

## Suggested Elements for a Peace Place in a PK Classroom or Home

One of the best gifts we can give the young people in our lives is a space to go to learn to self-regulate when feelings become overwhelming. This is the compassionate, mindful alternative to time out used in many Montessori and Waldorf schools and homes. While time out is a vast improvement over old-fashioned methods of discipline such as sitting or standing in a corner, it is still something punitive imposed on a child by an adult. Providing a carefully curated space with appropriate materials and activities to increase self-awareness, enable a child to focus on the present moment, and where they are free of judgement and harsh self-judgement builds skills that benefit the child and the whole class/family.

Initially, it will be incumbent upon the adult to invite the child to take a moment in the Peace Place when they see them beginning to get frustrated, angry, or overwhelmed by any strong emotion. Close observation and time are of the essence because once a child is in a meltdown or tantrum state, it is too late for this type of pre-emptive intervention. The goal is to encourage them to take a break before they are already reacting from the primal instincts of the amygdala, and then to participate in mindfulness practices that build neural connections to the prefrontal cortex where higher executive functions take place. Over time, children gain the skills to know when they need to go to the dedicated peace area and do so happily as needed because they have a sense of ownership and control.

For PK aged children, the main purpose of this strategy is to focus on the physical literacy of mindfulness both to recognize when the child needs to choose the Peace Place and to help with self-regulatory skills when there. A great supportive/preparatory activity is a guided body-scan followed by drawing sensations noticed on blank body outlines. Working with facial expression flash cards to recognize feelings (their own and others), and building emotional vocabulary are all SEL activities which can also support the emotional literacy of mindfulness and help children know when they might need to choose to take a break.

The Peace Place needs to be a dedicated, inviting space not totally closed off, yet slightly separated from the rest of the classroom (or area of the home). This can be done with hanging beads, a canopy, silk scarves, plants, etc. No furniture is necessary and soft rugs, beanbags, pillows and blankets are cozy and safe even for children prone to tantrums. It is important that the area not be too "busy" with no media or character images. Colors should be soft and inviting as well as materials. To address any potential sensory overload from auditory input, noise cancelling headphones or earmuffs can be very helpful to keep in the area.

The following is a list of items/activities that can be kept on a shelf or in a basket in a Peace Place, but not all of them should be available at once, only a few. If a child is in a situation of needing to calm down and look inward, going to an area where there is potential to be over-stimulated is obviously not going to be helpful. It is also a good way to maintain children's interest in the peace area by rotating out different items/activities weekly or monthly. Its best to try to keep a mixture of items that appeal to different senses as opposed to all tactile or all auditory elements.

- Mindfulness and other "gentle" picture books
- A soft toy or two to use as a "Breathing Buddy" or to cuddle
- A Hoberman sphere
- A glitter/calming bottle
- A sachet
- A weighted blanket
- A bowl of smooth pebbles or polished stones for tactile engagement
- Bubbles to blow
- A pinwheel for breathing exercises
- Coloring sheets- mandalas or nature- no media characters
- A wave machine
- Blank paper & colored pencils to draw feelings
- Hand puppets
- Modeling putty or beeswax
- Stress balls
- Battery operated candles or strings of small lights
- A yoga mat and kids yoga pose cards
- An eye mask
- Bells, chimes, singing bowls
- A scented rice eye pillow

A final element that I recommend for every Peace Place is based on the Waldorf practice of having a Nature Table in each classroom. This is a small table or shelf within the peace area that has different natural elements relating to the current season often collected by the children themselves during the daily walk. There are countless studies attesting to the mental health benefits of children developing a relationship with the natural world and observing the daily changes in the seasons. A feeling of connectedness to the planet leads to a feeling of security and increased ability to build social connections. Fostering awareness of the changes in nature is a basic mindfulness skill to focus, but even more so attunes children to the daily changes in their own bodies and feelings. In addition to collected leaves, flowers, feathers, rocks, cones, etc., a nature table can also have a water fountain or potted plants. Children are natural magpies and love collect treasures which can also give them a sense of ownership of the Peace Place.