



How Kathy Walsh found herself teaching

children about mindfulness and positive thinking

By Deborah Shouse



"Close your eyes," Kathy Walsh tells the third graders who encircle her. "And take a deep breath." She smiles as she hears the collective intake of 10 deep breaths.

"Now we're going to relax and meditate for a few minutes." The children sit silently on the floor, eyes closed, breathing smoothly. After five minutes, Walsh invites them to open their eyes. She enjoys seeing their relaxed, refreshed looks.

"Now, let's talk about what makes you

happy," Walsh says. Moving around the circle, each child shares.

"My baby brother."

"Chocolate ice cream."

"Being outside."

After discussing what makes them happy, Kathy says, "Your thoughts and feelings impact you. How can you improve your thoughts? What can you do when you feel worried or upset?"

"Think of something happy," a boy says.

"Talk to a friend," a girl suggests.

Walsh gently facilitates the conversation, offering additional ideas for positive thinking. Then the children adjourn to art tables to paint pictures of their happy places.

For 40 minutes a day, twice a week, Walsh orchestrates this mindfulness program at Fayette Street Academy, a private school in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Her intention is simple: She wants to teach children mindfulness techniques that will help them be happier and more joyful. She believes this is her purpose in life.

"I've learned that it's easy to teach children this positive thinking and mindfulness," she says. "They are so ready; there's no resistance."

Learning Mindfulness

Walsh's mother was a role model for positive thinking. "Oh, What a Beautiful Morning" was what she sang every morning to wake her seven children. "If someone asks how you are," she taught Walsh, "don't say 'good,' say 'great!'"

Walsh's own journey with mindfulness began in 1978 when she was 21 years old. She had moved from her parents' home in New Jersey to attend the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) in New York City. She took a Silva Mind Control class, which focused on meditation, and discovered something magical and

important about the practice.

"I've been meditating every day since," she says.

Working in the fashion industry, Walsh traveled the world to scout out the next trends. Along the way, she married and had two children. Despite her whirlwind life, she continued her spiritual seeking and taught her own children how to meditate. Gradually expanding her explorations, she attended workshops with such New Thought visionaries as Wayne Dyer and Marianne Williamson. She attended another workshop by Esther and Jerry Hicks, learning about the now-famous

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Law of Attraction. She read most of the spiritual books in the New Age section of the local bookstore and listened to tapes of Swami Satchidananda, don Miguel Ruiz, and Rudolf Steiner.

In 1991, she realized she needed more soul connection in her life. So she quit her high-powered job and worked as the marketing director for a Waldorf School, which specializes in promoting creativity and education through the arts. She also designed and taught the school's then-two-year-old program. One day, as she was working with the children, Walsh had a radical idea.

"I keep a gratitude journal for myself, believing it helps me have a better, more positive life," she explains. "So I thought, *Why not do this with the toddlers and my own children?*"

The idea of expressing gratefulness was a big success. With the 2-year-olds, she wrote down the things they liked and then they illustrated them—creating a booklet for their parents. At home, she and her daughters each

shared three things they were grateful for every night before bed.

Walsh's mindful approach to life helped center her when she got a divorce in 2002. Several years later, she visited a friend in New Mexico and fell in love with the land. In 2010, she moved to Santa Fe.

Appreciating Yourself First

As Walsh explored ways to build self-esteem and happiness within her children, she realized she needed to have those qualities within. She began by looking into the mirror and naming the different things she appreciated about herself. Initially, she found it challenging to gaze into her eyes and say nice things, but she persisted until she grew comfortable with the exercise. Once she had a list of her own good qualities, she looked into the mirror with her children and told them some of the things she appreciated about them—focusing on their uniqueness.

One of her daughters was strong-willed, so Walsh complimented her on her determination and vision.

"You would make an amazing lawyer," she told her. Her other daughter was shy and stuck close to her mom, but she pried herself away from Walsh to take ballet lessons. Walsh focused on her willingness to learn a new art form. "You're so graceful," she told her daughter.

She popped sticky notes into their lunch sacks that said things like, "I admire the way you make your bed every morning," "I appreciate the way you do your homework without being asked," "I love your smile," and "I was so proud of how you walked into class like a big girl."

In addition to the gratitude journals, meditation, and appreciation practice, Walsh and her daughters created collages with pictures depicting their goals and dreams. In the early years the collages centered on puppies, birthday cakes, and friends. Later, they became more specific; one of her daughters made a ballet collage to help her land a job. Even though her daughters are now grown, they still use these techniques.

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Sending Love Into the World

As Walsh's children grew, she realized that books modeling positive behaviors could contribute to children living a happier life. Through a Unity church, she took a class with Julia Cameron, author of *The Artist's Way*, and deeply resonated with the idea of waking up each morning and writing three pages of stream of consciousness.

"I felt this writing practice was key to connecting to the universe," she says.

That was the inspiration she needed to create her own press, Joyohboy, where she's since published several of her children's books and a 2014 guidebook for parents called *Raising Peaceful Kids*. This book offers suggestions for helping children become more relaxed, compassionate, and intuitive.

Some of Walsh's ideas for parents include:

Be present in nature. Take a tech-free hike, leaving behind all cell phones. Notice the wonder in the moment—the crunch of leaves, a smooth black stone on the path, the rough texture of a tree trunk, and the soft gurgle of a creek. Be grateful for all these sensory gifts.

Ask your heart. When a child has a dilemma, invite them to close their

eyes and picture their heart. Breathe in and out deeply, relaxing and bypassing the rational mind. Then state the troublesome issue and ask the heart, "What shall I do?" Listen to the first answer.

Use light energy. If something is bothering a child, suggest they envision light wrapping around the issue. If they're feeling left out, they can imagine a bright light encircling them and the people who are excluding them. That empowers them to focus on positive energy rather than stewing over negativity.

Acknowledge your child's feelings. If a child, particularly a young one, is expressing negative energy, notice and acknowledge their feelings by putting a name to them. You might say, "Wow, you must be so frustrated. It's tough to have to leave the playground before you're ready." Encourage the child to feel their emotions and then let them go. Walsh often guides children in drawing balloons, writing the feelings inside the balloon, and then imagining they are releasing the balloons into the sky.

Imagine great outcomes. When children are going through a hard

Kathy Walsh's Joyohboy

Books for Kids

- *Life Is a Rainbow* invites kids to notice the colors and sounds that surround them. "Energy is all around you," Walsh writes. "Be positive, loving, creative, and kind."
- *The Bright Blue Balloon* offers ideas for expressing painful emotions, letting them go, and returning to love and joy.
- *Love Is the Moon, the Stars, and the Sky* beautifully illustrates Walsh's belief that "The only thing that can make you feel better than being loved is to give love."
- *Gratitude Is a Funny Thing* invites children to "Show gratitude every day and it will come back to you."

For more information, visit joyohboy.com.

time, invite them to describe their feelings. If they don't make the first string of the basketball team or get the part they want in the school play, for example, encourage them to talk about what specific emotions they're feeling—whether they're angry, sad, frustrated, embarrassed, or feeling rejected. After they feel their emotions, then encourage them to imagine the most wonderful solution or outcome they can think of. Tell them, "The universe will make it even better than you imagined."

Talk positive. As you eat breakfast with your children or take them to school or work, express gratitude by saying something like, "Today is going to be a great day, and I'm grateful for these delicious fresh strawberries. What are *you* grateful for?"

Every morning, while still in bed, Walsh breathes in energy and envisions a white or purple light beaming through her crown chakra at the top of her head. As she inhales that vibrant light energy, she feels a connection to God. She imagines sending loving feelings into the world. Then she gets up and starts teaching and living mindfulness, positive thinking, and love. 🌈