

Children need more meditation and less stimulation

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A remote diocese in Australia is leading the way by allowing regular periods of silent meditation in the classroom.

If you want your children to feel more relaxed and less stressed, give them silence, not iPods.

This unthinkable idea came to mind after listening to Ernie Christie and Dr Cathy Day, two educationists from Queensland, Australia. They were addressing an [audience at Regent's College](#), London, on the benefits of allowing children to experience regular periods of silent meditation in the classroom.

A pilot study in 2005, involving teaching meditation to five- to 17-year-olds, had shown that children are not only capable of meditation, they actually enjoy it. The benefits to children's wellbeing were so obvious to teachers that it persuaded Cathy Day, director of [Townsville Catholic Education Office](#), to spend precious funds implementing the first Christian meditation programme for all schools in the diocese.

The initiative had two important catalysts: a diocesan bishop sympathetic to meditation, Michael Putney, and the input of Laurence Freeman OSB, leader of the [World Community for Christian Meditation](#). Without their help, Day admitted, nothing would have got off the ground. When an almost pathological "busyness" is the norm, valuing stillness and silence is counter-cultural. When our culture trains us to be winners, to compete and to consume, we all sense society's imbalance, said Freeman. We need to give children an experience of another way of relating to themselves and to others.

Deputy director Christie agreed. If children are over-stimulated we rob them of something precious: being allowed to "just be" where children discover their own inner sense of who they are. Hijacked by a "doing" culture that measures everything by what we achieve or possess, meditation helps children access a deeper part of themselves – an inner sanctuary away from a world of incessant activity and noise. They learn to honour their own spiritual life.

We all have a spiritual life, irrespective of any faith we hold, said Christie. Meditation can be practised with a diversity of beliefs: children of other faiths take part in the programme. Meditating in a group can give children an early sense of belonging, says Christie. Children with learning or physical disabilities can join in and feel part of the class. But the practice is introduced gradually. The recommended meditation time is one minute per age level; for five- and six-year-olds, it would be five to six minutes.

A video of interviews with teachers, children and parents was admirably honest. Children of varying ages said meditation helped them to feel "relaxed" or more

"peaceful". One boy said it helped his thoughts "just settle"; one girl enjoyed being "quiet". A child from an indigenous community said he was able "to be himself". Teachers reported improved behaviour in difficult children. Yet no one suggested it was a "cure all" practice. But at a recent awards ceremony in the second largest school in Townsville, the key speech was on the positive benefits of meditation.

The health benefits of meditation are well documented: it can relieve stress, lower blood pressure and alleviate depression. Psychiatrist Jonathan Champion said research showed most mental health problems have begun by the age of 14. Giving children periods of quietness and reflection to promote wellbeing could save money on healthcare later.

For Day and her team, meditation is an essential part of religious education. In the foreword to Christie's ground-breaking book, Coming Home: A Guide to Teaching Christian Meditation to Children, Putney says being "still" is very different from being "quiet". "Be still and know that I am God." It is in stillness that God speaks to the heart. Meditation as a way to self-knowledge and self-acceptance is an indispensable first step towards knowledge of God. Teachers hope children will discover a love that accepts them unconditionally and an inner spiritual resource they can draw upon later in life.

When religious schools are seen as intolerant of other faiths, the lost "contemplative" dimension of religion that reaches to a divine source beyond individual differences is surely needed. By training teachers in this depth dimension of faith, this remote diocese on the edge of the Australian outback is already creating waves.