



LITTLE YOGI DECK

User Guide

Section 1: Fostering a Supportive Foundation for Practice

Finding a Seat & Dropping Your Anchor

When kids feel big emotions, it can really help to pause. In this foundational activity of mindful breathing that is like “home base” for all the activities in the *Little Yogi Deck*, it may take some time for children to find the most comfortable seat possible. Fidgeting will likely happen in any case because this is the natural state of children’s bodies.

Take some time to have them experiment sitting in a cross-legged seat, sitting on their heels, with their legs straight out in front of them, or even in a chair, if available. In each seat, have them rock forward and back, and side to side. Experiment with making their backs tall and even stiff, and then contrast that with a soft rounded back. Ask children to share their experience of sitting in these different ways to find the most comfortable seat possible. Be sure to emphasize having a long tall spine where the body is not too rigid, but also not too soft. This creates space for the lungs and diaphragm to allow a full, deep intake of breath, which is the most powerful way to settle a topsy-turvy emotional state.

Locating Your Anchor

In the same way an anchor pulls a boat back to a steady, familiar spot on the water, in this activity children will practice letting the breath be an anchor for attention. When exploring this mindful breathing practice with kids, it can be helpful to experiment with the location of their “anchor” or breath because it is a very subtle physical exploration. The kinesthetic feedback that children get by touching their body in the regions that the breath might move is a wonderful way to make the quieter art of mindful breathing more accessible to children, particularly for kids who are experiencing anxiety or another emotion that makes it difficult to focus.

Starting with the hand on the belly, have your kids take 2–3 cycles of breath and notice what occurred in their belly region when they breathed. Then ask them to place their hand on their chest, to observe the movement of the breath, and give feedback.

Finally, ask your kids to place a hand in front of their nose to notice what they sensed while breathing. Ask them to choose the spot for their hand where their ability to observe their breath was easiest. After this exploration of finding their anchor, the practice of anchor breathing can begin.

Teaching the Language of Breathing: To “Inhale/Exhale” or to “Breathe in/Breathe Out”

Consider whether to use the language of “inhale and exhale” versus “breathe in and breathe out” based on the needs of your population. If you teach “inhale and exhale” to 4 and 5 years olds, for instance, a clarifying explanation of the concept of what it means to intake and expel air through our lungs might be supportive. With the really young ones, I have used a mist scented with therapeutic-grade essential oils to demonstrate that air that starts outside our bodies is drawn into our bodies when we breathe in, as evidenced by our ability to smell the scent.

Emphasizing that the same thing happens when we breathe air that has no scent facilitates the concept of an “inhale/exhale.” On the other hand, when using the language of “breathe in/breathe out,” the visual and kinesthetic feedback of the belly and chest rising and falling is often a sufficient way to ensure comprehension of the concept of taking air in and expelling air out. Details about the lungs and diaphragm and how their movement creates space for more air are great for older kids, but might be less supportive for younger children who may have less knowledge of anatomy. Vocabulary that might require some additional explicit teaching for this practice are the words anchor and sensation, or the felt experience of the body.

The Trickiness of Breath Awareness for Kids

Becoming aware of breathing without simultaneously manipulating the breath takes lots of practice (even for adults!). You might see your kids over-dramatizing their breathing in response to your direction. This is ok. Simply bring their attention to the fact that this is happening and is natural when we are unclear about what it means to simply pay attention to our breathing.

You might even model a non-example of mindful breathing by lifting and tensing the shoulders, by throwing the head back, or even by opening the mouth and making a heaving sound. This will surely make them laugh and become aware of the fact that “drama” is not a necessary requirement to breathe deeply. Make inquiries and have discussion to support their awareness of this. Then contrast the forced breathing with a more settled version of mindful breathing. Ask the children what they observed and how it made them feel to watch you breathe in this alternate way. Invite them to try mindful breathing again in the calmer way you modeled it.

Setting a timer can help alleviate anxiety about when this practice, that will be challenging for some, will end. Please note that though anchor breathing has simple steps, it is a very challenging practice for children and adults alike, when in an emotional state. For this reason, it is supportive to do this practice daily to gain familiarity and comfort when kids are already fairly settled, and to support a habit of mindful awareness.

Adaptations for Mindful Breathing

It is common and natural in many cases for kids to breathe through their mouths. For example, a child with an anxiety disorder, asthma, or when a child has a cold are instances that might require mouth breathing. In these instances and others, slow deep breathing through the nose might be triggering or even impossible.

Encourage children who breathe most comfortably through their mouth to notice how nose breathing makes them feel. Validate whatever experience they may be having and privately offer them an alternative, like breathing in through the nose, then out through the mouth. You can also offer a modification like 2–3 rounds of anchor breathing rather than a longer, 30-second to one minute practice. It is important for these children to experiment with breathing through the nose to bring their parasympathetic nervous system online, but it is also important to scaffold their experience of this practice so as not to overwhelm them or create more anxiety or resistance.



For Kids and Parents: How to Use this Deck at Home

Caring for Your Little Yogi Deck

Little Yogi Deck is a colorful resource full of fun, imaginative, and creative ways for you to play and explore your emotions. You'll soon see for yourself how magical and full of wonder you are! Consider keeping this deck in a place that is as special as it is, like a drawer or a treasure chest, wrapped in a beautiful cloth or scarf.

Just Explore and Play

Shuffle and pick any card(s) from the *Little Yogi Deck* that sparks your imagination and curiosity. In the beginning, your adult at home or a family member might explore *Little Yogi Deck* cards with you. Together, read through the steps on the back of the card, and then do each step. Explore the cards and note how they make you feel. Use descriptive words to share your feelings before, during, and after the practices.

Make a “Serenity Zone” or a “Peace Corner”

Create a special place in your home to explore the *Little Yogi Deck* where you feel free to breathe, observe, and move through all your feelings, big or small. All feelings need care and validation. The more special the place you create, the easier it will be to remember to pause and take time to practice caring for yourself and your emotions.

Consider including a small table in your special place. You might place items that make you feel happy or peaceful like a feather (for lightness and ease), a plant (for celebrating the life in all living things), a stone (for stability and groundedness), or a crystal (for clear thinking) on that table. You might also place a photo or two of someone you love or someone who makes you feel safe and brave. Your special place might include a yoga mat or even a chair for practice. If you are feeling a particular emotion, time in the serenity zone can be a place to explore that emotion with the deck. Play and have fun!

Make Mindfulness and Movement a Daily Ritual

Carve out time to explore mindfulness and movement at the same time every day. This will help make mindfulness not only a habit, but a ritual, a routine with special significance. When mindful self-check-ins become a daily ritual, you make paying attention to what is happening inside you a habit too. When you know what is happening inside you, you can make skillful choices about how to take care of your emotions, thoughts, and body. The better you become at caring for yourself, the better care you can give to others.

Combine Multiple Cards from the Deck and Make a Personal Practice Sequence

Choose 3–6 cards from the *Little Yogi Deck* that catch your eye, that bring you joy, or make you feel good. Arrange them in an order that you like, and do each card, one after the other. Like a detective, pay close attention to details like how your energy level changes, what sensations can be felt in your body and how they change, and any thoughts that arise as you do each practice. Think of this sequence as “an experiment” to see how doing a few of your favorite cards makes you feel.

Focus on a Particular Emotion

Sometimes we feel emotions in a big way. On those days, using the *Little Yogi Deck* can help you pause, notice, and name that specific emotion so that it gets the care it needs. Once you name the emotion, look through all the cards from that emotion section of the deck and choose one or more of the cards to explore. Notice how you feel before, during, and after you practice the activity on the card(s). Here is a helpful list of what to do when focusing on a specific emotion:

- Notice and describe the way you feel.
- Map your feelings in the body.
- Name your feelings.
- Practice gentleness and respect for all your feelings, especially the ones that are uncomfortable.



For Educators and Therapists: Adapting Little Yogi Deck Practices for Large Groups or Clinical Settings

Out of the Head and Into the Body

Most of the above activities are appropriate in one-on-one settings and for small or large groups of children. In clinical settings, mindful breathing and movement are a wonderful tool to help connect your client to the felt, embodied experience of whatever may be occurring for them. It is really helpful to do these practices with the children you work with, as any sensations or emotions that are difficult for kids to explore on their own can be regulated with your support.

From Teacher to Magician

If you are an educator who is new to teaching movement or practices that connect kids to their inner lives, please note that it is ideal to shift from your role as a “teacher” to thinking of yourself as more of a “magician” or a facilitator. The goal of mindfulness is self-observation, attention, and care. Think of yourself as the magician who facilitates wonderful and playful experiences rather than lessons. This will foster enthusiastic engagement from your students and free you up to play more too.

If kids are engaged and participating, exploring the movement, breathing, etc. (that you demonstrate by doing it with them), they are learning. There is no right way to do these practices, nor is there a singular learning that you should expect kids to get. What they learn and their perception of the experience will and should vary. All emotions and experiences are valid because yoga and mindfulness are self-awareness healing arts, not achievement or performing arts. Moreover, it is all good. There are no wrong answers in these *Little Yogi Deck* lessons.

Visiting Feelings

Consider designating a daily time to encourage exploration of a particular emotion in a circle or another special orientation based on the room you are in. There is a wonderful book called *Visiting Feelings* by Lauren Rubenstein that vividly captures the nuance and wonder of emotions.

Similarly, one of my favorite things to do to build emotional intelligence is to encourage kids to “visit their feelings” through physicalization or dramatization. As kids transform their faces and bodies into the version of themselves that experiences anger, for example, it is important to direct their attention to what is happening with their faces, in their abdomens, with their hands, arms and legs, and also with their breath and heart rate. This can be done verbally or in a journal. This physicalization could be explored daily or weekly as a way to foster emotional awareness.

Following this activity up with a card from that same emotion section of the *Little Yogi Deck* is a way to demonstrate the personal power that kids have to change their emotional states with awareness and simple practices. There are obviously far more than eight emotions that exist, and starting with the eight emotions in *Little Yogi Deck* can be a jumping off point. The poem by Rumi called “The Guest House” is a great enrichment tool to spark discussion on

the concept of welcoming all emotions as guests that can come and go from a child's body or "house" and to clarify that emotions are fleeting and constantly changing.

Mapping Feelings

Another great group activity that is similar to the visiting feelings activity above is to find a graphic of the outline of a body. Encourage kids to draw the location in their bodies where various emotions are felt. Using different colored pencils or crayons can make the emotions more vivid and alive as well.

Ask Questions. Listen to Answers.

It is important to balance practice and exploration of the cards with reflection by keeping their experience inquiry-based and student-centered. Ask questions like: What did you notice? What was that like for you? How did your energy level change? How did your breathing change? The sensations in your body change? What words do you have to describe what you felt and noticed? Asking questions ensures that kids reflect thoughtfully about their emotional experience.

Magic, Wonder, and More Magic!

Last and perhaps most important: remember that you are magic. Your magic gives you so much power to shift a child's perception and experience of any challenging moment. Be sure to make time to connect to your own fascinating complexity and the wonder of self-discovery through personal practices of mindful awareness and movement. Children attune to the attitudes and nervous systems of the adults who care for them. When you have an open-hearted and curious outlook, when your emotions are balanced, and when you hold your own emotional life gently and with loving care, the children around you will mirror these qualities and the values you embody.



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