

## **Meditation & Montessori**

### **By Julia Volkman**

I am writing this on the eve of departing for a week-long retreat. It is not your ordinary retreat. I am going to Karme Choling Family Camp. We parents will spend our mornings practicing meditation and studying mindful parenting while the children will have summer camp and dip their toes into the meditative arts. In the afternoons, we will come together as a family on our own or with friends to hike, swim, and enjoy the breathtaking natural landscape of Vermont's northeast kingdom.

So why might you care about my summer vacation plans? Well, because I've also been studying the benefits of meditation on the developing mind. As the healthcare field is now learning, meditation is not necessarily about one's religion or spirituality—it's more like push-ups for the brain. Doctor's are recommending it as something we do every day for general health and well-being, like eating vegetables and getting exercise. The Mayo Clinic calls it "a simple, fast way to reduce stress" (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2011).

And it's not just physicians who are touting the benefits of meditation. The cognitive neuroscientist Adele Diamond has reported that the walking on the line activities in Montessori classrooms are like walking meditation; they help to develop executive functions like self-regulation, self-control, and cognitive flexibility (Diamond, 2011). Of course, we also have the Silence Game, a form of seated meditation, and we all know how much self-discipline and self control it takes the children to succeed at this...and how powerful it is when they do. For the very young child, sitting meditation is an exercise in control of movement that directly develops higher brain capacities.

If you've ever practiced seated meditation, you know why this is so transformative. Contrary to some media images, meditation is not easy. You have to sit there, maintain your posture, not scratch your itch, let your legs fall asleep (again), and gently observe your thoughts and emotions without doing a darn thing. You just sit. No matter if you're thinking about drinking lemonade, duking it out with your ex, or solving the problem that's been gnawing you, you just sit. You silently label the thoughts/emotions 'thinking' and let them pass. No matter what.

And you know what happens inside your brain when you do this? All kinds of great stuff! The wiring in our brain actually changes. As we learn to rest in stillness, we switch from lots of short neural connections to longer, stronger ones that bring essential areas of the brain into direct communication (Berkovich-Ohana, 2012; Brewer, 2011). We lose connections that get in the way and gain ones that make our brains work better. It's like when we start an exercise program; we lose fat and gain muscle.

These changes are proving to be incredibly beneficial. Studies have found that meditation is effective in treating depression, panic disorder, chronic pain, substance-use disorders, and anxiety (Hollon, 2004; Brewer, 2011). It also improves attention and self-regulation and can reduce attention and behavior problems in children (Tang, 2007; Semple, 2010).

This is particularly important for children with ADHD. Scientists have found that children with ADHD have decreased connections in the networks of neurons that manage attention (Tomasi, 2012). One really interesting study showed that the development of those attention networks was delayed in juvenile offenders (Shannon, 2011). The incarcerated teenagers had neural connections that looked developmentally much younger than they should have and their behavior was significantly more impulsive than the control group.

So, with all of this information about why meditation is important for the developing mind, it's about time I stopped being so loosey-goosey about teaching my 7-year-old son Dante how to meditate. Since he was little, he has watched me when I meditate, sometimes coming to sit on top of me, sometimes insisting on gaining my attention, sometimes sitting on his cushion near me, etc. So, about two months ago I made a personal commitment to develop a regular meditation practice with my son. And this has inspired me to bring formal seated meditation into the Montessori classroom—think of it as an extension of the Silence Game that can be done independently.

Dante and I started by sitting for three minutes. I gave a brief instruction. “We take a comfortable seated position. Our backs are upright. Our hands are placed gently where they fall on our thighs. Our gaze is relaxed and down. The mouth is open and the tongue is on the roof of the mouth. We notice the breath coming in and going out, coming in and going out. When we notice that we are thinking about something, we just label it ‘thinking’ and bring our attention back to the breath.” Then, I rang the gong, started the timer on my iPhone, and we sat. (Just so you know, I've had a meditation practice for about 15 years, so I've had a lot of time to really internalize and absorb the instruction. If this is new to you, you may want to seek out a meditation teacher and begin your own practice before introducing it to the children.)

So, what do you think happened? Well, let's just say that Dante wasn't exactly at one with the universe. He fidgeted, grumbled, exhaled with great volume, and hunched. What did I do? I played the role of *umdze*, the meditation leader. I maintained the posture and meditated. I noticed my overwhelming desire to tell him to cut it out, to, “sit up straight and make some effort, for goodness sakes” and just labeled it ‘thinking.’ Then, when the iPhone's harp sound rang as our three minutes came to an end, I rang the gong three times and smiled. But the *next* day, realizing that I had to be a bit more concrete and offer some points of attention, I changed my instruction: “In meditation, we try to maintain our posture for the *whole* time. Even if we want to scratch an itch, we don't. We try to sit still. Today we'll try to sit still for three minutes.” I rang the gong, started the timer, and sat. Well, it helped. There was *less* mumbling and moving about.

We continued pretty much in this same pattern for a few weeks as I slowly increased the time we sat. At some point, I asked if he wanted me to repeat the instruction or if he wanted to give it. He chose to give it and my heart utterly melted with how well he explained how to meditate. I liked it so much that the next day I asked if I could film him. He agreed and, if you like, you can watch him give the instruction on YouTube (it's linked on my website: [www.maitrilearning.com/resources](http://www.maitrilearning.com/resources)).

Now you have to realize that it's summertime. Dante and I have been outside a lot: in the woods, walking in the creek near our home, hiking, etc... So on one particular morning, he was

absolutely riddled with bug bites. I mean, if you didn't know better, you'd think he had the mumps on his legs! So, I asked to give the instruction that day and after saying how we try to remain still and not even scratch an itch, I added: "This is going to be a particular challenge for you today because you have so many bug bites." He perked up. I rang the gong, set the timer, and he sat...in perfect stillness for 11 minutes! Not a single scratch. Wow.

Victory! Right? Well, two days later, he was like a Mexican jumping bean on the cushion. So, the *next day*, I added a part to the instruction about how this was such an ancient teaching that had travelled all over the world from India where it was first given over 2,500 years ago. Again, he perked up and was much more settled when we sat. This morning he sat in perfect stillness for 16 minutes.

Do you see the pattern? We start with what we know and then we adapt based on what we observe. We don't correct the child in the middle of their activity. We re-present at a neutral moment. We find the points of interest and draw attention to them. Over time, the work will lay down a Herculean neural network in the child's brain...and ours.

This year I'm hoping to get meditation as an exercise started in the classrooms where I mentor. Here's my album write-up:

<b>Materials:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● One meditation cushion set (zabuton and zafu) located in a quiet area of the room</li> <li>● One small cymbal/gong (very quiet, gentle tone)</li> <li>● A timer</li> </ul>
<b>Prerequisites</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Striking the gong</li> <li>● Using the timer</li> <li>● Walking on the line</li> <li>● The Silence Game</li> </ul>
<b>Presentation:</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Invite the child to do some work with you.</li> <li>2. Say, "I'm going to teach you how to meditate. I'll have a turn and then you can have a turn."</li> <li>3. Set the timer for less than 30 seconds.</li> <li>4. Gracefully assume the meditation posture on the cushion. With exaggeration, make your back upright, place your hands on your thighs, place your tongue on the roof of your mouth, and breathe.</li> <li>5. Say, "I'm going to sit perfectly still just like this until the timer goes off. I won't even scratch an itch!"</li> <li>6. Start the timer. Ring the gong.</li> <li>7. Maintain the posture and breathe.</li> <li>8. When the timer goes off, ring the gong three times and maintain the posture, acutely listening until you can't hear the gong anymore. Then, smile and</li> </ol>

	<p>delight in your accomplishment.</p> <p>9. Say, “Now it’s your turn.”</p> <p>10. Observe the child and note any points that need to be represented/clarified later, at a neutral moment.</p> <p>11. When the child is finished say, “That was meditation. You can meditate whenever you like.”</p>
<b>Purpose:</b>	<p>1. To help the child develop careful and purposeful movement</p> <p>2. To help the child control his movements</p> <p>3. To help the child learn self-regulation, self-discipline, and cognitive flexibility</p>
<b>Points of Interest:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The upright posture</li> <li>• The open mouth</li> <li>• The tongue on the roof of the mouth</li> <li>• The feeling of the breath going in and out</li> <li>• The sound of the chime</li> <li>• The completion of the timer</li> </ul>
<b>Age:</b>	3 and up

For the older child, I will use more language. For additional presentations, I’ll introduce putting attention on the breath, labeling thoughts ‘thinking,’ increasing the time, and so on.

Meditation is an incredibly powerful tool to help develop and refine the brain’s very architecture. In everyday life, this translates into improved executive functions and greater well-being. We can offer it in a formal yet simple way to very young children. Then, they can be free to choose it just as they would choose any other independent work.

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