beautiful piece, and he talks about how it's the pauses that make the piece. And it's the pauses and space in life that fill up so much of our life, and all those thoughts that go on in our mind really are creating our reality and our life all the time. What do we do with those thoughts when we're sitting here listening to people sharing or feeling our body against the chair? To me that's what mindfulness has helped me with, and I'm only guessing that's what it helps children with too.

ELINE: Yes, to be more aware of spaces, to be more aware of what's going on between people and between their thoughts and their emotions and their reaction to that, their response to that. It's about relationship.

STUDENT 19: Yeah, all those pauses.

ELINE: Yes, all those pauses. You're right, very important; thank you.

STUDENT 20: You already said this but didn't write it down, that mindfulness can help children with trauma and brain development.

ELINE: Yes, brain development is also a very important part. We are just beginning to explore that: brain development, trauma healing, sometimes.

STUDENT 21: I'm not sure of the research. Is it the prefrontal cortex mostly or is it amygdala as well, emotional control?

ELINE: Yes, it's about both, and it's about stress reduction. The amygdala—we have two of them—is responding to stress very much. When children doing mindfulness exercises, the amygdala reacts to that in a positive way, so it isn't firing all the signals to support children in reacting immediately or hitting someone immediately or getting a knife or a gun or that kind of thing. It reduces their reactions to stress, and it will help them to be fully aware of that they have a choice in reacting. Like we have our reactions to stress, we cannot avoid to have those first body reactions, but we have the choice of acting them out, and that's, for children, very important, for the later adults. Yeah, it's true.

STUDENT 22: I think that mindfulness can help every area of life; we talked about overstimulated, and I think that if the child . . . doesn't matter what they do: music or art or a sport or reading, if they're not present while they're doing it, there's no benefit from all of it. So we put our children in music courses to develop their brains. You put them in piano, so they use the right and the left and sports so that they can become great athletes, but if they're not present, then they're not getting the benefits of any of these activities; it's the same thing with school. I even remember myself in school. I didn't get much of anything because I was uncomfortable, even in just a sitting position. Being short, my legs never touched the ground. I was never comfortable, and I couldn't sit cross-legged because it wasn't appropriate, so I think that being able to be aware of the present and find those different stimuli . . . I work with autistic children, and it's helping them to realize . . . because they can't realize the stimuli, that it's affecting them, so to help just sit and realize, "My finger hurts; my toe is bothering me. I need to realize that, so I can move forward and be here." So I think that mindfulness helps with everything they do. Mindful eating, so it doesn't lead to obesity because you just eat to eat, and I think that mindfulness can . . . I mean, not just children. Everyone.

ELINE: Yes. That's true. Also, we live in a time that everything and every kid has to perform better. Everything has to be better than it is, and mindfulness teaches them that the way they are, they are good enough. They don't have to be a better child. They don't have to learn better or to act better or to

perform better or that kind of thing. When they do their best, the best they can, it's good enough. Yeah. And that's very important for them. Thank you very much.

STUDENT 23: By the same token, what mindfulness can also do is help a child notice, in a more embodied way, their moments of competence.

ELINE: Yeah, that's also very important. Thank you very much.

STUDENT 24: To your point about kids feeling like they're good enough, I think a lot of us adults—we become very practiced at thinking that we're not good enough.

ELINE: Yes, of course.

STUDENT 24: Many of us struggle with that. I think one of the major opportunities with mindfulness is that we are approaching individuals—these children—at a time when they haven't become as practiced with thinking about those . . . not practiced in a positive way but practiced in a negative way around those not-good-enough feelings. Then I think back to the neuroscience of it all; it's fascinating, the connection. I think it's the insula that connects the amygdala . . .

ELINE: Yeah.

STUDENT 24: And the prefrontal cortex and that's what they're calling the "mindfulness muscle," and it's just very fascinating.

ELINE: Yeah, when we do mindfulness with twenty-five children in a class, for example, 75 percent of the children who are practicing mindfulness for the first time in a class have such bad thoughts about themselves. Seventy-five of the children think they are stupid. They are dumb. They are losers. They are completely convinced of that, and that is not a thing that they make up; it's what they learned from the adults: "Don't smile like this; don't do like that; you have to act better; you have to don't sit like this, but sit like this." All the time they hear that kind of thing from adults in their intimate world. So the conclusion they make very easily is that "It's about me; it's about me. I'm not good enough. I'm not

sitting good enough; I'm not learning good enough. I'm not smart enough; I'm not sportive enough; I'm not humorous enough; I'm not enough." And mindfulness changes that.

After eight weeks, children are capable to have a much better feeling about just being themselves is good enough, and that's a miracle, I think, almost, that we need only a few weeks of practicing—being aware of this moment and knowing that not all our thoughts are true and that we are not our thoughts at all. That helps children, and they understand it very easy: that they are not their thoughts. That helps children a lot; it is our experience also—that when they can make a little bit of space between what they think and who they are, that that's just the space they need to know that it's not true when they think they are a loser. That thought is not a definition of themselves.

Yes, OK, what inner attitude . . . There were some answers right now in between all the answers we had. What inner attitude do we need to support our children?

You said it very right. I'm not sure about your name. What's your name?

STUDENT 25 (Howard): Howard.

ELINE: Howard told us already that it's so important to live mindfulness as an adult when you have children, when you teach children, when you work or live with children. That's a very important attitude. Are there any contraindications, do you think, for children to receive mindfulness lessons? Are there contraindications? It's also very important to know something about that. Yes?

STUDENT 26: My understanding is that some profound trauma can be somewhat of a contraindication in that some of the reliving of the trauma can occur, so potentially being somewhat tentative in not inviting, necessarily, using a different language, but allowing kids to keep their eyes open, for instance, if needed, and things like that.

ELINE: Yeah.

STUDENT 26: For profound trauma.

ELINE: Yeah, that's true. That's also important for us as teachers or therapists—that we know something about the background of children when you do it as a profession. Most of the children will benefit from it also when they have a profound trauma, but then sometimes we have to give them more space or the

opportunity to have some individual talks with the teacher or the appointment that when something is going wrong inside, that they can talk about it.

STUDENT 27: Would you recommend, then, if giving space . . . thinking of a child who, specifically had trauma or even if the child just brings it up after mindful sitting with themselves, almost a reflective period, with an adult or with a facilitator or a guide to help guide them through figuring out their own thoughts or . . .?

ELINE: Yeah, sometimes when there is profound trauma, sometimes children don't tell us before they go into a mindfulness class, for example, and it comes out during the training. It doesn't happen so much, but sometimes it happens, and then sometimes it is better to stop the training and start a therapy. But children live in a system with parents, and sometimes parents don't want to know something about therapy, or they don't want to support a child in that, so we don't have one answer for this. It's occurring, the situation; there are so many different situations. But I didn't experience a lot that children had to leave the mindfulness setting. Sometimes we had some children that lost one of their parents very shortly before doing a training, and they found it so valuable to be in the training, for example.

I had an experience with four children in a class that had a very violent background at home, and the teachers didn't know so much about it, but when we had the lesson about feeling feelings and how you can respond to difficult feelings, they started to talk about how they react to anger, for example. One girl told me that she was hurting herself. She was going with her fingernails on the asphalt—how do you call it?—until she was going to bleed. Then when one girl was telling this, the others—there were three others in the class with a very violent background at home—they could find the courage to tell a little bit more about their experiences. One was bouncing with her head into the wall. So it was about hurting themselves, and that was the way they reacted on their own horrible feelings, and mindfulness helped them to hear, at least, that there was another way to cope with feelings. This was the only way they could deal with it. But the parents—they didn't want to do anything with mindfulness; they didn't want to be helped by therapists. So sometimes it's very difficult, and you have to find a kind of way and stay in very close contact with the children and find out what they need.

Most of the time, children, when you are in really contact with them, they know exactly what they need. Sometimes it's just real attention and the possibility to come to an adult and be really heard and really felt by that person. Most of the time, that's enough. They don't need solutions; they don't

need problem solving; they just need a person that really feels who they are and can come close to them.

Thank you. I think we can stop this part, but for us, this is important, an important guidance, always, to find out what our own motivation is to teach children mindfulness. There are four important stepping stones, when we start teaching mindfulness.

When we are teaching very young children the start of mindfulness, we start with the “stop button.” It’s very difficult to find our own stop button sometimes. Then we ask children, “Where is your stop button? Where would it be? Would it be on your head? Would it be on your shoulder? Would it be in your belly? If you have a stop button, where would it be?” They find miraculous places on their body where their stop button might be. Most of the time, when we have a parent meeting, we also ask the parents where their stop button is, because it’s not only for children. They can only use their own stop button, not use their parents’ stop button, and parents cannot use the children’s stop button. It’s a very interesting thing, that stop button. Most of the time we have just “go on buttons,” so that’s the first step: how to use our own stop buttons and realize that we are able to stop.

For children, it’s difficult to stop—especially to stop with very nice things like eating very sweet things or gaming or do things they really like to do. They can stop very easy with homework. No problem. But stopping with gaming or television—it’s very difficult for them. And why is that, do you think? Why is it so difficult to stop with something we really like? It’s about motivation. It’s just about motivation. Children are so motivated to look very long at a very interesting film. They are so motivated to go on the play yard or sport or making music if they love music. We have a son—he’s a rapper by profession—and he had no stop button for that particular area. He could go on for hours, until deep in the night, with making text for his raps and finding the right tunes and that kind of thing. He couldn’t stop so very easy because he was so motivated to be a good rapper.

Stopping is also a kind of remembering. Remember that you can stop when you feel that you are getting too tired. When you have to find your stop button, you need to be in contact with your body. That’s what we are going to talk tomorrow morning or tomorrow afternoon, to be in contact with your body. Because when you are not in contact with your body, you’re not able to stop. You just stop until you drop down somewhere and fall asleep because you are so tired. So stopping is the first stepping stone by teaching and starting mindfulness.

Observing is the second stepping stone. Observing what’s going on in this moment. Stopping is about stopping automatically going on.

The third stepping stone is about relaxing. When we are not relaxed, we don't seem to have a choice of making a stop. And when we have stopped and we observe what's going on at this moment that we can find out how we are—when we relax a little bit—then we can make the choice that is healthful or wise or whatever. Sometimes it's not wise at all, and then we find out that it's not wise at all.

So the first three steps, we need to make a choice—to make a conscious choice—to choose to address the situation consciously instead of reacting impulsively. And the frog can help us to make these four steps. Maybe this is a good moment of the evening to do a short frog exercise and find out how these four steps can bring us back in this moment and make us have the choice to refocus every moment again. Maybe you can have the intention to use those four steps and find out how important it is to don't just sit and wait for the text, but have the intention first that it's very important for children, but it's also very important for us to have the intention to really be with what we are doing now.

This is an exercise, the frog exercise, which children learn in the first session of the first week. We teach them in the class. Before of after this meditation, we tell them a story. For the older children, like your age, for example, it's the story about Sarah, and it's in the book *Sitting Still*. Maybe you read the story about Sarah: she hit her knee so much that it was bleeding a lot, and she was very fearful about it. She had to go to the hospital, and the doctor got a needle, and it had to be stitched. I was with that girl when it happened. All the stories in the book are real stories. When I met this girl Sarah at the camping place and she was bleeding and she was completely pale of fear and shivering, I asked her to just be with her breathing; when I asked her to do that—in the meantime, I was on her back doing like this to keep her a little bit calm. The mother was at another place at the camping, and then she asked me, "Can I do this also when I have to go to the hospital with the ambulance?" I said, "Sure, it will help you a lot; when you are with your breathing, you are not thinking about all the things that can happen to you." So she really tried that and did that for the first time, and it helped her so much that afterwards she came back to the camping, and she had a lot of stitches, and her knee was all white with bandages and that kind of things, but she said to me, "I did it. I could be with my breath during the time that the doctor went with his needle in my knee."

Sometimes I get the question from teachers, "Isn't the story too much for the children, because it's not a funny story?" But children really have found out that they have these kind of experiences themselves. When I was seven, I was on my bike—and I never forget that moment—and I ran into a caravan that was right in front of me, and it was parked, that caravan, and my chin was a little bit like the other way where my face was, and it was all over blood, and . . . Children fall down and fall out of

trees and have a lot of accidents, so this isn't such a bad story, I think. But for the little ones, we have other stories, and I would like to end this evening with the story the little ones get to hear before they do a breathing exercise. It's about Freddy the Frog.

One beautiful sunny day, Freddy the Frog spots his friend Hector the Hopgoblin. Hector the Hopgoblin—do I pronounce it right?

STUDENT 28: Hobgoblin.

ELINE: Hobgoblin. [*Laughter*] Hector the Hobgoblin is always cheerful. Riding on his hobgoblin bike, he sings a song into his beard. "Whoop-de-doop-de-ding, I always do my thing. Whoop-de-doop-de-dee, I've come up with a great idea. Whoop-de-doop-de-hoplahey, I'm having a wonderful day." And then, suddenly—wham!—before he knows, he's on the ground. He has a terrible fall.

His nice red coat is dirty, his beard is caked in the mud, and his hands hurt. They hurt a lot. His hands took the brunt of the fall. He's afraid to look at his hands they hurt so much. Maybe his hands are torn to pieces and will never be whole again. Now what?

Freddy the Frog is sitting by the pond when he hears a noise. What could that be, the soft and sad sobbing and sniveling in the forest behind him? Who could it be? He sets off in search and soon comes across by his friend Hector the Hopgoblin. Hopgoblin. Sorry, Hobgoblin.

"What's happened, Hector?" he asks.

Hector can barely talk through his tears. He looks ghostly pale with fright. But Freddy the Frog has already figured it out. Hector has had a terrible fall, and all he can do is cry.

"Why don't you place your hand on your belly, my friend," he says, "and look at me? First you breathe in, and then you breathe out again, in and out again. Breathing like a frog is great help when you've had a fright and you are in a lot of pain. Go ahead; do it a couple more times."

Gradually, the crying becomes less. There is just the occasional sob now [*makes sniffing sounds*]. Hector notices that it helps. He even has the courage to look at his hands, which are itching so much. They're bleeding. For a split second, he panics again.

"Carry on breathing, Hector," Freddy tells him. And sure enough, it calms him right down. He becomes calmer and calmer. "Breathing helps."

"Always?"

"Yes. Always. Especially after you have fallen."

"And what about the blood?"

“A Band-Aid will take care of the blood, especially the ones with the pictures—the fun pictures.”

This is the way the stories can support the meditations. And in every lesson, there is a meditation, a story, and a kind of small movement—mindful movements.