



Eric Lindberg/Courtesy UnCruise

What Happened When I Took My 10-Year-Old Son on a Meditation Cruise

by J U D Y K O U T S K Y

February 18, 2019



Was bringing my active 10-year-old on a trip for adults brilliant—or disastrous?



You've heard it everywhere from CNN to the **New York Times**: Stress and anxiety levels in kids have reached such an all-time high, many schools are teaching mindfulness and meditation in the classroom to help combat the effects. With kids on overload from too many activities and commitments, meditation offers them the chance to slow down and quiet the mind. My son, Jack, started learning these calming practices in his (progressive) preschool, but by fourth grade, I thought it would be good for a refresher course. Like almost all his ten-year-old friends, he, too, has a packed itinerary (hockey, basketball, soccer, chess, homework every night), and I wanted to give him the chance to be able to experience things without being on autopilot. What better place to learn than on vacation, when you're away from daily distractions and pressures, and generally more willing to try new things?

Unlikely as it may sound, I opted to take him on a cruise—one in which he was the only child on the trip. There were a lot of things about this option that appealed: We sailed with **UnCruise**, so named because it has a unique take on cruising. You travel on small ships (no more than 100 people; some with less than 30), so you really get to know the other passengers. Activities focus on hands-on active excursions (think snorkeling and hiking), and there's no WiFi (that was a big one). UnCruise had just announced their **first wellness itinerary in La Paz, Mexico**, on the Sea of Cortez focusing on meditation, mindfulness, and yoga. Plus, it's got an active adventure every day (something both Jack and I really, really love). An adventure cruise—in January, no less—with sunrise yoga, meditation kayaking, and mindfulness hikes? I figured I'd give it a try and see if this leap would result in either a great trip...or a disastrous holiday.

Courtesy UnCruise

Why kids need mindfulness

“Now more than ever, kids need to use a vacation to unplug and destress,” says **Dr. Lisa Long**, a psychologist in private practice in Charlotte, N.C. “As parents, we need to encourage our kids to view meditation and mindfulness as an activity of daily living, just like brushing their teeth or hair.”

My son was skeptical. “Do I have to wake up before the sun every morning for yoga?” he asked. But that’s the nice thing about a seven-night cruise. You don’t have to do every mindful activity—you can pick and choose. So Jack did yoga a few times during the week (his favorite was beach yoga), but he also took part in some mindfulness activities—like our meditation kayak excursion, where we did less talking and more listening (to the sound of the birds, waves, and wind).

“Taking time during vacations to have quiet, peaceful moments to relax can help everyone return with renewed energy,” says **Dr. Rebecca Isbell**, a pediatrician and mother of three.

But can practicing mindfulness on vacation transfer to stressful situations that might take place back home at school? “Whether it’s visiting relatives, packing in busy sight-seeing while discovering a new city, or driving across the country, many vacations give us the challenge and the opportunity of coping with stress,” Dr. Isbell says. “Using these times to practice being present and mindful can be helpful in learning to apply those skills to other situations, whether it be work or school.”

A day after one of our mindfulness walks, Jack referenced his third eye (something mentioned in previous talks—when I was pretty sure he was day-dreaming rather than listening). It just goes to show that exposing kids—or anyone, for that matter—to mindful practices can have a way of working through osmosis.

“Helping your kids maintain a consistent practice of mindfulness/meditation helps them feel grounded, and will also help them enjoy the vacation to the fullest,” Dr. Long says. “A kid who is truly mindful will be less likely to ask ‘are we there yet?’ or ‘what do we get to do next?’ because they will be focused on the present fun.”

Cameron Zegers/Courtesy UnCruise

Taking a child on a trip with mostly adults—good idea or crazy?

My friends thought I was nuts taking my son on a cruise where he’d be the only kid. While UnCruise gets lots of kids during school break and summer vacation, it’s less common during the school year. Having said that, kids age eight and older can join UnCruise and go along on all the regular activities, such as hiking, snorkeling, skiff excursions, paddle boarding, and kayaking.

Once they realized they had a high-energy ten-year-old on board, the guides even adjusted the excursions. They let my son run ahead (he was the mountain goat of the group) when we did the gorgeous ridge hike in Isla San Francisco—following the trails along red bluffs and desert beach, among cardon cactus and Palo Verde trees. They let Jack lead the burro ride through the canyons and hills of Bahía Agua Verde, against the backdrop of the Sierra de La Giganta range. La Paz is home to the Sea of Cortez, where more than 800 species of fish can be found, thus famously nicknamed “The Aquarium of the World” by Jacques Cousteau. The guides answered his dozens (and dozens) of questions when we did the tidal pool excursion, where Jack uncovered many creatures hiding under rocks in the water. Jack felt like an explorer in one of the most diverse seas in the world.

Though he was the only child, instead of that fact making him feel conscious (or bored), the reverse happened. The other guests were only too happy to talk to Jack—everyone was asking him about his favorite excursions—and he, in turn, behaved accordingly and instigated conversation, asking thoughtful questions of others. I soon realized that taking a child on a vacation where there weren’t many other kids is a wonderful way to let that child get a lot of attention and focus, which is something any child with a sibling rarely gets. Jack and his brother are active boys, so my role on vacation is often refereeing fights. Having just one child—not only from my family, but on the cruise—inadvertently made Jack act differently. There was no whining, fighting, or negotiating. I saw a mature side to my son that often doesn’t surface on vacation.

There’s something to be said for doing all of this **on a cruise**, and not another type of trip, too. Because the ships are small and there’s communal seating at meals, we sat with different people every day and really got to know them and the staff. My kids and I love cruising: we love the idea of unpacking once and sleeping in the same spot, but waking up to a new adventure every day. At a resort, we wouldn’t be able to get the seven distinct adventures and experiences we had on a cruise. Plus, most resorts that focus on wellness retreats really target adults; many don’t allow kids under a certain age (certainly not an energetic ten-year-old).

Jocelyn Pride/UnCruise

The end result

Whether it was spotting puffer fish while snorkeling in Los Islotes, swimming with sea lions in **Isla Partida**, or being surrounded by dozens of gray whales at Bahía Magdalena, Jack and I had an amazing vacation together. One of my favorite moments was at the end of each day, when we sat with our hot chocolate and watched the sun explode with colors as it set deep into the mountains and sea. We tried to practice what we learned about being mindful and present: We lingered on the taste of the chocolate on our tongues. We noticed the warm breeze on our cheeks. We watched the dolphins racing against the boat. ✦

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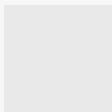
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