



Exploring how mindfulness can support young children's well-being in the nursery school

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This paper explores how a mindfulness approach can support young children’s well-being in nursery schools. The research draws on a small-scale qualitative research project with four maintained nursery schools in the South of England. In total there were 33 participants including 5 early years professionals and 27 children aged between 3 and 4 years. An action research approach was adopted involving the nursery schools in each stage of the project. Mixed methods were used including semi-structured interviews, narrative observations, and reflective journals. In line with previous research, the findings from this study suggest that mindfulness supports children’s well-being and self-regulation. Key factors integral to the success of the project included: the role of the mindfulness champion; high-quality training, and an adaptable and flexible approach. In conclusion it is argued that mindfulness practices are an appropriate way of supporting children’s well-being in the early years; and that a Train The Trainer [TTT] approach is cost effective and sustainable.

Key words: mindfulness; self-regulation; co-regulation; early years; mental health; well-being.

Introduction

The recent surge in mental health (MH) conditions globally has been well-documented (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2022), with COVID-19, anxiety related to climate change, and persistent war and conflict as 'the triple impact' significantly impacting global mental health (Kestel, 2022). According to the WHO (2022: 17) mental health conditions are

“highly prevalent and largely undertreated” across nations with one in every eight individuals worldwide, a total of one billion people, living with a mental health condition. These trends are reflected in childhood with 13% of children and adolescents worldwide reported to have a mental health disorder (UNICEF, 2021). Whereas the mental health of children has focused on school age and above, there is increasing concern about the mental health of very young children. The most recent **National Health Service [NHS] statistics** report that 5.5% of preschool children aged 2- to 4-year-olds in England have a probable mental health disorder (NHS Digital, 2023). However, statistics are likely to underestimate the extent of mental health conditions for young children, due to long waiting lists to see a professional (Children’s Commissioner, 2024); and the challenges of diagnosing mental health conditions in young children (NHS, 2017). Research suggests that children are more likely to have better mental health later in life, if they develop skills to support mental health in the early years (Department for Education [DfE], 2023). Therefore, supporting well-being in the early years is crucial to providing a strong foundation for children’s future development.

In recent years there has been interest in how mindfulness approaches in schools can address children and young people’s mental health; with research indicating that engaging in mindfulness can have a positive impact on well-being, executive functioning, and cognitive, social and emotional abilities (Berti and Cigala, 2020; Hosan et al., 2022; Viglas and Perlman, 2018). Emerging research suggests that mindfulness can also have positive effects for the youngest children, supporting well-being, and emotional and cognitive development (Bockmann and Yu, 2022; Flook et al. 2015; Sop and Hancer, 2024; Yaari et al., 2019). However, most of the research about mindfulness in the early years has focused on

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children’s ‘outcomes’, and little attention has been paid to the factors which support young children to develop mindfulness practices (Bockmann and Yu, 2022; Holt et al., 2022). This paper aims to address this gap by focusing on the perspectives and experiences of early years professionals, and how mindfulness can be used to support children’s well-being in nursery schools.

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness has its origins in Buddhist meditation and is commonly, defined as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003:145). Mindfulness is an active process involving attention to the present, rather than past or future, in a way which is non-judgemental and accepting of the present moment (Hooker and Foder, 2008: 77). It is considered to be a way of understanding the world, rather than a tool or approach (Rempel, 2012). Attention is paid to both external experiences, such as sights, sounds, smells; as well as internal experiences for example, thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations (Hooker and Foder, 2008). Key practices include: meditation; attention to breathing; body scan, noticing different sensations as the body is mentally scanned; and intentional movement, for example, yoga (Bockmann and Yu, 2022; Rempel, 2012).

Mindfulness in early years settings

In recent years, there has been an increase in published studies about how mindfulness in early years settings can support young children’s mental health and well-being both in the

UK and internationally (Berti and Viglas, 2021; Bockmann and Yu, 2022; Holt et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2020; Sop and Hancer, 2023). Emerging research in neuroscience suggests that mindfulness practices might enhance children's ability to self-regulate, by causing changes in the brain regions linked with attention, emotion, and self-regulation (Tang et al., 2015). Research demonstrates that children's ability to self-regulate is strongly linked to emotional well-being and being mentally healthier (Bockmann and Yu, 2022; Hosan, et al., 2022; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2021). The early years is a critical time for the development of self-regulation skills due to the plasticity of the brain and development of the prefrontal cortex, therefore mindfulness for preschool children may be a particularly effective way of supporting well-being and building good mental health (Bockmann and Yu, 2022; Muir et al., 2023).

Bockmann and Yu (2022) and Holt and Atkinson (2022) in their International reviews of mindfulness practices with young children in early years settings found that mindful breathing was common to all programmes, with body scanning, meditation, and props/visuals, and use of reflection frequently used (Bockmann and Yu, 2022; Holt and Atkinson, 2022). However, how mindfulness was understood and delivered, varied considerably in terms of approach, duration and frequency of practice, making it difficult to determine which type of mindfulness approach is most effective for young children. Overall, mindfulness practices combined with social and emotional learning, including awareness of emotions and promoting kindness and compassion for others, was found to be the most typical type of programme (for example, Flook et al., 2015; Thierry et al., 2016). Commonly programmes were carried out over a period of nine months; and sessions were delivered two to three times a week, with each lasting between 20 to 30

minutes. Many mindfulness programmes were adapted from adult programmes and delivered using a structured manual by external trainers or practitioners within the setting (Bockmann and Yu, 2022; Holt and Atkinson, 2022). As Holt and Atkinson (2022: 215) point out, delivering mindfulness as a structured programme with a set number of lessons over a set number of weeks raises questions about what happens to children's mindfulness practices once the intervention has finished. Conceivably a mindfulness approach which does not embrace a "life-long approach to being" (Holt and Atkinson, 2022:89) is not in line with Kabat-Zinn's (2003) conceptualisation of mindfulness, and less likely to meet the needs of young children.

Despite the wide variation in how mindfulness is delivered in the early years, research suggests that practicing mindfulness can benefit children's well-being due to improvements in self-regulation (Bockmann and Yu, 2022; Sop and Hancer, 2023). Self-regulation is commonly understood as involving three key executive functions including: attention control, the ability to focus on what is relevant rather irrelevant; working memory or cognitive flexibility, holding information in mind whilst also updating information; and inhibition, stopping an initial response in order to achieve a goal (Berti and Cigala, 2020; Emmerson, Rowse and Sills, 2017). Overall evidence indicates that mindfulness supports the development of self-regulation in young children (Bockmann and Yu, 2022; Sop and Hancer (2023). This includes: improved cognitive regulation (for example, increased attention, improved working memory and cognitive flexibility); emotional regulation (for example, awareness of emotions, ability to self-calm, and increased empathy); and behaviour regulation (for example, increased impulse control and reduction in undesired behaviours). Mindfulness has found to be particularly beneficial for children from low-income families;

those who have experienced stress or trauma; or have lower levels of self-regulation than their peers (Bockmann and Yu, 2023; Sop and Hancer, 2023).

In England, according to the Early Years Foundation Stage Early Learning Goals, children are expected to be able to self-regulate by the age of five (DfE, 2024b). This includes the ability to “understand their own feelings and those of others and begin to regulate their behaviour accordingly” (DfE, 2024b: 26). However, Conkbayir (2021) cautions that the term self-regulation is open to interpretation, with the prefix ‘self’ suggesting that regulation is something that the child achieves independently. They maintain that the role of the co-regulator, an adult who can support young children by taking a sensitive and attuned approach, is essential for achieving self-regulation. Therefore, it is argued that for very young children self-regulation should be understood within in the context of co-regulation, recognising the important role that skilled early years professionals play in nurturing children’s emotional development through a sensitive and attuned approach.

How can mindfulness be facilitated in early years settings

To date most studies on mindfulness for young children have employed a quantitative approach commonly using teacher and parent pre and post questionnaires or rating scales to measure improvements in self-regulation (Bockmann and Yu, 2022). Studies have consistently reported improvements in children’s ability to self-regulate following taking part in mindfulness practices. However, there are several limitations to the research. Small samples sizes, potential for biased reporting, together with the variability in the way mindfulness interventions are delivered limit the extent to which these findings can be generalised (Bockmann and Yu, 2022; Lee et al. 2020; Sop and Hancer, 2020). In addition,

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3 taking a quantitative approach, which measures changes in children’s self-regulation, does
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5 not provide an insight in to how mindfulness might be facilitated and how children’s well-
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7 being might be supported.
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13 Research about how mindfulness can be facilitated in early years settings is rare. In contrast
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15 to other studies which have focused on children’s ‘outcomes’, Holt et al. (2022) explored
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17 how early years professionals can effectively support young children with mindfulness in
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19 early years settings. Several factors were identified as facilitators. Firstly, a collaborative
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21 and flexible that evolved over time helped to involve and engage children and staff over
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23 time. As well as supporting the needs of the children, it also ensured that the approach
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25 complimented existing practice and met the requirements of the Early Year Foundation
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27 Stage (DfE, 2024a). Secondly, teacher-led mindfulness practices were short (10 minutes) and
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29 frequent (twice daily) enabling children to remain attentive and focused, as well as
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31 supporting informal practice outside of the teacher-led sessions. Thirdly, enjoyment was a
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33 key element, with staff enjoying the approach themselves and incorporating the things
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35 children had particularly enjoyed into the approach. Fourthly, sensory approaches and the
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37 use of physical props supported young children’s understanding of mindfulness, this was
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39 found to particularly helpful for children with English as an additional language [EAL], who
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41 may have lower receptive English language levels than their non-EAL peers. Fifthly,
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43 developing a safe space with limited distractions, where a sense of trust and safety could be
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45 engendered, helped children to engage with mindfulness activities. Lastly, the importance
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47 of involving and training staff in mindfulness, with ongoing support, instilled a sense of
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49 confidence. Although this study was conducted in only one setting, making it difficult to
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3 generalise, it arguably provides factors to consider when developing a mindfulness
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5 approach for young children.
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10 Building on the work of Holt et al. (2022) further research is needed to develop an
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12 understanding of how mindfulness can be facilitated in early years settings, and how this
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14 might support children's well-being. To address this gap, we explored the following research
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16 questions:
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- 20 a) How can mindfulness support children's well-being?
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22 b) What factors support young children to develop mindfulness practices?
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24 c) What factors support early years professionals to deliver mindfulness practices?
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30 **Methodological Design**

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32 The methodological design drew on action research, an approach that supports or
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34 influences change within educational organisations (Robson, 2011). Central to action
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36 research is the collaborative approach of the researcher and participants and reflection at
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38 each step of a spiral process (Mukherji and Albon, 2022). Drawing on this approach enabled
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40 us to work closely with the nursery schools to ensure that the project was appropriate for
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42 the schools, by involving and reflecting with the teaching staff at each stage of its
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44 development. Thomas' (2013) 'spiral of steps' model was adopted, which is as follows:
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46 specify the problem; examine the problem; plan action; take action; and evaluate and
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48 reflect on the actions.
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57 *The problem:* The project arose because a group of head teachers from four maintained
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59 nursery schools had concerns over the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic had on children
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and staff. **Maintained nursery schools** provide early years education and childcare to children aged 3 to 4 years old in the most deprived areas of England (Paull and Popov, 2019). They are funded by the local authority, and like other maintained schools have a head teacher, governing body, delegated budget, and at least one teacher with qualified teacher status [QTS].

Examine the problem: Since the Covid-19 pandemic, the head teachers had noticed a change in children's behaviour. The head teachers wanted to improve practice in their settings by reducing stress and increasing well-being for both children and staff. An experienced early years professional in one of the nursery schools, had been using mindfulness practices successfully in one of the maintained nursery schools. All the headteachers were keen to explore how mindfulness might support children's well-being in the other three **maintained Nursery Schools** as well as extending the use of mindfulness within the first nursery school.

Plan action: A mindfulness champion was identified in each of the four nursery schools. Each mindfulness champion was a key person within their nursery school and had responsibility for a group of between 8-12 children aged 3 to 4 years old. The mindfulness champions received a one-day training session led by the Mindfulness Lead. A Train The Trainer [TTT] method was used where a specialist teaches identified non-specialists how to deliver an approach or intervention (Greif et al., 2015). In this case the specialist was the mindfulness lead, and the non-specialists were the mindfulness champions. Such an approach enables those who have received the initial training to deliver this to others through subsequent training activities, making the approach cost effective and sustainable (Yarber et al., 2015). The training included an introduction to mindfulness practices for

young children. These included: breathing exercises; attention activities, for example: listening to sounds; helping children to resolve conflict using puppets; understanding emotions; and positive affirmations. Each mindfulness champion was given a bag of resources to support the activities, which included:

- a Hoberman sphere, a large expandable ball used to support breathing exercises;
- a chime bar;
- a puppet;
- a glitter jar, used as a visual prop for understanding emotions;
- breathing buddies, these were a collection of small cuddly toys used to support children's abdominal breathing; by placing one of the cuddly toys on their abdomen the children could focus on the rise and fall of the toy as they breathed;
- and activity sheets with a range of mindfulness activities for young children.

Take action

The project started in November 2022. The activities were introduced by the champions to their key children in their daily small group sessions of about 8 to 12 children over a 10-week period. The approach was flexible, and mindfulness champions could choose how they introduced the activities to their groups and adapt these for the individual needs of the children. Sessions were typically between 10 to 20 minutes and were part of the children's usual daily routine. Group times were usually held in a quiet room or space in the nursery school. The mindfulness lead supported the mindfulness champions throughout the project. This included regular online meetings; visiting each of the mindfulness champions at their setting; and observing mindfulness champions deliver mindfulness sessions.

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3 *Evaluate and reflect on actions*
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6 Action research is a flexible approach which employs a range of methods, depending on the
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8 purpose of the research (Mukherji and Albon, 2022). The research is underpinned by an
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10 interpretivist paradigm, a position that acknowledges there are many ways that the world
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12 can be understood and is focused on how people make sense and interpret those
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14 understandings (Mukherji and Albon, 2022). In line with this approach qualitative methods
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16 were adopted to provide an in-depth understanding of how mindfulness can be facilitated in
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18 nursery schools, as well as providing both participants and researchers with the opportunity
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20 to reflect on the project at different points of the process. Journaling is a tool often used in
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22 action research, as of way of capturing and reflecting on initial and changing thoughts
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24 (Mukherji and Albon, 2022). The four mindfulness champions were asked to complete a
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26 weekly reflective journal about their experience of delivering the mindfulness sessions.
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35 Each of the mindfulness champions were observed by one of the researchers and the
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37 mindfulness champions during the 10-week period. The observations took place during one
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39 of the group-times and typically lasted between 10 and 20 minutes. Narrative observations
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41 or ‘naturalistic observations’ were used (Mukherji and Albon, 2022). This enabled us to gain
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43 an in depth understanding of how the mindfulness group sessions were delivered. After the
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45 observation there was an opportunity for the mindfulness champions to discuss and reflect
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47 on the session with the mindfulness lead.
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54 The four mindfulness champions were interviewed twice, once after they had completed
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56 the training day, and once after they had completed the 10-week introduction of
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58 mindfulness activities. Semi-structured interviews were used, with a small number of open
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3 questions designed to explore the mindfulness champions' understandings of mindfulness
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5 and how they supported mindfulness practices within the nursery school (Braun and Clark,
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7 2013).
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13 Thematic Analysis (TA) is a suitable analytical method for many qualitative methods, and
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15 appropriate for when an understanding of how participants make sense of their experiences
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17 is needed (Braun and Clarke, 2013). As an in-depth understanding of how early years
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19 professionals can facilitate mindfulness practices within in nursery schools was sought, this
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21 was an appropriate method to employ. Thematic analysis typically follows several phases
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23 including: data preparation, reading and familiarisation of the data; coding; searching for
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25 themes; reviewing themes; and defining and naming themes (Braun and Clarke, 2013). In
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27 the initial phase data was prepared including transcription of interviews with mindfulness
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29 champions and writing up of observation notes. In the next phase the researchers
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31 familiarised themselves with the data by reading through the different data sets and taking
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33 note of anything which was of particular interest. A process of complete coding was used to
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35 identify aspects of the data that was relevant to our research questions, looking at anything
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37 and everything which might be relevant (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Emergent themes were
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39 generated by searching for relationships between the codes and collating these into
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41 categories relevant to our research questions. In total there were three categories which
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43 informed the three themes discussed in the findings section.
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54 Before starting the project, ethical approval was gained from the participating University.

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56 Written consent was gained from the Head teachers of the four maintained nursery schools
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58 and participants, including the parents, mindfulness lead, and mindfulness champions. For
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the children an assent form with pictures and images was used to explain the purpose of the project. Children's participation in the project was voluntary, and they could choose whether they wanted to take part in the mindfulness activities. Assent was monitored throughout the project, and careful attention was given to children's verbal and non-verbal cues. For example, if a child appeared uncomfortable, they were given the opportunity to withdraw or not take part in an activity. In total there were 33 participants including 4 mindfulness champions, 1 mindfulness lead, and 27 children aged between 3 and 4 years of age.

Findings

In the following section we present the findings from the three themes identified in the analysis. The first theme, supporting children's well-being, explores how mindfulness practices supported children's well-being. The second theme, supporting children to develop mindfulness practices, discusses the key factors which supported children's engagement with mindfulness. This includes two subthemes: enjoyment, engagement, connection; and environment. The final theme, supporting mindfulness champions, explores the factors which were key in supporting the introduction of mindfulness in the maintained nursery schools. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the mindfulness champions. They are referred to as: Davina, Louise, Victoria and Kim. Davina was a teacher and Special Educational Needs Coordinator [SENCo]; Louise and Kim were both teachers, and Victoria was a nursery nurse.

Supporting children's well-being

All the mindfulness champions talked about how mindfulness supported children's well-being and ability to self-regulate. They noticed an increase in children's awareness of

emotions, ability to self-calm, and empathy at the end of the 10 weeks. Kim talked about the improvement in children's self-awareness and empathy towards others during small group times:

They seemed to demonstrate empathy with the puppet and were able to draw on their strategies to support him which is, I feel a good indicator that they are taking on board not only the strategies themselves but also when it is a good time to use them in real life situations (Kim, journal).

Champions also gave examples of how mindfulness reduced stress for both staff and children by having a calming effect, for example, Kim reflects: "Sometimes it's good for you to actually stop and just breathe for a minute. Reset yourself so that then you're in a better frame of mind to go on to the next thing".

Louise (mindfulness champion) explains how the children started to take a lead, rather than the adults, in 'calming' others saying: "The techniques do work. The child was more in control, rather than me, of calming herself down with the help of the group." Other champions reflected on how the children had an increased understanding and awareness of emotional states and were beginning to identify these in new contexts. Davina reflects on a child's increased understanding of emotions after reading "The Colour Monster" (Llenas, 2016):

"I know what calm is now" [...] I think basically he was trying to explain that initially he had no concept of what calm meant and through the breathing exercises he felt that awareness of calm (Davina, Interview).

Mindfulness also supported children's cognitive and behaviour regulation. Two champions noticed improvements in children's ability to problem solve and resolve conflict. For

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example, during group time Louise noticed how the children were able to support a child who was upset because someone had sat in her space:

[The children said] well, I've got an idea. She could sit next to me instead, so a few of them said that. And I said, "Wow, you're coming up with some good ideas to help" (Louise, interview).

Improvements were also noticed by two champions in relation to children's listening and attention, particularly in the group times: "So their listening and attention was a lot better during those sessions as well. They seem a lot more focussed" (Kim, interview).

All the nursery schools supported children with a wide range of needs, since the Covid-19 pandemic, they had noticed a change in children's behaviour. All champions talked about how mindfulness practices were inclusive and adaptable for every child. Davina commented on how mindfulness supported a child who had had difficulty settling at the nursery school: "She then went to those different things, and she'd say, 'Oh can I can I have the glitter jar,' and it really helped her to settle" (Davina, Interview). Kim noticed how mindfulness supported even the very youngest children: "Sometimes they're a little bit distracted, but more often than not [...] they absolutely loved it" (Kim, interview). Many of the children found transitions every day challenging, for example, leaving home to attend nursery school; moving from free flow play to structured small group times; and leaving nursery school at the end of the day to go home. Mindfulness champions found that mindfulness was particularly effective in supporting children's ability to self-regulate during these times. In her interview Kim reflects:

Sometimes they come in and they've either been playing in the garden or they've been engaged play around the setting, but quite often when they come in they're

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3 buzzing [...] Starting the activity even with just the chime and just doing the
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5 breathing at the very beginning of the sessions, you could see their bodies relaxing
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8 (Kim, interview).
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10 11 12 ***Supporting children to develop mindfulness practices***

13 14 *Connection, enjoyment and engagement:*

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17 A key factor which supported engagement with the mindfulness practices was the
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19 relationship between the mindfulness champions and the children. All champions talked
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21 about how their connection with the children supported engagement with mindfulness
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23 practices. Louise, Victoria and Kim commented on how shared enjoyment and making the
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25 activities fun were key factors in connecting with the children during the mindfulness
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27 sessions. In her journal Kim reflects on how she joined in the laughter with the children
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29 when they listened to the chime bar for the first time: "I laughed with them and
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31 acknowledged that the sound went on for a very long time" (Kim, journal). For Louise
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33 valuing the children by "hearing and seeing" them and giving feedback was another factor
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35 which supported engagement with mindfulness practices: "Being aware of them, seeing
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37 them, hearing them, and then feeding back in an intimate space like a group time."
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40 Champions also noticed how their own emotional state could influence children's
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42 engagement, for example, in her journal Kim reflects: "The children didn't seem as calm as
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44 they have in previous sessions, but I think [...] it may also have been the children picking up
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46 on my nervous energy about the session".
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All the champions talked about how the connections beyond the nursery school supported the children's well-being. For Louise the tripartite relationship between the parent[s], child and key person was particularly important:

It's all working together to get the children to a better place, isn't it? So, it's just threading all those connections between parents, child and key persons? All connections and in making them a balance, happier child that's feeling safe (Louise, interview)

Many of the champions talked about how the children's engagement with mindfulness, extended beyond the nursery school and into their lives at home; often the children were instrumental in taking the lead in sharing and modelling practice at home with their parents.

An example of this is given by Davina:

Very early on in the early sessions I had a little girl who having had the breathing ball then went home and spoke to her Mum [who] was really motivated, and they found an old colander [...] to do the breathing exercises (Davina, interview).

Environment

The nursery school environment was identified as another key factor in supporting the children's mindfulness practices. One of the challenges champions identified in delivering mindfulness was the busy loud nursery school environment, which contributed to the children feeling "stressed". Finding quiet spaces was important for the children to be able to self-regulate and practice mindfulness:

To have that quiet space like for a little group every day, a certain amount of children just come in like those that have been deregulating through in the day (Victoria, interview).

Mindfulness was introduced in structured small group sessions; however, this quickly developed into a flexible and less structured approach. Champions talked about how free flow play opportunities, when the children choose their own child led activities, facilitated the use of mindfulness in the children's everyday lives. For example, Victoria reflects:

On many occasions, myself and my colleagues, have witnessed children utilising their mindful skills unprompted and spontaneously during their free play, or when supporting each other (Victoria, journal entry).

However, for one champion practicing mindfulness in free flow play opportunities was challenging. Davina talked about how her concerns about making mindfulness resources freely available for the children to use outside of group times:

It was lovely to see breathing balls etc left out in the environment now sadly if we do that here I can guarantee that there are some that wouldn't actually respect those at the moment (Davina, interview).

Outdoor environments were identified as supporting children's use of mindfulness. In her reflective diary Victoria reflects on how a blend of adult led and child led activities enabled the children to engage in and enjoy mindfulness in a woodland area next to the school:

It was a joyful experience to witness every child engaging in this calming, yet invigorating activity. To see the children running free in such a natural environment, and to watch their features unwind, as they mindfully uncovered and discovered nature's awe and wonder, literally on their doorstep (Victoria, journal entry).

Supporting mindfulness champions

The mindfulness champions identified several factors which supported them in their role. These included: training and mentoring; personal engagement with mindfulness; starting

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3 gradually; and opportunities to disseminate. All mindfulness champions were very positive
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5 about the training and mentoring they received from the Mindfulness Lead, comments
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7 included, "I'm really inspired" (Davina, interview) and "Absolutely fantastic" (Kim,
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9 interview). Some of the mindfulness champions, such as Victoria felt "a bit nervous" about
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11 taking part in the project, but were quickly reassured after completing the training, "[It's]
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13 just our daily practice and I can do that, you know" (Victoria interview). Many champions
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15 commented positively on the Mindfulness Lead, and how their passion and willingness to
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17 share resources and ideas supported the process:
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23 I think that [the Mindfulness Lead] is absolutely amazing. I think what she's trying to
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25 do, I think her passion is, you know, comes across (Davina, interview).
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28 All mindfulness champions talked about the need to engage personally with mindfulness,
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30 before being able to effectively practice this with the children. For example, Louise
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32 comments:
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35 I think it starts with with me. So, the benefits are, if I'm more mindful and use that
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37 supportive language and then I'm hoping that the children then will feel that they
38
39 are more able to cope with their emotions going forward (Louise, Interview).
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42 As well as the need for personal engagement with mindfulness, champions talked about the
43
44 importance of introducing mindfulness practices gradually and building up practice over
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46 time: "So I introduced the things very gradually over the weeks and sort of built up,
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48 sometimes I might use two things (Louise, interview)."
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54 Mindfulness champions were eager to disseminate the training to others. Some talked
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56 about how other practitioners had heard about the project and were keen to get involved.
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58 Others had held or were planning to hold staffing meetings where they could feedback and
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3 disseminate the training to other staff within the nursery school. In this example, Louise
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5 reflects on the staff's interest in project "They were very interested in it and I am feeding
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7 back in one of the staff meetings". Many of the champions had spoken to parents about
8
9 how mindfulness could be used at home. For Louise this was something she planned to
10
11 continue: "I would love for this to be something that we support parents with more". All
12
13 were keen to continue with the mindfulness project and develop the practice across their
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15 nursery schools, including introducing mindfulness to other groups of children; having
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17 regular staff meetings to discuss mindfulness; developing resources; and creating quiet
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19 spaces.
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28 Discussion

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30 In the following discussion we explore how our findings contribute to existing research on
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32 mindfulness for young children including: how mindfulness can support children's well-
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34 being; key factors for success; and how early years professionals can be supported.
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36 Consideration is also given to how our findings can point a way forward in terms of early
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38 years policy, professional development, and practice.
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45 Emerging research demonstrates that mindfulness can have positive effects on young
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47 children's well-being and mental health by enhancing children's ability to self-regulate
48
49 (Bockmann and Yu, 2022; Holt and Atkinson, 2022; Sop and Hancer, 2023). Our findings
50
51 contribute to this research, with the champions observing an increase in children's
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53 awareness of emotions, ability to self-calm; empathy and ability to problem solve. These
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55 effects extended to the mindfulness champions, who also benefitted from engaging with
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57 mindfulness.
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Early years professionals play an essential role in supporting children’s self-regulation through co-regulation, by nurturing children’s emotional well-being through a sensitive and attuned approach (Conkbayir, 2021). Our study found that co-regulation was integral to a mindfulness approach. Examples demonstrated how champions were able to skillfully and sensitively support children to regulate their emotions using an approach which was adaptable to the nursery school environment, and appropriate for a play-based early years curriculum. Our research highlights how the children’s engagement and self-regulation was shaped by the quality of their interactions with the supporting adults. At times, especially during the mindfulness group sessions, the adults took the lead as a more knowledgeable other (Vygotsky, 1978) but as time went on, the children were empowered to adopt this role, co-regulating with each other, and teaching and sharing mindfulness with their families.

Enjoyment is an important factor in successful learning in early childhood and supports children’s engagement with mindfulness practices (Holt et al. 2022). In line with this, the mindfulness champions talked about how shared enjoyment and fun was a key component that contributed to the high level of engagement experienced by the mindfulness champions and the children within the mindfulness group sessions, the wider context of the nursery school environment, and for many the home environment.

The environment was a key factor in shaping how mindfulness was experienced by the children in the nursery schools. Mindfulness champions identified ‘quiet spaces’ as important for both practicing mindfulness and places where children could be supported

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2
3 through co-regulation. This finding aligns with Holt et al.'s (2022) research, where the
4
5 development of a 'safe space' with limited distractions engendered a sense of trust and
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7 safety for children to engage with mindfulness practices. Arguably, creating spaces where
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9 children feel safe and secure, and can be supported by sensitive and attuned adults, have
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11 the potential to provide children with a physical representation of a secure base within a
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13 busy environment (Schofield and Beek, 2007).
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20 In Holt et al.'s (2022) study a flexible and adaptable approach was used, which helped to
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22 support children and adults' engagement with mindfulness practices. In the current study
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24 mindfulness was introduced in structured small group sessions, however this quickly
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26 developed into a flexible and less structured approach, with both children and adults
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28 introducing mindfulness into other spaces both within the nursery school and at home. Over
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30 time it was evident that mindfulness had become part of the adults and children's everyday
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32 practice. Therefore, utilising both a structured mindfulness approach whereby adult led
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34 mindfulness activities are introduced in small groups; and over time a more fluid and
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36 flexible approach, supported children in developing their own mindfulness practice, which
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38 was both individual and adaptable. Arguably this approach is in line with Kabat-Zinn's (2003)
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40 conceptualisation of mindfulness, and appropriate for a child-centred framework, such as
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42 the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2024a).
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52 Previous research demonstrates that quality training and ongoing support is a key
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54 component for successful mindfulness approaches (Holt and Atkinson, 2022). In the current
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56 study the passion and enthusiasm of the trainer, and ongoing development of mindfulness
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58 both within the nursery school, and with the parents were identified as being key to the
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project’s immediate and future success. Champions agreed that to successfully practice mindfulness with the children, they first needed to be practicing mindfulness themselves, recognising the importance of their own well-being. High quality early childhood education relies on well-educated educators who benefit from strong foundational initial education and training and continuing professional development (Nutbrown, 2021) suggesting that for mindfulness to be successfully implemented in the early years, practitioners need to receive appropriate training, coaching, and time and space to reflect. However, the lack of funding for early years settings in England (DfE, 2024c) means that for many settings paying for training and ongoing development is not viable or sustainable. The Train The Trainer model [TTT], is a potential solution to this problem, enabling settings to access training in a cheaper and cost-effective way.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore how mindfulness can support young children’s well-being within a nursery school context. Although it is not possible to make generalisations from a small-scale study, the findings contribute to emerging research in this area. Our research shines a light on the factors which facilitate a mindfulness approach for young children, an area which has received little attention in the past. The role of the mindfulness champion was key in children’s engagement with mindfulness practices, acknowledging the importance of co-regulation. The flexibility and adaptability of the approach enabled mindfulness to become part of children’s everyday lives, empowering them to adapt and share mindfulness practices both within and outside of nursery school. Training and ongoing mentoring were key, empowering mindfulness champions to disseminate their knowledge to others using a Train The Trainer approach. Our findings suggest that, when sensitively

introduced and supported by training and mentoring, mindfulness has the potential to be an appropriate, sustainable, and cost-effective way of supporting young children's mental health in the early years. This has implications for early years policy, suggesting that further attention should be given to understanding the importance of supporting children's self-regulation through a co-regulatory approach. Further large-scale research in this area would help to provide stronger evidence and knowledge base for the factors that support mindfulness for young children in the early years.

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For Peer Review