

Happy Children

English Version

Contents

Foreword 05

Introduction 07

Purpose of the book 08

Structure of the book 08

Short biography 09

The author's sources of knowledge and inspiration 10

Chapter 1: Understanding child development 11

1.1 The basic needs of children 11

1.2 The four types of „nutrients" in Buddhist psychology 12

1.3 The importance of play 15

1.4 Conclusion 21

Chapter 2: Mindful child-rearing 23

2.1 What is mindful child-rearing? 24

2.2 Positive impacts of mindful child-rearing 25

2.3 Mindful child-rearing with respect to parents 26

2.4 Exercises 27

2.5 Criticism of mindful child-rearing 28

2.6 Summary: The transformative power of mindfulness in child-rearing and education 29

2.7 Mindfulness with respect to children 30

Chapter 3: Happy Schools – Practical implementation of mindful child-rearing and education in the school context 33

3.1 The Happy Schools project in Vietnam 33

3.2 On the need for a different approach to education in schools 34

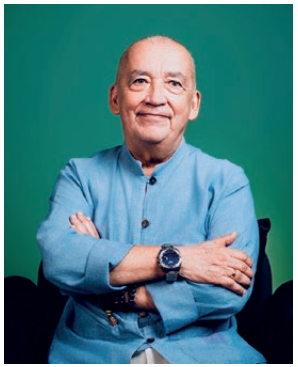
3.3 Anchoring the Happy School approach in the UN 35

3.4 The Happy Schools concept 36

3.5 Mindfulness practice in the Happy Schools programme 37

Epilogue 42

Foreword



Reading this wonderful summary of my book, "Happy Children", I am filled with immense joy and appreciation. It is remarkable how the editors have succeeded in presenting the core ideas and essential principles of my text. I am so grateful to observe how the central concerns – children's wellbeing, mindful child-rearing, and an educational approach that speaks to both heart and mind – come alive in this publication.

It means so much to me that this synopsis of my work is presented within the context of the work of Kindernothilfe, which performs invaluable work throughout the world on behalf of children's wellbeing in difficult life situations. Its commitment to children's rights, education and social justice is an inspiring example of compassion in action. I am greatly honoured that the principles of Happy Children could be incorporated into such valuable work.

I hope that this booklet will inspire many people – whether in educational work, social projects or day-to-day family life – and, thereby, help create an environment for children in which they feel safe and are able to learn, grow and develop their full potential.

With heartfelt thanks to everyone who contributed to this publication,

Tho Ha Vinh

Introduction

Mareike Walter

This booklet presents a summary of the manuscript for the book "Happy Children" by Dr Tho Ha Vinh, a renowned psychologist and educationalist from Vietnam. His text focuses on the fundamental aspects of child development and the model of mindfulness within the context of teaching and learning. His theories are rooted in the principle of recognising the independent personality and rights of children. This principle is also at the heart of our work at Kindernothilfe.

The aim of this booklet is to provide a starting point for discussion for the staff of Kindernothilfe and its partner organisations, as well as to raise awareness of, and encourage reflection on, these issues.

This synopsis was prepared by a team of Kindernothilfe editors consisting of Imke Häusler, Daria Hansen, Victoria Depping, Mareike Walter and Gunhild Aiyub. They have restricted their interventions to limited additional research into and review of theories.

Best practice examples from the extensive manuscript will be made available for integration into our work in the areas of programmes and children's rights.

Purpose of the book

In his book, Dr Tho Ha Vinh advocates the global improvement of the education system. He also seeks to help create a better understanding of child development and the changing needs arising during the course of this development. In addition to providing guidelines, Dr Tho presents a range of tools and practical exercises to create a positive environment for child development.

Structure of the book

The book is divided into three main chapters. Chapter 1, entitled "Understanding Child Development", presents a theoretically grounded overview of the various developmental stages of a child. In Chapter 2, "Mindful child-rearing", a number of practical examples illustrate how insights from a mindful approach can be applied within the family context. In the final Chapter, "Happy Schools", the author presents a detailed outline of the programme used in these schools and its relevance.

Short biography

Dr Tho Ha Vinh, born in Vietnam, was an international expert on peace and sustainability. He was actively involved in a range of aid projects throughout the world in the fields of ecology, education and social renewal. His multidisciplinary knowledge and experience in various fields have enabled him to specialise in conflict transformation, violence prevention, global sustainability and education.

In geographical terms, the focus of his work has been in his home country Vietnam and in Bhutan where he has been dedicated to promoting happiness and wellbeing in society.

With a doctorate in psychology and education, Dr Tho Ha Vinh worked for many years with the International Committee of the Red Cross in crisis zones around the world. He founded the Eurasia Learning Institute for Happiness and Wellbeing (ELI), an organisation dedicated to promoting happiness and wellbeing among people in Eurasia. He was also co-founder and president of the Eurasia Foundation NGO which develops ecological and educational projects in Vietnam.[1]

In Bhutan he co-founded the Gross National Happiness Centre (GNH). This development philosophy model prioritises the happiness and wellbeing of the population instead of its economic progress. As programme director, he was partly responsible for the introduction of Gross National Happiness (GNH) as a measurable indicator.

Dr Tho Ha Vinh was the author of several books, delivering lectures across the globe on Gross National Happiness, happiness and wellbeing, and on measurement parameters that are alternatives to Gross Domestic Product for education, the economy and communities.[2] [3]

1 Eurasia Association, Eurasia Learning Institute for Happiness and Wellbeing (2019) URL: http://elihw.org/
2 Rudolf Schmid und Hermann Schmid Stiftung, Dr. Tho Ha Vinh – Kurzbiographie (2017) URL: https://gebrueder-schmid-zentrum.de/fachtagung/dr-ha-vinh-tho-programmdirektor-des-zentrums-fuer-bruttonationalglueck-in-bhutan/
3 Dr. Tho Ha Vinh, Der Glücksstandard (2019) URL: https://www.droemer-knaur.de/buch/dr-ha-vinh-tho-der-gluecksstandard-9783426292952

The author's sources of knowledge and inspiration

In his book, "Happy Children", Dr Tho Ha Vinh combines his own experiences as a father and grandfather with his scientific findings as a researcher and practical experience as a teacher to establish the empirical basis for his educational theory.

He draws on the anthroposophical worldview of Rudolf Steiner, the Austrian philosopher and founder of the Waldorf school system – a valuable source of his spiritual and philosophical insights.[4]

One other key source of inspiration for Dr Tho Ha Vinh is the Vietnamese Buddhist scholar and Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. He is regarded as the "father of mindfulness" to whom Dr Tho refers in the mindfulness exercises presented in the "Happy Children" manuscript.

Dr Tho's insights into child development are based on the research of the renowned Swiss paediatrician and researcher Remo Largo. He had dedicated himself to studying child development and to understanding the individual characteristics of children with developmental and behavioural disorders.

„I believe that all children have a right to be happy and to enjoy their school life."
Dr Tho, Happy Children manuscript, p. 313

4 Please note that we, as Kindernothilfe, distance ourselves from critical aspects of this worldview, especially from the controversial attitudes towards "race" and people with a different ethnic background.

Chapter 1

Understanding child development

Daria Hansen

"Children have never been particularly good at listening to their elders, but they have always managed to imitate them."
James Baldwin, American novelist

The (psychological) development of children is indeed complex, and plenty of (specialised) books on the subject already exist. Accordingly, we will restrict our explanations to the fundamental aspects that are relevant to the context of this booklet. We should, therefore, bear in mind that by the age of seven a substantial part of a child's development is already complete. That is why early childhood experiences warrant particular attention. All of the information in this chapter assumes that the children concerned have no disability. The timeframe is, of course, approximate since actual development is specific to each individual child.

1.1 The basic needs of children

Social acceptance and integration: This includes emotional security provided by caregivers as well as successful social integration. Dr Tho explains that even in their first year of life children exchange glances, sounds and movements with one another, and want to be noticed. In their second year children begin to communicate with and imitate others. Then, in the third year, they seek their position in the group. This includes acknowledging the social and physical skills and strengths of others. Differences between the sexes begin to be observed between the ages of three and five. In his kindergarten, Dr Tho observed that

girls tend toward flatter hierarchies and exhibit social and communicative skills, while boys prefer graded hierarchies in which competition plays a central role.

Interaction between girls and boys is vital, and adults should allow them to play freely together with as little interference as possible. However, adults do remain role models, for example, with respect to conflict resolution.

Learning and development: Within the context of learning, we should also ensure that children have the opportunity to demonstrate their independence. This gives them, for example, the inner motivation to become toilet trained. It is also important that each step is appropriate for the child concerned: if the tasks are too difficult, he or she can quickly become overwhelmed and discouraged; yet, if they are too easy, the child can quickly become bored. Each child has his or her own individual development tempo and learning style. This suggests that schools that have exams and award grades are not really up to meeting this challenge. We will look at this again in the chapter, "Happy Schools" (see p. 33 – 41).

1.2 The four types of "nutrients" in Buddhist psychology

"A battle is raging within each of us," it says in the book, "Happy Children". "A battle between two wolves. One is evil – embodying rage, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other embodies positive qualities: joy, peace, love, hope, equanimity, humility, kindness, goodwill, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. Both wolves fight to the death. This battle takes place within you and every single person."

"Which wolf is going to win?"
"The one you feed."

Healthy foods

For many children, breast milk is their first food. It not only protects them against many illnesses but establishes an intimate bond between mother and child. It is, therefore, not just a matter of the milk itself but also about warmth, intimacy, love and care.

Healthy nutrition, of course, remains important throughout life. For Dr Tho, this amounts to much more than just the intake of vitamins that ends up on our plates. It is a matter of the health of the entire food chain and the planet. Health begins with crop cultivation and animal husbandry. We should always be aware of the impact our food consumption has on the planet: whether our food is "natural" or full of chemicals; whether it is regionally produced or has travelled thousands of miles; whether it is free-range or factory farmed, and so forth. In all cultures there is a clear connection between traditional festivals and specific meals. This demonstrates the close relationship between food, emotional security and the sense of belonging that shapes children from an early age.

Sensory impressions

In times of insufficient childcare and increasing workloads, it is perfectly understandable that parents and caregivers are often pushed beyond their limits. Electronic devices may be an easy way to distract children and keep them busy, but we must also bear in mind that screen time provides negligible educational value. This is because children learn little of practical use, at least with respect to what they actually need. Girls and boys learn through free play (see p. 15 – 16), experimenting and by activating all their senses. This is another reason why Dr Tho Ha Vinh advocates the use of "natural toys" that promote children's motoric skills and their imagination. More often than not, plastic toys bought in a shop have the disadvantage, for example, of having only one function: a fire engine, for instance, can move left and right, forwards and backwards. However, its functionality and purpose are predetermined. Even if a child uses such a toy creatively, it remains, at the end of the day, a fire engine in both form and function. A stick, on the other hand, can be anything: a sword, a magician's wand, a horse and so much more – the imagination's possibilities are endless.

We should also give consideration to the materials. Plastic is neither a natural material nor really compatible with the "healthy cycle" explained above in relation to food. Shrill sounds and garish colours are not particularly natural and they can disrupt harmonious development.

Action

The guiding question for all our actions should be: **does this action make me and other people happy, or does it make me and other people suffer?** Dr Tho is convinced of the strong links between ethics and action, pointing out the moral principles that, in many religions, are formulated as prohibitions (for example, Christianity's Ten Commandments or Buddhism's Five Precepts). However, it is more important to define the positive counterparts. In other words: What should we do instead? Which virtues, attitudes, behaviours and actions have a positive impact not only on our lives but on our planet? Acquiring such attitudes at a young age will help shape who we are and what we do for the rest of our lives.

Nature determines the framework for our actions. It has its own rhythm, from sunrise to sunset, through the changing seasons. We, too, align ourselves to its rhythms. Establishing a rhythm and routines gives children stability and security. One specific challenge – especially in fast-paced times like ours – is to sustain the required perseverance and constant repetition.

When children live healthy lives, they love moving. It is worth noting the recommendation from the World Health Organization that children between the ages of three and seventeen should have some form of exercise for least one hour per day , something that is no longer a widespread practice in many schools today.

Consciousness

Our brain is like a well-trodden path. When we walk – figuratively – through the undergrowth and learn something new, we trample down a few blades of grass, thereby forming neural connections. The more often we walk along this path, the more obvious it becomes, and the stronger our neural connections. In due course, the path is easily distinguishable and we know exactly where to go. Everything we practice regularly will eventually become second nature. If we are able to do or practice certain things day after day[5], why should this not apply to showing gratitude on a daily basis?

Our opening quotation from James Baldwin stated: "Children have never been particularly good at listening to their elders, but they have always managed to imitate them." It is a fact that children learn so much more through a passive than through an active upbringing. We are referring here to imitation. How we act as role models for our children has a more significant impact than anything we preach to them. We cannot shout at them and then expect them to be quiet and peaceful. Even if they appear calm on the outside, they are more likely to be intimidated, especially by the strong presence that adults possess. That is why it is especially important to constantly question our own actions: "If my child were to imitate me, would my behaviour and actions be healthy for her/him?" Bringing up a young person is thus always also a matter of educating ourselves. All the qualities we want to see in our child are the qualities we must first embody ourselves.

The ultimate goal of child-rearing should be to convey to our child that the world is good, that he or she can trust it, and that the universe is a benevolent place. If this is the default mode, it does not mean that a person is naive but rather that he or she has a fundamental trust in life. This fundamental trust in the world should be firmly anchored by the age of seven.

1.3 The importance of play

As mentioned above, there is enormous temptation in our stressful everyday lives to distract children with screens. Whether in the form of video games or television programmes, girls and boys often sit mesmerised in front of their screens and forget everything going on around them. This gives parents

5 World Health Organization (WHO) (2010) Global recommendations on physical activity for health. WHO, Geneva, URL: https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/44399/9789241599979_eng.pdf?sequence=1

and caregivers a chance to breathe and have time for other activities. This is understandable and it would be wrong to completely demonise screen time. At the same time, though, we should be aware that it is no substitute for genuinely free play. For children, free play is vital since it fosters their creativity and imagination, makes human interaction possible, promotes motoric skills, and enables them to learn new things about themselves and the world.

Our partners' projects often seek to take girls and boys out of child labour and give them the chance of a "real" childhood. Apart from offering them access to schooling, this also gives them the chance to play. This is important for several reasons.

Play-based learning

Between the ages of three and six it is vital that children are allowed to play independently, which means that where possible adults should avoid interfering. The child should decide which games he or she wants to play. Ideally, these should take place outdoors. Through free play, girls and boys learn to love, respect and protect nature, thereby helping them to develop an awareness of plants, animals and people as well as the work that goes into ensuring food security. During this phase, the time children spend playing is crucial. This is because it stimulates neural pathways, improving such social skills as relationships with peers, fine and gross motoric skills, as well as motoric planning and co-ordination. Play-based programmes are thus more beneficial than the more academically focused preschools or kindergartens. Learning opportunities can be found in such situations as shared meals where mindful eating can raise a child's awareness for such things as the colour, texture, smell and taste of food.

Learning through experiences, social and emotional skills

There are many play-based formats that enable children to develop their skills. Creative play, storytelling, artistic activities and outdoor exploration: all of these experiences foster language development, rudimentary mathematics, the ability to collaborate with peers, and active listening. They extend children's attention spans and foster memory development.

For example, through their interaction with others children learn to solve problems, broaden their imagination, and work together to accomplish tasks. At a puppet show, for instance, they learn to sit for longer periods in a circle, recite, remember and listen attentively. They extend their vocabulary and acquire a firmer grasp of the sounds of language. Storytelling in kindergarten is a vital foundation for later reading lessons since it develops comprehension and phonetic skills. Listening, understanding and visualising the spoken word are the key to later reading comprehension. Artistic activities, on the other hand, improve fine motor skills and the ability to concentrate for longer periods. Activities such as finger knitting even improve basic mathematical skills such as counting and understanding complex patterns.

Sensory integration

Stimulating the senses and the relationship to one's own body is also important. Children should have at least three breaks per day, which should almost always take place outdoors. Activities, including walking, log jumping, tree climbing or simply playing with sand and mud – promoting, for example, the sense of touch – are possible in rain, wind or sunshine. In view of this, the current trend toward increasingly fewer breaks and ever more rigid curricula is particularly concerning. Tactile skills are practiced, for example, while cooking, kneading dough or carving beeswax. Other commonplace educational tools include music and dance.

All in all, development should focus on greater mobility, flexibility, spatial awareness and the promotion of the sense of touch, proprioception[6] and sensory integration.

6 Proprioception refers to the body's subconscious ability to sense its own position, movement and force in space. This includes the relative positioning of limbs, head and torso to each another. Furthermore, their changes during movement, along with the sensation of weight, tension, force and speed, are hereby explained.

Learning in nature

Why is spending time in nature emphasised so often? Quite simply, because it has many benefits: for example, increasing cognitive performance, reducing anxiety, and improving test results. In nature children learn to discover things in a new way. They explore them physically. From the changing seasons they learn about the cycles of life, while a close proximity to nature helps them understand their place in the world. This fosters curiosity about nature, and respect for it, laying the foundation for an interest in scientific research. Richard Louv[7] says: "Time spent in nature is not leisure time, but an important investment in our children's health." (Last Child in the Woods, p. 101).

> **"When I approach a child, it awakens two feelings in me – tenderness for what it is and respect for what it can become."**
> Louis Pasteur, French biologist, chemist and physicist

How play fosters children's development

Especially during the period from birth to adolescence, a range of unstructured play opportunities are essential. Freely chosen play means that the child determines and controls how the game unfolds in line with his or her own instincts, imagination and interests. It means playing without being directed by adults, because there is no right or wrong way to play. This type of play improves children's health, wellbeing and development.

7 American non-fiction writer and journalist best known for his book, "Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder".

Why play is important

As already mentioned, play promotes the cognitive, social and emotional wellbeing of children and young people. They learn about the world and themselves. Skills needed for learning, work and relationships are practiced. These include:

- **> Trust and independence**
- **> Self-esteem and resilience**
- **> Interaction and social skills**
- **> Curiosity**
- **> Coping with difficult situations**

Developing physical health through play

- **> Physical games, such as running and cycling, promote children's development**
- **> Good physical fitness**
- **> Agility**
- **> Endurance**
- **> Co-ordination**

Developing social skills through play

Play does not just enable children to develop social skills to help them interact with others. Listening, paying attention and sharing their experiences of play with one another also help them explore their feelings, develop self-discipline, learn to express themselves, and process emotional aspects of life.

Playful child-rearing

When parents and caregivers interact with children, it is important that they support the child's play activity and avoid dictating what happens. As a participant, it is important to give young people time, freedom and choices when they are playing.

Play and challenge

When they are playing, children want to create challenges and uncertainties. This is how they learn to deal with risks. Risky, challenging play enables them to test themselves and identify their own boundaries. Parents and caregivers have an important role in this. They should encourage their children while simultaneously teaching them such fundamental skills as riding a bike, swimming and road safety. Parents and caregivers can also explain to their sons and daughters that it is important to learn from mistakes, try again, and believe in themselves. They can help them recognise and understand their limits while still allowing their children to have fun.

Play and digital technology

There is still very little research into video games, especially considering that many studies are based on correlations. A number of studies point, indeed, to positive aspects of video games. The mere fact that they can stimulate discussion among young people is likely to be significant in terms of social integration within the group. However, in relation to child development, the question is to which positive aspects we are referring here, and to which alternatives video games are being compared. One way or another, discussion about the benefits of video games is usually directed at young people and is reasonably complex. The younger a child is, the more important it is to limit screen time and allow them to play freely.[8]

Dr Tho also proposes setting up technology-free zones for this purpose, for example, at meal times, outdoors and in the bedroom before bedtime. Furthermore, digital devices should not be used to divert children or keep them quiet. Instead, this time could be spent together: talking, playing games or looking at a book. Parents and caregivers could also be actively involved in children's screen time and talk to them about online activities. Once again, the following applies: all of this can only be truly effective if parents lead by example.

8 World Health Organization (WHO) (2010) To grow up healthy, children need to sit less and play more, Geneva, URL: https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/24-04-2019-to-grow-up-healthy-children-need-to-sit-less-and-play-more & Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung (BZgA) (2024) Table: How often and how long should children use media? URL: https://www.kindergesundheit-info.de/themen/medien/alltagstipps/mediennutzung/hoechstdauer/

1.4 Conclusion

Unlike animals, human beings are born helpless; they cannot even move autonomously and must rely on interaction with others for their entire development. Early childhood is decisive for cognitive, emotional and social development. During this phase, organic, physiological, psychological/mental, emotional and even spiritual foundations are laid down.

Positive, loving interactions between parents or caregivers and children promote the young person's development and brain maturation. With regard to a child's development, this primary bond cannot be underestimated since social and emotional skills are crucial for overall development and, ultimately, for cognitive abilities.
As a reminder, four types of nutrients "nourish" the child:

- **> Healthy food**
- **> Sensory experiences**
- **> Movement**
- **> Awareness**

A young child is like a sponge, soaking up everything from their surrounding environment. They learn through imitation. Thus, parents and caregivers should act as role models for what children should learn, enabling them to imitate what they observe. We should not forget that girls and boys have to learn and practice all human skills: walking, talking and thinking. For this to happen, human interaction is required. Accordingly, Dr Tho Ha Vinh regards the upbringing of young children as a sacred task as it has lasting impacts that shape human beings for the rest of their lives. Caregivers have, thereby, one of the most responsible jobs in the world.

Free play has a particularly important role in children's development. Although all children go through the same developmental phases, each child is unique and develops his or her own pace. We should, therefore, take enormous care to avoid imposing external criteria or expectations on young children. The greatest gift we can give them is our full attention and presence, as well as our love.

Since all of this may sound overwhelming and highlights the extensive demands involved in bringing up children, one important concluding remark is required: like every other human being, parents and caregivers are not perfect. As a parent or caregiver, you cannot do everything right, and that should not be the goal.

While this booklet seeks to provide guidance on what to consider when bringing up children, it is equally as important to take care of your own mental health and needs. It is not intended to add even more duties and responsibilities but rather to remind you that sometimes it is okay not to do everything to perfection. It is also okay to feel emotional and overwhelmed since the world does demand a lot from us. Work and day-to-day tasks often mean you have insufficient time to dedicate yourself fully to your child. Sometimes you just cannot manage to patiently spend the whole day with him or her because you would rather be with friends, read a book, get some exercise, or just enjoy a bit of peace and quiet. That is actually okay. It does not do the child any good if we force ourselves to do things with them that we do not enjoy. Remember: these "little sponges" absorb everything, including our lack of enthusiasm. All things considered, it is more important that the life you present as a role model is one in which you know when and how to take care of your own inner balance.

At the end of the day we all try to do our best and put our trust in life. And that, too, is an important gift we can pass on to children, along with the conviction that the world is good.

Chapter 2
Mindful child-rearing

Victoria Depping

This chapter combines well-founded theoretical insights and practice-oriented approaches, and seeks to make the principles of mindful child-rearing tangible and practicable. It establishes the basis to understand and promote the enormous potential of mindfulness, not only as an educational method but also as a transformative approach in educational and family contexts. The following should act as a stimulus to consider alternatives to traditional education models, and to re-evaluate the importance of conscious presence[9], emotional intelligence and empathic communication in relation to children.

Above all, this chapter should be a starting point for discussion within Kindernothilfe to critically examine and further develop the role of mindfulness in supporting and nurturing children, as well as its application in educational and support programmes. It does not just offer theoretical knowledge to parents, educators and disseminators. It also provides concrete ideas for action to integrate mindfulness into day-to-day life in a sustainable manner, thereby reinforcing the emotional and social wellbeing of children and adults alike. For our work in the area of children's rights, focusing on mindful child-rearing offers the opportunity to create an environment in which children feel safe and respected. Mindful guidance stimulates children's intellectual and social development, which is closely linked to the right to education and personality development. In addition, mindfulness helps enable children to voice their opinions and become active participants, thereby strengthening their social participation and right to freedom of expression. By integrating mindfulness into our educational and support programmes, we are not only improving the

9 Being fully present in the moment, experiencing your current state of mind, surroundings and interactions with your whole self.

emotional and social wellbeing of children and adults, but also contributing significantly to the realisation of children's rights. In many ways, this is at the heart of our work, reflecting our fundamental conviction that each child has the right to optimal development and protection in a respectful and supportive environment.

2.1 What is mindful child-rearing?

Mindful child-rearing is a nuanced and conscious approach based on three central pillars: the capacity for non-judgmental presence, full acceptance of others, and the targeted development of emotional and social skills. This approach to child-rearing goes beyond mere action, emphasising an attentive approach that is reflected in every interaction. At the heart of this is the integration of mindfulness as a practice that facilitates a non-judgmental perception of the here and now, and social and emotional learning (SEL) that is essential for children's healthy psychological and social development.

Jon Kabat-Zinn[10] describes mindfulness as "… an awareness that arises from intentional attention to the present moment, without judgment, in the service of self-knowledge and wisdom."

Thich Nhat Hanh[11], who had a profound influence on the practice of mindfulness, defines it as "an energy of being aware and awake to the present moment" which makes it possible to be "truly alive, present and at one with the people around you."

In the context of child-rearing this means regarding children not only as learners or bearers of responsibility, but as individual personalities with unique needs, feelings and perspectives. Mindful child-rearing encourages parents and caregivers to minimise distractions, avoid making judgments, and to build a deep, authentic connection with their children. It creates the space that enables an understanding of a child's emotional world by listening to and acknowledging their views. This practice not only creates opportunities for communication based on respect and needs but also lays the basis for an educational approach that is characterised not by perfection but by presence and empathy.

The goal is to provide children not only with guidance and security, but also with an environment that fosters their emotional and social development. Through this approach parents and caregivers themselves develop greater emotional competence, which in turn creates a stable basis for a lasting, positive relationship between adults and children.

2.2 Positive impacts of mindful child-rearing

The positive influences of mindful child-rearing are multifaceted and have an impact not just on the relationship between parents and children, but also on children's individual development. The focus is on promoting respectful and appreciative interactions. Through conscious presence and mindful communication, children develop a deep understanding of empathetic and compassionate human relationships. This creates a basis for more harmonious interactions, and reinforces the bond between parents and children.

Mindful child-rearing also supports conflict resolution by enabling parents and children to meet challenges in a calm and constructive manner. Conflicts are not perceived as problems but rather as opportunities to understand mutual needs and work together to find solutions. This ability to respond calmly and reflectively to difficult situations reinforces not only stability within the family but also children's social behaviour in other contexts.

Another key aspect is boosting children's emotional wellbeing and competence. Mindful child-rearing helps them to better recognise, express and regulate their feelings. As well as contributing to positive self-perception, it also has a long-term impact on children's resilience. They develop the ability to deal with challenges and they emerge stronger from difficult life situations.

10 Professor emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester; he taught mindfulness meditation as a means of helping people to deal with stress, angst and illness.
11 Vietnamese Buddhist monk, author and lyricist; also known as the "Father of mindfulness".

It is important to emphasise again that mindful child-rearing does not demand perfection. Its value lies, instead, in the continuous striving for a more conscious and present attitude. Parents and caregivers do not always have to get everything right; it is more a matter of taking regular breaks, self-reflection, and responding with openness and empathy to children's needs. This approach creates a supportive environment not only for children's development but also for the personal growth of the parents and caregivers themselves.

2.3 Mindful child-rearing with respect to parents

As primary caregivers, parents play a central role in their children's emotional, social and cognitive development. The key characteristics of mindful parenting are conscious presence, empathetic interaction, and a deep understanding of the child's individual needs. This approach focuses on the quality of the relationship and encourages parents to be mindful of themselves and their children.

Elements of mindful parenting:

Full presence without distractions: During shared time, parents should make a conscious decision to put away digital devices and give their undivided attention to their child. Such presence enhances the child's sense of security and appreciation.

Self-care: Consciously recognising and attending to one's own physical, emotional and social needs is crucial if parents are to act calmly, patiently and empathetically. Parents can only create a stable foundation for their children if they themselves are balanced. Self-care is an important part of this. By attending to their own wellbeing, parents are able to develop the resilience required to meet the day-to-day challenges of family life in a mindful, constructive manner. This creates a harmonious family atmosphere while also supporting the child's long-term development.

Open communication: Talking to one another respectfully and appreciatively not only fosters trust and understanding between parents and child, it also allows children to express their thoughts and feelings freely and strengthens parent-child bonds.

2.4 Exercises

The following exercises can help integrate mindfulness into day-to-day life, promote emotional intelligence, and ensure children and parents have the tools to deal better with stress, emotions and social challenges. They can help anyone put mindfulness into practice in daily life.

Connecting with your own body:

> Mindful breathing: Children and parents can concentrate on each individual breath to calm the mind and be more fully present in the moment.
> Body scan: A relaxing exercise, focusing the mind on different parts of the body.
> Mindful walking: Each step is taken consciously to promote calmness and clarity.

Promoting emotional intelligence:

> Mindful breathing: Children and parents can concentrate on each individual
breath to calm the mind and be more fully present in the moment.
> Body scan: A relaxing exercise, focusing the mind on different parts of the body.
> Mindful walking: Each step is taken consciously to promote calmness and clarity.

Practical integration into day-to-day life:

> Articulating feelings: Children learn to recognise and express their emotions, for example, through reflective conversations.
> Empathy exercises: Role-playing or stories to help empathise with others.

The aim of these exercises: The exercises can be flexibly integrated into daily life, and promote the personal development of both parents and children. They help develop a mindful way of life that reinforces the emotional wellbeing of the whole family.

2.5 Criticism of mindful child-rearing

In spite of the numerous positive effects promised by mindful child-rearing, a number of critical perspectives also require more nuanced consideration.

One frequently voiced criticism concerns the risk of individualising responsibility. Critics argue that mindful child-rearing could encourage parents and educators to focus exclusively on their own interactions, while structural problems – such as poverty, educational inequality or societal pressure to perform – are pushed into the background. This view is a reminder that mindfulness is not, in itself, a solution to systemic challenges but must be embedded in a broader societal context.

It can also be argued that the demand on parents and caregivers for constant presence and empathy can be burdensome for them. In stressful life situations, especially, the pressure to "be mindful" can, itself, run the risk of becoming a stress factor. This could then have the opposite effect of the intended goal, namely, to foster serenity and emotional stability.

Finally, there are also concerns that efforts to commercialise mindfulness practices, especially through courses, apps or books, could dilute the concept and alienate it from its original roots in Buddhist philosophy. This creates the risk that mindfulness would be understood not so much as a comprehensive attitude but instead marketed as a short-term solution to parenting problems.

These criticisms should not be ignored since they demonstrate that mindful child-rearing cannot be considered in isolation. Indeed, it means that a thoughtful approach is required to take account of individual, familial and societal factors.

2.6 Summary: The transformative power of mindfulness in child-rearing and education

Mindful child-rearing amounts to much more than a mere method; it is also an attitude, and an approach that not only helps enrich the relationship between adults and children but also fundamentally transforms perspectives on children's upbringing and education.

Through conscious presence, empathic communication and the fostering of emotional intelligence, an environment can be created in which children can grow and develop free from excessive pressure to perform, and characterised by mutual respect and understanding.

From the perspective of the work of Kindernothilfe, pursuing a mindful approach opens up a valuable perspective that allows us to make our support of children and families throughout the world even more holistic. This is especially true when, as shown in our work with children whose difficult life circumstances make them particularly vulnerable, mindfulness can help build trust, enhance resilience and create a strong sense of belonging. Putting mindfulness principles into action in Kindernothilfe's education and support programmes could help empower girls and boys in their development, while also relieving and inspiring staff and volunteers in their demanding work.

From a staff perspective, this enables them to further explore the possibilities of mindfulness in practice, reflect on the approaches and their own interventions, and actively integrate these approaches into programme development. There are many opportunities for implementation, including workshops and training sessions as well as sharing best practices to ensure that any positive impacts are embedded sustainably within the organisation. A key aspect of this is establishing a culture of dialogue, communication and discussion with our partners. As well as being a methodological approach, this perspective presents a fundamental attitude that must be continuously and consciously borne in mind. Such a culture of communication promotes open

exchange and collaborative development, thereby enabling the organisation to achieve sustainable success.

Mindful child-rearing reminds us that real change begins on a small scale: in the quality of our relationships, in the way we listen, and in the space we give children for their development. Integrating these principles into our day-to-day work and approaches enables us not only to help individual children but to make a significant contribution to creating a more just, empathic and peaceful society. However, this external change is not possible without self-reflection and introspection. These processes of inner examination and conscious self-reflection allow us to create the conditions that generate profound and lasting external change.

2.7 Mindfulness with respect to children

Mindfulness with respect to children plays a decisive role in both school and family settings. Within schools, it makes use of targeted exercises and empathy-promoting activities to facilitate a supportive learning environment, which boosts social skills and emotional intelligence. Within the family context, it promotes loving presence and mindful communication between parents and children. This in turn strengthens bonding, trust and emotional wellbeing.

Practical approaches in schools

Integrating mindfulness into the school day fosters the personal development of students and teachers, and creates a more supportive and respectful environment. It redefines the school as a living space which makes a stress-free, empathetic and productive collaboration possible. Given the growing significance of mental health and social skills, mindfulness offers an effective way to sustainably enrich education on emotional, social and intellectual levels.

Mindfulness exercises in schools

Short periods of calm and concentration

Introducing brief breathing exercises or short periods of silence at the beginning of class can create a solid basis to focus students' attention and calm their minds. Such exercises help ease the transition from one activity to the next, and create an atmosphere of concentration. As a theory, this is closely linked to Jon Kabat-Zinn's concept of mindfulness which emphasises the importance of stabilising the mind in stressful or demanding situations. These exercises can be particularly helpful in reducing stress among students, which is often triggered by pressure to perform or by social conflict.

Empathy-promoting activities: role-playing and discussions

Empathy is a fundamental social skill that is of central importance both within and outside of school. Role-playing and discussions that seek to foster compassion and social skills give students the opportunity to encounter and understand the perspectives of others. Lev Vygotsky's[12] theory of social development accentuates the importance of such interactive learning methods, since learning and development are strongly influenced by social interactions. Through the targeted promotion of empathy, students learn to resolve conflicts constructively and cultivate positive social relationships, thereby strengthening the entire classroom community.

Cultural change: appreciative interaction in school

Fostering respectful, appreciative interactions between teachers and students is another key component of integrating mindfulness into the school day. John Bowlby's[13] Attachment Theory demonstrates how decisive positive relationships are for emotional and social development. Respectful dialogue[14], based on understanding and appreciation, are able not only to reinforce teacher-student relations but also to create a sense of security and belonging. This cultural shift helps establish a fear-free, pressure-free climate that allows students to thrive.

12 Soviet psychologist who is regarded as the founder of the currents in Soviet psychology that became known as the Cultural-Historical School.
13 British paediatrician, child psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and one of the pioneers of attachment research.
14 Respectful dialogue involves active listening, empathy and maintaining a calm, non-judgmental tone to ensure all parties feel heard, even during disagreements.

Mindfulness benefits students while also giving teachers the valuable tools they need to meet the challenges of an often stressful daily life. A conscious approach to dealing with emotions and a more rooted presence in the here and now enable teachers to respond more calmly to difficult situations and communicate more clearly. For students, mindfulness opens up the space that enables them to better understand their emotions and regulate them, and thereby improve their learning ability and social skills. According to scientific research findings, such as those from positive psychology, this mindful approach leads to greater resilience and improved learning outcomes.

Chapter 3
Happy Schools – practical implementation of mindful child-rearing and education in the school context

Imke Häusler

3.1 The Happy Schools project in Vietnam

Since 2014, UNESCO has supported the piloting of the Happy Schools project in Asia. This approach goes beyond cognitive education to focus on the acquisition of socio-emotional competencies needed to live more sustainably and harmoniously with oneself, within the community, and in relation to the natural environment.[15]

At the initiative of Dr Tho Ha Vinh, a Happy Schools pilot project was implemented in nine schools in Hue Province between 2018 and 2022. This was done in co-operation with the Eurasia Learning Institute, the Peaceful Bamboo Family (Tinh Truc Gia TTG), and the University of Hue, with the approval of the Department of Education and Training. Several hundred teachers were trained and the concept was adapted annually on the basis of experiences and lessons learnt. The impact on students was scientifically evaluated.

In the project Dr Tho's emphasis was on practical application: "The goal of Happy Schools is to provide practical examples and exercises that can be

15 Happy schools guide and toolkit: a resource for happiness, learners' wellbeing and social and emotional learning, UNESCO 2021, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380325

implemented in the classroom and that help both teachers and students to create a happy school community." (Manuscript, p. 397)

The pilot project was deemed so successful by the Vietnamese school authorities that the Happy Schools curriculum is now to be extended to other provinces and schools in Vietnam.

3.2 On the need for a different approach to education in schools

The school system that predominates in many parts of the world is now outdated. Rooted in an earlier era, it met the demands of the industrial age for conformity and the prioritisation of mathematical, technical and linguistic skills. Now, in the face of rapid digital developments, different skills are required. The path must lead from knowledge-based learning – where AI will in any case be superior – to acquiring skills that are superior to digital systems.

There is now widespread recognition of this. The World Economic Forum lists the following competencies as elements of a contemporary and future-oriented education: global citizenship skills, innovation and creativity skills, technological skills, interaction skills, individual and self-directed learning, accessible and inclusive learning, problem-oriented and collaborative learning, as well as lifelong, student-centred learning.

A second criticism of the traditional education system is that, for many students, it leads to stress and suffering. A UNESCO study reveals that several Asian countries which performed well in the PISA studies, scored very poorly with regard to the mental health of their students. This trend was exacerbated by the extensive school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting children and young people throughout the world.

UNESCO responded to the problem of mental health in schools with research into the Happy School approach.

3.3 Anchoring the Happy School approach in the UN

The United Nations recognises the pursuit of happiness as a fundamental human goal. Goal 4.7 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals states: "By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire knowledge and skills to promote sustainable development, including through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development."

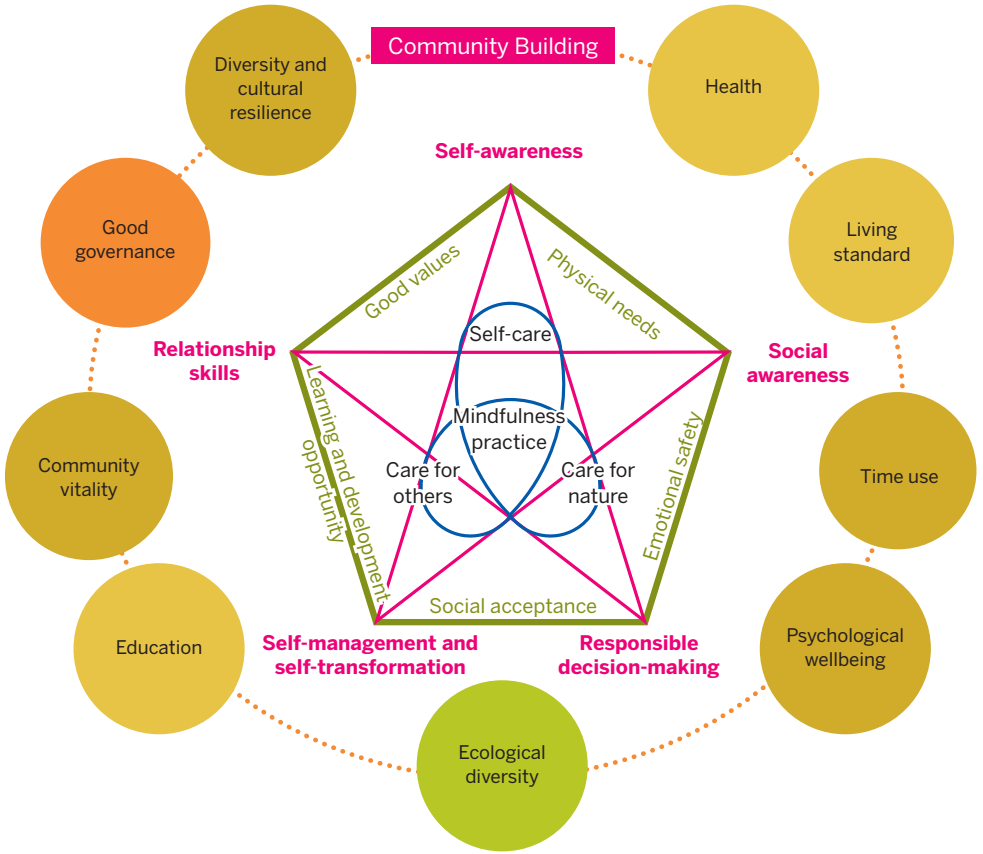
This goal shares several elements and overlaps with the Happy Schools concept. Happy Schools promote the happiness of teachers and students, while such learning skills as mindfulness, caring and perseverance open up opportunities to live in harmony with oneself, with others and society, and compatibly with nature.

In its report on Education for the 21st Century, UNESCO distinguishes four pillars of education:

1. **Learning to know**
2. **Learning to live together**
3. **Learning to do**
4. **Learning to be**

The Happy Schools concept places great emphasis on learning to live together, and learning to be.

3.4 The Happy Schools concept



The diagram depicts an approach to education that promotes mindfulness and fulfils the basic prerequisites for effective learning. It simultaneously illustrates the influence of this type of education on how basic skills are acquired. These, in turn, have a positive impact on the nine areas of Gross National Happiness.

However, if children are to achieve their full potential, the basic prerequisites for learning must be met:

> basic physical needs
> emotional safety
> social acceptance
> learning and development (namely, fostering children's drive to learn and develop)
> and good values (exemplified as a compass for behaviour)

On one hand, emotional intelligence is required to create conditions conducive to children's learning, while, on the other, mindfulness practice fortifies the five competencies that constitute emotional intelligence:

> self-awareness and self-knowledge
> self-management and self-transformation
> social awareness
> relationship skills
> and responsible decision-making

The ability to build relationships is the most important factor in the endeavour to lead a happy life. The nine areas of Gross National Happiness have been identified by the Kingdom of Bhutan as a tool used to measure national progress. They can also be used to evaluate the success of the Happy Schools programme.

3.5 Mindfulness practice in the Happy Schools programme

Self-Care

Mindfulness exercises focusing on self-care allow you to direct attention to your inner life as a means to understand your own emotions, become aware of your strengths and weaknesses, and identify your innermost needs. Self-care is closely linked to social skills.

Mindfulness exercises including breathing exercises, mindful walking or listening to the reverberations of a bell, can be easily integrated, for example, as a start to the school day. Each school must try out a range of practices and adapt them to its specific circumstances.

"Emotional first aid kit"

One of the pilot schools set up a "Happy Children Club" involving 20 students and several teachers. They tried out various mindfulness exercises for their school, selecting and adapting their preferences, with the aim of implementing them school-wide. With respect to dealing with difficult emotions, the students decided to develop an "emotional first aid kit." They discussed various methods including breathing exercises, talking to a friend, leaving the room, or having a warm drink. They then selected several methods and made a poster about them that now hangs in all the classrooms. If someone starts feeling angry, for example, the poster is a reminder of what to do to feel better.

Cultivating positive qualities

Self-care practices in schools include cultivating positive qualities. Particularly at times when school is stressful – for example during performance assessments – it can be helpful to highlight each child's strengths regardless of his or her grades. Some pilot schools have had positive experiences using "superpower cards" as an aid. In the lead-up to exams or parent-teacher conferences, the children themselves or their classmates or teachers fill out cards on which only the children's strengths are listed. This ensures that each child's positive achievements throughout the school year are not overlooked, giving them a sense of pride, pleasure and renewed motivation.

Cultivating gratitude

Gratitude is an inner attitude that expresses appreciation for what one has (as opposed to what one wants or needs). Some studies show that gratitude is not just something that can be practised but also has positive impacts on a person's body and mind. Gratitude has two components: affirming the good, and acknowledging the good to which others have helped us attain. There are many ways to practice gratitude including, for example, a "gratitude tree" at school where anyone can hang a thank-you note, a "gratitude discussion group", or a "gratitude diary".

Cultivating kindness

Kindness is the quality of being friendly, generous and considerate. The desire to do good for others appears to be inherent since it can even be observed in very young children. Kindness increases the sense of happiness not only for the person receiving kindness but also for the person offering it. It is actually easy to practise kind habits. These include holding doors open for others or extending friendly greetings. Doing such things as giving each other gifts, writing letters or arranging to do things together can be integrated into the school routine, while schools can also organise volunteering or fundraising opportunities.

It is important that all of these activities are appropriate for each specific context. They must be tried out by teachers and students in advance and adapted!

Caring for others and society

The last section clearly illustrated the close ties between self-care and caring for others and society. The ability to feel empathy is innate and, for human beings, was almost certainly a key evolutionary advantage. It can, however, be trained and further developed.

In a school context, the relationship between teacher and student is of central importance. Research shows that children produce hormones that make them happy, calm, sociable and creative when an adult maintains a strong and loving relationship with them. As a result, they are able to learn much more effectively. A happy teacher is therefore experienced in mindfulness practices and able to pass these on to the children.

Creating caring relationships in the classroom

Alongside their teaching role, the teacher must learn and act as facilitator. This involves creating a suitable space for discussion where each person is welcome, where there are no right or wrong answers, where everyone is free to participate, and where the unique qualities of each group member are recognised and promoted. To develop the ability to facilitate caring relationships in the classroom, practice, self-refection and seeking feedback from trusted individuals are important. The four components of empathic interaction are at the heart of this: intense listening, paraphrasing, reflecting on feelings, and mirroring needs.

Presenting group agreements, to which each member of the group has a responsibility to adhere, is also important. There are basic rules for such a space of caring conversation: group members feel free to speak or not; they strive for a non-judgmental approach; they practise intense listening; and they adhere to any agreed confidentiality.

There are also a number of practical exercises – even for younger children – to practise friendship, fairness, sharing, consideration, respect, honesty and care for others.

Twelve elements that constitute a happy school community

In its evaluations of the Happy Schools programme, UNESCO identified twelve elements that constitute a happy school community. They are all linked to the elements of self-care and care for others:

1. **Friendship and relationships within the school community**
2. **Positive attitudes and qualities of teachers**
3. **Respect for diversity and differences**
4. **Positive and co-operative values and practices**
5. **Working conditions and wellbeing of teachers**
6. **Skills and competencies of teachers**
7. **Teamwork and willingness to co-operate**
8. **Team-learning involving students and teachers**
9. **Psychological wellbeing and stress management**
10. **Warm and friendly learning environment**
11. **Safe environment, free from bullying**
12. **Positive discipline**

Care for the environment and planet

The third area of mindfulness practice is care for the environment and planet. Experiencing nature and physical activity have a range of positive impacts on the healthy development of children. Today, however, there is often a shortage of both. Within a Happy School context the aim is, therefore, to bring more nature into the school in order to give girls and boys the chance to experience it firsthand. This can include school gardens or even growing plants on windowsills.

Kindness towards nature can be practiced in many different ways, ranging from water conservation measures and litter collection campaigns to planting trees.

Epilogue

Long before I got to know Dr Tho Ha Vinh, I was impressed by the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) which he had played a key role in implementing in Bhutan. In contrast to previous approaches that use economic indicators exclusively to define a nation's contentment and development, the wellbeing of the population is at the heart of the GNH. What a paradigm shift! It is no longer just a matter of considering material prosperity or economic wealth as indicators of a happy and fulfilling life, but of focusing on people with all their physical, emotional and spiritual needs and, thus, promoting completely different dimensions of wellbeing.

With respect to child development, this question of holistic wellbeing, above all, is the one I find so compelling. Dr Tho's work, "Happy Children", demonstrates yet again that, as well as a stable economic foundation, children also need an environment that fosters their emotional, social, and intellectual growth. This requires education systems that are not exclusively geared towards academic achievement, but also support young people's wellbeing and personal development: including really enjoying learning, making friends, a sense of belonging to a community, and caring for themselves and others. Dr Tho argues that it is only through such a holistic approach that we can ensure that future generations can grow up in a society that enables them to live happy, healthy lives.

That is why this booklet seeks not simply to pass on knowledge to children, but to foster their social and emotional skills. "The greatest gift we can give children is our attention, our full presence and our love." The importance of mindfulness in child-rearing – especially in the crucial early childhood years – cannot be overstated. Mindful child-rearing, which encourages parents and caregivers to minimise distractions, avoid making judgments, and develop a strong, authentic connection with children, creates the space to understand the emotional world of the child. These are the spaces in which children can freely express their feelings, thoughts and imaginations, where their views are heard and acknowledged, and which foster their individual development and emotional wellbeing.

"Happy Children" demonstrates most impressively how mindfulness is not simply a way of bringing up children, but can be a transformative approach that boosts the wellbeing of children and adults alike. The combination of theoretical knowledge and practical suggestions ensures that the booklet is a valuable tool for parents, educators and experts in the field to integrate mindfulness into their day-to-day lives and, thereby, create a positive, supportive environment for children.

One particularly impressive aspect is the emphasis on the vital role of mindfulness in the child rights-based work of Kindernothilfe. As a child rights organisation rooted in Christianity, we view children as unique, valuable individuals, who must be treated with dignity and respect. For over 65 years, we have been resolute in our commitment to ensuring that every child grows up in a safe, positive and supportive (school) environment. It is in this sense that we recognise our own vision in Dr Tho Ha Vinh's approach and see it as a valuable supplement to our mission to strengthen children's rights and help secure a better and happier future for them. The aim of adopting this approach is not just to alleviate acute emergencies but to bring about long-term, positive changes – with the active incorporation of children's views – that enable them to have a better, happier future.

During my visits to Kindernothilfe projects, I speak regularly with our partners. One question that often arises is, "How do you perceive children?" Our booklet can act as a valuable starting point for such discussions and help us reflect more deeply on our own understanding of children's rights and child welfare. It should also encourage us to look carefully at our own ideas and approaches, and develop new perspectives.

Our booklet can also be used for purely personal purposes. Many of our colleagues are themselves parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts or close friends of children. Our approach to working with children is not just theoretical or from the sidelines; we ourselves are intensely involved as active players. This personal experience allows us to integrate and share the principles of "Happy Children" – authentically and practically – in our work. We sincerely thank Dr Tho Ha Vinh for making his manuscript available to us. His vision of the wellbeing of children as something sustainable is a cause

close to our hearts, one that we, as the board of Kindernothilfe, support wholeheartedly and to which my colleague Carsten Montag is also strongly committed.

I hope this booklet, with its encouragement to engage in mindful parenting, helps raise awareness of children's needs and rights, and inspires us all to work together towards a better future for children and young people.

Katrin Weidemann

Imprint

Publisher: Kindernothilfe, Düsseldorfer Landstraße 180, 47249 Duisburg, Germany
Katrin Weidemann, Chief Executive Officer
Phone: +49 203.7789-0, www.kindernothilfe.de
Donation Service: Phone: +49 203.7789-111, E-Mail: info@kindernothilfe.de

Editors: Victoria Depping, Daria Hansen, Imke Häusler, Mareike Walter, Gunhild Aiyub

Layout: Eckard Kleßmann

Translation: John McLaughlin, Wuppertal

Association register and number: Local court Duisburg, register number: 1336,
Headquarters: Duisburg

Sales tax identification number: DE 119554229

Account: Bank für Kirche und Diakonie eG – KD Bank
IBAN DE92 3506 0190 0000 4545 40
BIC GENODED1DKD

Kindernothilfe e.V., 2026

