

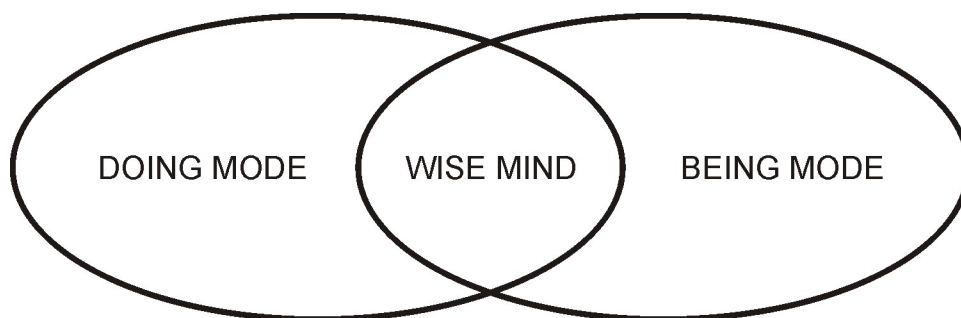
What is Mindfulness in Ecoplay?

One of the major components of Ecoplay is the concept of mindfulness. The simplest definition of mindfulness is, "paying attention to the present moment in a particular way."

At this moment, think about the top three things that worry you. Make a mental list. Of those three things, how many of them have to do with worrying about events that happened in the past? How many of them have to do with anxiety over what may or may not happen in the future? Do any of your worries have to do with anything that is occurring right now, at this very moment, as you're reading this?

Human beings in general are very good at getting caught in negative thought processes. Negative thoughts are a chain reaction. One negative thought leads to another, and another, until we find ourselves caught in a downward spiral of negativity that can lead to depression, anxiety, and poor self-esteem. Mindfulness is a way of setting aside negative thought patterns and paying attention only to the moment. It's not about avoiding, resisting or "fixing" unpleasant thoughts and emotions. Instead, it is a way of stepping outside of the thought stream for a moment to realize that who you are as a person is not defined by your thoughts. It is a way of accepting that you don't have to believe these negative thoughts about yourself and others. Thoughts and feelings are not facts. They're just things your brain does. Your brain's going to do what it's going to do, but you don't have to believe everything it tells you.

Often when we have negative thoughts we feel tempted to do something about it, but sometimes there's nothing that can be done. In such a case, mindfulness means moving from *Doing Mode* into *Being Mode*. Doing Mode is trying to do something about negative thoughts and feelings. Being Mode just means making space for those negative thoughts and feelings, without feeling like we have to "do" something about them. The perfect balance between Doing Mode and Being Mode is what we call Wise Mind.



When we get stressed out or anxious, the emotional part of our brains (called the limbic system) takes over. When the limbic system is running at full speed, our fight, flight or freeze response kicks in, making it difficult to think rationally. From an evolutionary perspective, this makes perfect sense. If you're being chased by a predator, you don't have time to sit down and think about it. All of your mental resources need to go into fighting, fleeing or freezing until the danger is over.

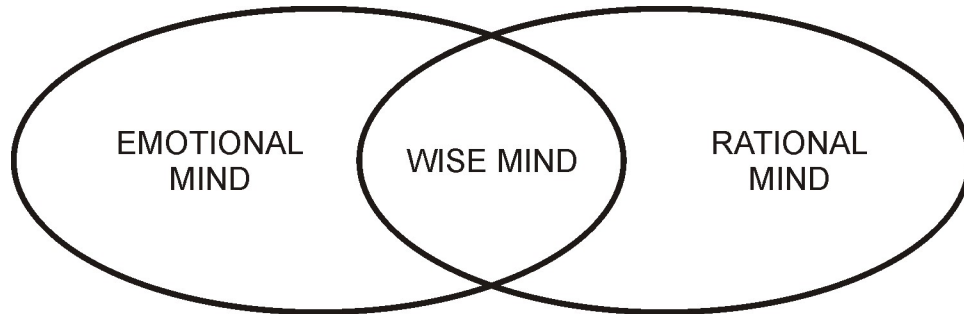
The problem is that our brains don't know the difference between a real danger and an imaginary one. So when emotional mind takes over, we tend to think that thoughts are facts. In other words, we believe the emotions and respond as if there is a real danger present. So the emotional part of the brain overwhelms the rational part of the brain, making it difficult to think of a course of action.

On the other hand, we can sometimes get stuck in the rational part of our minds too. When that happens, we tend to rely too much on cold hard facts and logic and forget to be compassionate and empathetic.

In mindfulness, *Wise Mind* is a perfect balance between *Emotional Mind* and *Rational Mind*. It is reason tempered by compassion and emotion tempered by logic and reason.

What is Mindfulness in Ecoplay?

In Ecoplay we rely extensively on Wise Mind. It is the ultimate product of mindfulness, leading to a strengthening of the parent/child bond, and greater feelings of compassion, self-esteem, self-confidence, and resilience for both parent and child.



One reason for spending time in nature and scheduling weekly Ecoplay sessions outdoors is that nature has been demonstrated to facilitate the contemplative states that allow mindfulness to occur. Spending time in nature makes it easier to shift from Doing Mode to Being Mode. Part of the reason for this is that Being Mode is about engaging in the present moment. One way to become more aware of the present moment is to pay attention to all the information your senses are giving you. Sensory awareness brings you into the present moment because you cannot see, touch, taste, hear or smell anything in the past or the future. You can only engage your senses in the now. In nature there are plenty of opportunities to engage the senses. The more sensory experiences we have in nature, the more we are naturally drawn to the present moment.

The more we leave Doing Mode and enter Being Mode, the more effective we are at striking a balance between Emotional Mind and Rational Mind. As we leave the idea that we have to “do” something about whatever emotional state we’re experiencing, the more we find that balance.

As you and your child spend time in nature throughout the course of the Ecoplay program, pay particular attention to the information your senses are giving you from moment to moment, and teach your child to do the same. The more you are both able to do this, the more mindful you will be, and the more you will approach the perfect balance that is Wise Mind.