iACT is a Los Angeles-based organization whose mission is to aid, empower, and extend hope to those affected by mass atrocities.

iACT utilizes innovative thinking, human-centered design, and collaborative relationships to deliver replicable, sustainable, and cost-effective programs in refugee camps and for communities affected by humanitarian crises. iACT challenges the traditional humanitarian top-down model by co-creating and delivering solutions together with beneficiaries in order to address the comprehensive needs of a community, build resilience, and restore dignity.

Since 2009, iACT has helped to empower refugees and community members to lead safe, fun, and inclusive education, sports, and leadership programs that ensure displaced children and youth are able to exercise their rights to education and healthy development, in addition to providing employment, leadership, and professional development opportunities for parents and caregivers.
Context

The cognitive, emotional, and socio-economic burdens imposed on refugee and displaced communities are enormous. Life in overcrowded camps, deprivation, uncertainty over the future, and disruption of social-support services and systems often lead to severe psychosocial distress. Research suggests that asylum seekers are five times more likely to have mental health needs than the general population and more than 61% will experience serious mental distress. However, data shows that they are less likely to receive support than the general population.

Mindfulness

To address and support the emotional health and well-being of refugee and displaced communities—and to help individuals learn how to cope with stress, build resilience, and restore hope—iACT integrates mindfulness training and curricula into each of our programs.

Mindfulness is defined as a type of awareness that is cultivated by intentionally paying attention to the present moment in a way that is open, curious, and non-judgmental. Mindfulness teaches individuals how to systematically regulate their attention and energy by encouraging the redirection of focus to the present moment. Individuals learn how to recognize, accept, and investigate their own thoughts, emotions, and body sensations in the very moment they exist in—the present. The practice of mindfulness teaches individuals how to respond to the present moment’s situation instead of reacting to traumatic memories from their past or worrying about the uncertainty of their future.

Put simply, mindfulness is paying attention, on purpose and without judgment, in the present moment. The practice of mindfulness helps us to be aware of our thoughts, feelings, and sensations as they arise, and to notice what we are feeling and thinking, without judgment. Mindfulness develops life skills to help us respond and relate to what’s going on around us, with wisdom and compassion. Mindful moments can happen every day, at any time, and in any place.

iACT Programs & Mindfulness Curriculum

iACT programs and curricula are co-created with refugee communities and in collaboration with experts in: early childhood education, sports science, trauma recovery, peacebuilding, and mindfulness.
Refugees United Soccer Academy is a place for refugee children and youth to learn about teamwork, leadership, and peacebuilding, while also improving their soccer skills.

The Academy offers children and youth, whose families have experienced extreme violence and trauma, a safe space to play, heal, and be empowered. The Academy’s objectives are to promote leadership, health, equality, and education and serve as a way to connect refugee children and youth with soccer players and clubs across the U.S. and globally.

Each Academy employs two men and two women as coaches to lead girls and boys ages 6-13. The Academy is open after school five to six days a week and sessions last between 1 – 1.5 hours a day. Each session begins with a mindfulness exercise, followed by activities and drills to maximize touches on the ball, and small side games. Coaches also incorporate lessons around key issues such as: hygiene, safety, child rights, peacebuilding, and gender equality. Each Academy strives to ensure that at least 50% of players are girls.

Mindfulness is deeply integrated in the foundation of the curriculum and plays a key role in the success of the Academy. The application of mindfulness to sport has been shown to increase functioning in all aspects of sports performance, including: current-moment awareness, balance and agility, and sensory-motor acuity; all critical components of sports performance. As written by George Mumford, whom NBA legend Michael Jordan credits with transforming his game, “Mindfulness reconnects us to this center space, where we fully experience the present moment...This calm center space is what anchors the mindful athlete in the present moment and facilitates high performance and flow.”

Studies also show that athletes who practice mindfulness have greater emotional stability, better concentration, and less self-criticism. For young refugee players, mindfulness creates a peaceful and safe space that allows them to be present and respond to situations objectively rather than reflexively, as well as minimizes external distractions of camp life and insecurity.

On the Field

At the beginning of each Academy session, the coaches guide Academy players in practicing mindfulness:

**Exercise: My Body**
1. Stand or sit in a comfortable position.
2. Close your eyes and rest your hands either by your sides or on your lap.
3. Begin by thinking about your toes. How do they feel? Are they warm?
4. Next, think about your legs. How do they feel? Do you have an itch?
5. Now, think about your stomach. How does it feel? Do you feel your shirt touching your stomach?
6. Think about your arms. How do they feel? Is it difficult to keep them still? Do you feel the air touching your arms?
7. Now, think about your neck. How does it feel? Is it turned in any direction?
8. Lastly, think about your face and head. How do they feel? Are you smiling or frowning?
9. Take 3 deep breaths, then slowly open your eyes.

“Body scan...is a common mindfulness practice that may attune sensory skills by enhancing interoception—the awareness of internally generated body states, including muscle activity, the movement of air through the body, and physiological changes” (Susan L. Smalley, PhD, and Diana Winston. *Fully Present: The Science, Art and Practice of Mindfulness*. Boston: Da Capo Press, 2010).
Little Ripples is a refugee and community-led early childhood education program.

Little Ripples empowers refugees and communities affected by humanitarian crises to deliver child-centered, quality, and comprehensive pre-primary education that supports the social-emotional, cognitive, and physical development of children ages 3-5. Refugees and community members learn about the Little Ripples curriculum and approach through an in-depth, participatory teacher training and adapt the curriculum and program activities to their culture and context. The curriculum was co-created with refugee communities and developed in collaboration with experts in: early childhood development, trauma recovery, pre-primary education, and mindfulness. The curriculum’s modules emphasize social-emotional learning, peacebuilding, literacy, and numeracy.

A key aspect of the Little Ripples curriculum is the introduction of mindfulness with the intent of supporting young learners to: find stability and comfort in the chaos of displacement; nurture internal peace as a form of resilience-building; build executive functioning and self-regulation skills; and learn mindfulness practices that they can carry with them as they transition to adolescence and adulthood. As discussed by author and developer of the Inner Kids program, Susan Kaiser Greenland, mindfulness practices help children form an understanding that helps them connect to themselves and with others; children then feel less isolated, and socially and ethically responsible behaviors develop naturally. “By practicing mindfulness kids learn life skills that help them soothe and calm themselves, bring awareness to their inner and outer experience, and bring a reflective quality to their actions and relationships.” Greenland also notes that, “Researchers can now identify the chemical and neural correlates that are responsible for a child’s thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations, and connect specific components of mindfulness training to tangible benefits.”

In the Classroom:

Mindfulness exercises are an integral part of the daily activities at Little Ripples. The teachers guide their students in practicing mindfulness everyday in their “welcome” and “goodbye” circles.

**Exercise: Take a Deep Breath**

1. Lie in a comfortable position on your back.
2. Close your eyes and rest both of your hands on your stomach.
3. Slowly take a deep breath, concentrating on your hands moving up and down as your stomach rises and falls.
4. Slowly take 5 more deep breaths, again concentrating on your hands going up and down on top of your stomach.
5. Now, take 3 normal breaths, then slowly open your eyes and slowly sit up.

Research suggests that mindfulness and meditation develop executive functioning. “Executive function is highly predictive of children’s academic, social, and emotional success and is responsible for core skills that children use all the time—for instance, remembering information, self-regulating, noticing, and shifting attention” (Greenland, Susan Kaiser. *Mindful Games: Sharing Mindfulness and Meditation with Children, Teens, and Families*. Boulder: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2016).
Pathways for Peace Collaborative develops effective leaders (Pathfinders) and tools that seek to build and strengthen community-based action and sustained political will to address the entire spectrum of identity-based violence, from Dangerous Speech to genocide. The core values of the program include shared purpose, driving action, prevention first, and personal and community growth.

In the United States, the Collaborative works with: refugees, survivors of mass atrocities and their descendants, and ally leaders to identify what is needed to create a path to leadership and how to engage their communities in responding to and preventing identity-based violence. Three ‘Pillars of Practice’ guide the Collaborative’s areas of intervention:

1. **Advocacy:** Active promotion of peaceful communities through campaigns that are national in reach and can be elaborated upon locally.

2. **Education:** Adaptable leadership and community-based tools, workshops, and curricula that can be strengthened and adapted by Pathfinders to meet local needs, either in formal or informal education settings.

3. **Speech and Dialogue:** Purposeful creation of space for Pathfinders to reflect on how words and their delivery impact others. The growth of thoughtful facilitators who pay forward their learnings through dialogue from one-on-one conversations to community-level gatherings.

Mindfulness communication, meditations, and visualizations are key elements of a Pathfinders training. Pathfinders learn to understand and reflect on their communication and are provided with the opportunity to integrate nonviolent communication and trauma-informed approaches into their personal journeys and community transformation.

**In Practice:**

As Jack Kornfield describes, a lovingkindness practice, “…uses words, images, and feelings to evoke a lovingkindness and friendliness toward oneself and others…planting the seeds of loving wishes over and over in our heart.”

This type of exercise begins with breathing and focusing on fostering a lovingkindness in yourself, then extending it those who have a positive influence in your life, and finally to those who may create difficulties in your life; as the heart opens first to yourself, then to loved ones, individuals find that they won’t want to close it anymore. This lovingkindness practice is used during iACT’s internal meetings and retreats, as well as during Pathfinder trainings.
Key Advisors

Jack Kornfield, Ph.D. trained as a Buddhist monk in the monasteries of Thailand, India, and Burma. He has taught meditation internationally since 1974 and is one of the key teachers to introduce Buddhist mindfulness practice to the West. Over the years, Jack has taught in centers and universities worldwide, led International Buddhist Teacher meetings, authored numerous books, and worked with many of the great teachers of our time. He holds a Ph.D. in clinical psychology.

Trudy Goodman, Ph.D. is a vipassana teacher in the Theravada lineage and the Founding Teacher of InsightLA. Trudy is trained in meditation and psychotherapy and practiced mindfulness psychotherapy with children, teenagers, and couples for 25 years. She also helped pioneer Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) with its creator, Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn.

Susan Kaiser Greenland is an internationally recognized leader in teaching mindfulness and meditation to children, teens, parents, and professionals. She played a foundational role in making mindfulness practices developmentally appropriate for young people and helped to pioneer activity-based mindfulness practices.

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⁵ Ibid. Pg. 26