

**A SHORT INTRODUCTION
FOR PARENTS & GUARDIANS**

Learning to BREATHE

**A MINDFULNESS CURRICULUM
FOR ADOLESCENTS**

Patricia C. Broderick, PH.D. © 2025
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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION



You've probably heard it said that raising children 'does not come with an instruction manual.' If you are reading this booklet as a parent or guardian, the meaning of the expression is clear. Raising a child is both deeply rewarding and also, at times, maddeningly challenging. Most of all, parenting can be confusing. We want to do well by our children, but what does that really mean and how can we manage it in difficult circumstances?

Parents of young children often struggle with the fatigue involved in taking care of their children's needs, all day, every day. Yet, young children can be loving, responsive, and (sometimes) docile in ways that melt a parent's heart. This can make most aspects of child-rearing gratifying and can motivate parents' engagement. In general, as children enter adolescence, the parent-child dynamic changes. This can introduce a few new challenges.



Across the world, the transition to adolescence is beginning at younger and younger ages. In fact, adolescent researchers now identify multiple stages for this period of development: pre-adolescence, early-adolescence, mid-adolescence, late-adolescence, and so forth. It takes a long time to grow an adult, and parents are on the front lines of this hard work.

This booklet is clearly not an instruction manual - because parents and guardians need to develop their own unique relationship with their growing and changing children. Instead, it is intended to support parents as they grow along with their children through the adolescent period. We will discuss some information about adolescent development, fresh from researchers who make this study their primary occupation. We will also describe what mindfulness is, why it's so important for adolescents, and why parents, too, may wish to practice it for their own wellbeing. Finally, we will knit these topics together by presenting the plan and goals of the Learning to BREATHE (L2B) curriculum and some reasons why it can help you and your family manage stress, cultivate attention, emotion regulation, and compassion.



REFLECTION

Try responding to the following sentence prompts with the deepest wish you hold for your child (or children):

"I wish for my child"

If you wish, include one or two more wishes. Is there one thing in common that these wishes involve?

Now, consider yourself as a parent and respond to this sentence with your deepest wish for yourself:

As a parent, I wish for myself"

If you wish, include one or two more. Is there one thing in common that these wishes involve?



Chapter 2:

A little developmental information



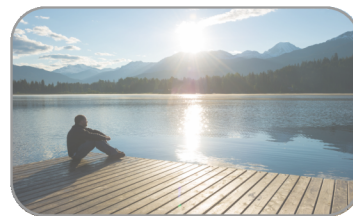
No one needs to tell a parent or guardian that their child is approaching adolescence. The physical changes are obvious, as are the emotional highs and lows. Even though most parents understand and expect these developments, they can get hit hard when their child's demands for independence accelerate and their emotional weather is stormy. For some adolescents, this transition is relatively smooth, while for others, the shift can feel sharply abrupt.

Influences like genes, diet, and other environmental conditions, including the experience of traumatic events, affect physical and emotional changes. Some maturational changes are obvious, while others - like adolescent brain changes - are less apparent. One of the key findings about development in recent years is that the brain changes throughout our lifespan, not just in childhood. This is an awesome and somewhat scary fact: the brain can change for the better, but also for the worse.

What is it that changes? Rather than thinking of the brain as an organ that's simply growing or changing in size, think of it as an intricate network or system of parts. That's why the brain is part of a nervous 'system.' Like an orchestra, different parts interact to play a role in the symphony, communicating messages through a network of cells called neurons. Neurons are the worker cells of the brain, and their interconnected networking results in thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and so forth. The network pathways that are used or practiced a lot tend to become more habitual. Some others, that are less practiced, can fade away. This means that our brains are responding to what's out there in our environment and to what we do with it. When we learn a new language or an equation for solving a math problem, our brains have changed. When we experience some unfortunate event, our brains change as well. Our brains have evolved to rewire themselves as we learn and grow.

Our experience, in the classroom, in the family, at work, with media and with friends, all refine our neural circuitry, and practice can make these changes endure.

Some periods in the lifespan are particularly ripe for major brain rewiring, and adolescence is one of them. Parents are often awed by how quickly their toddlers and preschoolers gain vocabulary. This is an example of a rapid period of brain development in language skills. Similarly, adolescence is a period of rapid brain reorganization in areas of social and cognitive skills. In other words, adolescent brains are ripe for learning particular things. These include things about life that are more complicated than vocabulary or math problems. In the experiences they have with peers, kids learn important lessons about being part of a social group. They are not yet adults, but they're no longer children anymore. They need to figure out where they stand relative to others, need to learn to negotiate, solve problems, cope with inevitable difficulties and stress, plan for the future, and construct their own identities. They also need to learn to manage the strong and often confusing emotions they feel inside themselves.



REFLECTION

Take a moment to reflect on your own adolescence.

How would I describe my own transition to adolescence?
(easy, smooth, rocky, difficult, etc.)

What were some of the experiences that affected me most during my own adolescence?

Who were some of the people that affected me most during my own adolescence?

What or who helped me with the challenges I faced as an adolescent?

What kind of support would have helped me at that time?



CHAPTER 3:

THIS IS INTERESTING, BUT SO WHAT?



While some understanding of adolescence development is interesting, it's most helpful to connect how the changes of this period of life actually affect youth and the people who love and care for them. When children are young, from toddlerhood through early school years, most parents, guardians, and teachers take the job of teaching manners and good behavior quite seriously. "Remember to share your toy with your sister." "Say please." "Don't hit your brother." The list goes on and on...

Although we adults often keep up the good work into adolescence, the job can get a lot harder. Offering rewards for good behavior and consequences for misbehavior, like losing one's dessert, fail to be effective. One reason, of course, is that kids are older and less receptive to certain threats and rewards. In their growing need for independence, responses to parent, guardian and teacher demands can range from semi-compliant to outright oppositional.

Adolescents may view their peers as the best guides for acceptable behavior, modeling all manner of dress, speech and mannerisms, in an effort to find a fit that suits them as they cross the terrain of adolescence on the road to adulthood. The child-version no longer fits, but the adult version is still a long way off. For parents, this can be unsettling. It's the new frontier.

Whereas many child-rearing problems in the early years turn on modifying behavior, the action turns inward during adolescence. Truth be told, many parents just don't know what their adolescent children are thinking, feeling or doing all the time, compared to what they knew at earlier stages of life. Many adolescents guard their privacy in their march toward autonomy, although this can differ to a greater or lesser extent depending upon personality and circumstances.



It's not uncommon for adolescents to believe that parents and guardians have legitimate authority in moral areas that belong to a set of ethical principles (like cheating or stealing). However, they are less likely to see parental authority as legitimate in areas of social convention, like hair or dress styles. Such decisions, they might reason, are personal and thus up to them. Sometimes family conflicts arise because what appears to be a personal choice to the adolescent, such as whom to date or whether to drink alcohol, veers into a safety issue for parents. Remember that adventures in an expanding social world are normative and important for adolescents to experience. Even so, they may introduce tensions into families.

These transitions, from dependence to independence, can be stressful for young people, too. Life is complicated today. The world is rapidly changing, and its problems are becoming increasingly complex. Parents are not available to offer real-time advice when kids are in the company of their peers. Research tells us that the adolescent brain is like an airport that is still 'under construction.' There is a lot of incoming traffic, but the air traffic controller is not experienced enough to handle everything well. When adolescents learn healthy coping skills and effective tools for stress management, the brain's 'construction process' results in wholesome mental, emotional, and social habits that prepare them for a healthy adulthood.

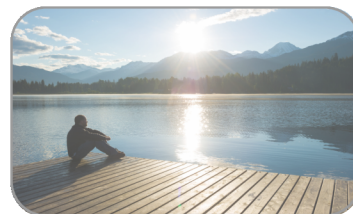
But too much stress, social pressure, or exposure to maladaptive coping mechanisms can result in kids learning ineffective styles of coping that don't help them in the long run. Sometimes adolescents try to go it alone - avoiding help from others who love them or relying on friends and social media for information. What happens when problems get so great and feelings get so strong that they turn a corner and become a mental health problem?

Mental stress increases in adolescence, in general, and adolescent brains are particularly sensitive to social stress. Chronic stress decreases ability to pay attention, to learn effectively, and to bounce back from bad moods. Depression and anxiety can develop when the stress is too prolonged or too overwhelming. Behavioral problems and underachievement are also related to poorly managed stress. Young people need to learn skills for managing many tasks, for setting goals and persisting at them, for switching mental gears when needed, and for coping with strong emotions that can feel overwhelming. So, when the adolescent brain, with its underdeveloped ability to manage emotions, meets emotionally charged, high risk, or chronically stressful situations, the result can be a perfect storm that sets the stage for later difficulties.



The good news is that adolescence also presents an important period of opportunity. Because kids can learn effective as well as ineffective stress management skills, we can equip them with tools they can use to deal with challenges. Mindfulness is a way of strengthening those behaviors of the mind that support attention, learning, good decision-making, regulation of emotions, self-acceptance and compassion. In other words, it's good stress management. Learning to BREATHE (L2B) is a curriculum designed to strengthen these skills and foster stress management through understanding and practicing mindfulness.

REFLECTION



Imagine yourself as your own adolescent child. If you have more than one child, try this exercise by taking the perspective of each one. How would they answer these questions?

What stresses me out most?

What would help me deal with stress better?

What do I wish my parent (or guardian) would do to help me?



Chapter 4:

What is mindfulness and why do parents need it, too?



Mindful awareness, as used in L2B, refers to the practice of training the mind to pay attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and with openness, curiosity and kindness in the service of wise and compassionate action (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Research on mindfulness suggest that this practice can impact academic and behavioral outcomes by supporting the emotion regulation and attention that ultimately support well-being and learning. Mindfulness helps us manage strong emotions and unhelpful thoughts without pushing them away or getting tangled up in them.

When we practice mindfulness, we look clearly and honestly at our own experience without turning away from it, without blaming someone else for it, and without blaming ourselves. This sounds pretty easy, but it actually takes some practice. Take a moment to consider how good we humans are at coming up with excuses and rationalizations for our reactions. Common ways of dealing with stress, like giving up, avoiding, lashing out, blaming others, over-eating or drinking, over-spending, getting lost in social media, to name a few, are not only limited to adolescents. We all tend to think that the cause of our stress is somewhere outside of ourselves, and that the solution is there, too. If only we could change X or Y (the thinking goes), we'd be happy.

But sometimes circumstances can't be changed easily, if at all, and the truth is that life is filled with large problems and small annoyances that we'd love to change if we could. A central feature of emotional resilience is the ability to find a way to rebalance after the experience of discomfort or what is commonly called "stress" or distress.

The ability to manage distress, from the normal day-to-day unpleasantness of not getting your own way or being bored with schoolwork to more difficult life circumstances, is built on the practice of tolerating distress without necessarily acting on it immediately.

So, what would happen if we changed our own automatic reactions to the things that stress us out? What if we shifted the way we notice things that are unpleasant? In mindfulness practice, we learn how to practice this skill. We turn toward our experience with curiosity, kindness and acceptance, a posture that strengthens our tolerance for distress and changes unhelpful, reactive patterns. When practiced regularly, mindfulness can provide a powerful tool to restore emotional balance, curb engagement in harmful behaviors, and foster wellbeing.

Notice that the emphasis in this kind of stress management is on each one of us - not on changing things outside of us. Clearly, we do need to make changes in certain circumstances and situations in our lives. This can be a good thing. What mindfulness helps us do, however, is take a clear-eyed, nonjudgmental look at what's happening, right here and right now, so that any decision to make changes or to respond to events can be more balanced and effective. It also helps us see the patterns of thinking and feeling that lock us into downward spirals and helps us learn to gently free ourselves in the process. It gives us some mental space and helps us recognize that we are bigger than our problems. In L2B, we call this 'gaining the inner edge.'

Greater emotional balance comes from practice. We can't just understand mindfulness as a concept; we actually have to try it out. In the intentional directing of attention and acceptance to our real-time experience, we can become stronger, more balanced and more empowered. We become increasingly aware of our own inner ability to handle the ups and downs of life with greater ease and freedom.

As you may have guessed, mindfulness is not just for kids. Parents and guardians can also benefit greatly from some mindfulness. Kids pick up on adults' emotional states, a phenomenon called emotional contagion, and they learn lessons about stress management from their first and most important teachers.

Parents also go through their own transition during their children's adolescence. They must adapt from being the all-knowing parent of young children to one who recognizes the normal expression of autonomy-seeking without being too threatened by it. Certainly, a little awareness and self-compassion for the challenges this process presents can only help.

THE ABC'S OF COMPASSION FOR PARENTS AND GUARDIANS: A PRACTICE

This practice is designed to be used whenever you recognize that you are struggling with some difficult emotion or circumstance. It's also helpful to do when you're being too hard on yourself. Parents and guardians can practice this even when they are not feeling particularly stressed so that they can use it when they need it. The ABC format makes it easy to remember and practice frequently. A stands for "awareness," B stands for "breathing," and C stands for "compassion." The three short steps can be done in about a minute or two or can be expanded to take longer if desired, especially if any discomfort continues. It's a good mindfulness tool for dealing with difficulties, and it can help to restore a sense of balance.



THE ABC'S OF COMPASSION FOR PARENTS AND GUARDIANS: A PRACTICE



A

When you notice that you are feeling anxious, disrespected, powerless, frightened, sad, inadequate, angry or any other uncomfortable feelings, bring awareness to the difficult emotions you are experiencing. Don't try to block it out or do something immediately to get rid of it. Just notice and be aware of it as gently as you can. You can say inwardly: What I'm going through right now is really hard for me or These feelings are very uncomfortable.

B

Take a moment to find your breath in the body and take a few full mindful breaths. Feel the movement of the breath in the body. Feel the in-breath and the out-breath as it moves through your body for a few cycles.

C

Now, bring to mind some compassionate wishes, directing them to yourself and repeat them inwardly, linking them to the movements of the in-breath and the out-breath. Inwardly repeat these phrases or create your own for as many breaths as you want: Breathing in, I send myself compassion. Breathing out, I send myself strength. You may want to repeat a single word as you breathe in and out. Some suggestions are love, peace, patience, stillness, strength, calm, balance or breathe.

CHAPTER 5:

A WAY TO DO IT: LEARNING TO BREATHE



It might be helpful to stop and think for a moment about how much effort we adults invest in our children. We are concerned about their health, what they eat, and how well they sleep. We help with and remind (or nag) them about homework on a daily basis. We may advocate on their behalf with schools, seeking out those teachers whom we believe best meet their needs. We may help arrange their social events. Although not everyone is able to do this, we save for their future education and may also invest in educational opportunities well beyond what schools offer. We may search out the best coaches, camps, or extracurricular opportunities to expand their horizons. All of this is a true demonstration of our love and care for our children. But these investments are primarily weighted on the side of cognitive and academic support.

Many of us also recognize the struggles our children face. Unfortunately, we can feel helpless in the face of problems that appear beyond our control. We adults simply don't know how to address some of the difficulties that youth are facing in today's world. Chronic stress seems to be an equal-opportunity problem, despite our best actions and intentions as parents and guardians. Some of us are afraid of the challenges and seek to protect kids at all costs. This may work, but only up to a point. Might it not be a good idea to strengthen kids' emotional resources, so that kids are as emotionally balanced as they are academically well-prepared?

The concept of prevention has a long history in the health fields because of its effectiveness. In short, it's easier to prevent problems than it is to remediate them. Learning to BREATHE can be thought of as a prevention program for youth and adults that offers fundamental knowledge, tools, and opportunities to practice skills to support emotion regulation and stress reduction.

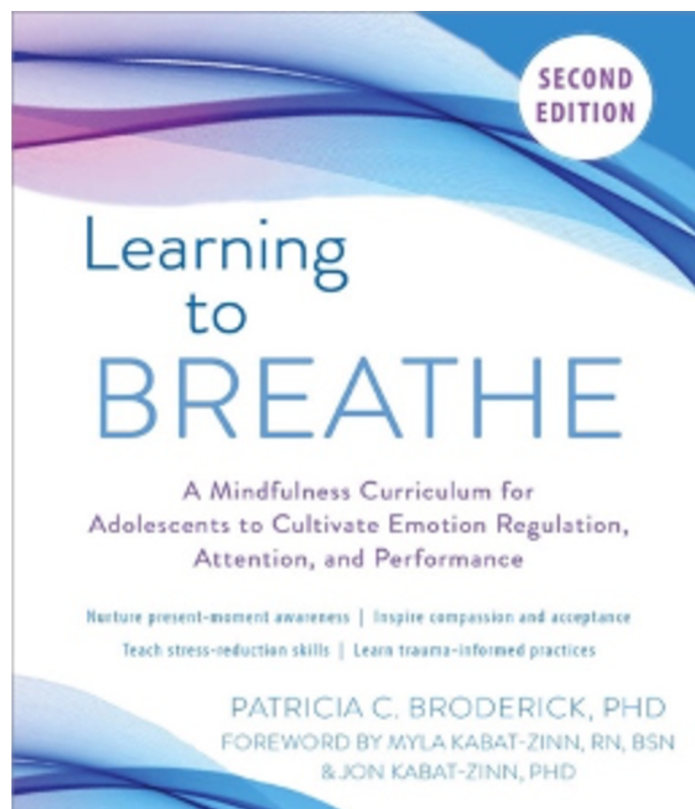
Think about prevention this way: If you had to save yourself in deep water, wouldn't it be better to know how to swim than to have to wait for a life preserver? L2B develops the tools of mindfulness which, once understood and practiced, become an inner technology, an inner resource that helps us surf the waves of whatever life brings.

In the Learning to BREATHE program, participants first learn about the definition and qualities of mindful awareness, compared to mindlessness, and how to practice it. We practice becoming aware of physical sensations to foster attention and well-being. Then, students learn to recognize the nature of their thoughts and become more aware of thinking patterns that can trap them in cycles of anxiety or depression. They move on to learn about the emotions we all have but often don't know how to handle. Mindfulness practice and activities help students notice thoughts, feelings and sensations nonjudgmentally and with acceptance and curiosity so that they can decide to act more intentionally and with greater discernment. Throughout the lessons, the message of compassion is continually reinforced. Students begin to recognize that what they experience is very much like what other people experience. We are all in this together. This recognition provides a safe environment in which to see both pleasant and unpleasant experience more clearly and compassionately. The overall goal of the program is to encourage the development of awareness and compassion and help students bring more mindfulness into their lives.

We all want our kids to be happy, but we know we can't guarantee that the external supports we provide will necessarily ensure happiness. The search for meaning, identity and life satisfaction is essentially an inside job; children must construct it for themselves. In this process, ups and downs are inevitable. Mindful awareness training can teach a skillset for healthy living that builds the inner resilience that does not entirely depend on the changing nature of external events.

On the next page, you will see all the themes and key messages of the L2B lessons. There is also a brief "Message to Students" that illustrates how the lessons evolve and connect with each other.

Thank you for all you do for your children. If you have any further questions, please go to the L2B website at <https://learning2breathe.org/> for more information.



BREATHE PROGRAM

THEMES

B - Body

Listen! Your Body has something to tell you.

R - Reflections/ Thoughts

Thoughts are just thoughts.

E - Emotions

Surf the waves of your Emotions.

A - Attention

Attention to the body, thoughts and feelings is good stress management.

T - Tenderness

Learn to be kind to yourself and others.

H - Healthy Habits of Mind

Practice healthy habits of mind by paying attention to the inside and the outside.

E - Empowerment/ Inner Edge

Gain the inner edge.

BREATHE MESSAGE TO STUDENTS

To be happy and successful in life, you need both outer and inner strength. Every day you deal with different events in your life, like things that happen in your family, with friends, in school, and in the world. There are also things going on inside you. For example, thoughts and feelings come and go all the time. It's easy to lose your inner balance and power if you get carried away by any of it. Mindfulness builds inner strength, **empowers you (E)** and helps you understand your mind – and it will help you master and strengthen the skills you choose to work on in school, in sports, and in life.

Mindfulness is a **special way of paying attention** that takes practice. A good place to start is to practice paying attention to your **breath (B)** and to what's happening in your **body (B)**. Being mindful of **thoughts (R)** and **feelings (E)** also helps you stay centered and strong. This isn't easy. We all **get stressed out and mess up a lot (A)**, so we have to have a good attitude about this. Practicing **kindness (T)** helps us be less judgmental toward ourselves and others and helps us keep going. With practice, we can all **live a more mindful life (H)**. That's what we'll be learning about and practicing in this program.