



Mindfulness-Based Emotional Regulation for Vietnamese Preschoolers Aged 5–6: An Integrated Sensory and Co-Regulation Model

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Abstract

This study explores an integrated model combining mindfulness-based interventions (MBI), sensory integration, and emotional co-regulation to support emotional self-regulation in Vietnamese children aged 5–6 during their transition to primary school. Restructuring in the prefrontal cortex and heightened environmental demands make this critical phase prone to behavioral outbursts. Using an interdisciplinary framework across cognitive neuroscience, developmental psychology, and sensory integration therapy, the research demonstrates how regular mindfulness practice alters brain plasticity. Specifically, mindfulness strengthens executive functions in the prefrontal cortex (\$EC\$) while down-regulating hyperactive amygdala responses (\$AR\$), producing a "cognitive pause" that inhibits reactive outbursts. Addressing the link between sensory processing disorders and emotional instability, the study emphasizes a bottom-up therapeutic approach that stabilizes sensory systems prior to higher-order cognitive training. It introduces the CAM model (Calm, Awareness, Lead, Mentor) to facilitate adult-child emotional co-regulation. Furthermore, the study synthesizes local practical tools, including Vietnamese-language apps, picture books, and training centers in Ho Chi Minh City. Overall, the findings present a culturally adaptable, scientifically grounded pedagogical framework to foster emotional resilience and sustainable well-being in young children.

Keywords: Mindfulness, emotion regulation, emotional regulation, mindfulness-based interventions (MBI), mindfulness for kids

Introduction

The transition from preschool to primary school at the age of 5-6 is considered a particularly important psychophysiological developmental milestone in a person's life. During this pivotal stage, the child's cerebral cortex undergoes significant restructuring, and the child faces higher demands from the new school environment. These demands include the ability to maintain attention for extended periods, the capacity for behavioral inhibition control, and the ability to regulate individual responses to complex social and academic stimuli.

Clinical and educational evidence shows that a lack of emotional self-regulation at this age often leads to negative outburst behaviors.

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Common manifestations include tantrums, yelling, excessive anxiety, isolation, or severe difficulty integrating into group environments. Without timely and scientifically appropriate interventions, these emotional dysregulation disorders can progress into more complex psychological syndromes in the future (Vietnam CareFor, 2026).

In this context, mindfulness is emerging as a highly effective clinical and educational approach. Mindfulness is defined at its core as the process of being aware of each moment in the present through purposeful attention, maintaining an open, curious, and completely non-judgmental attitude. When applied to children, mindfulness is no longer an abstract philosophical concept but becomes a system of mental training techniques that help shape brain structure and function (Emotiv Neuroscience, n.d.; Kabat-Zinn & Kabat-Zinn, 2014).

This study was conducted with the aim of conducting an in-depth analysis of the neurobiological basis of mindfulness, clarifying the close relationship between mindfulness and the process of sensory integration/regulation, and building a model of emotional co-regulation between adults (parents, teachers) and children. Based on that, the study systematized practical tools, visual learning materials, technology applications in Vietnamese and practical models in the Ho Chi Minh City area, in order to provide a synchronized, scientific and sustainable pedagogical guidance framework for children aged 5-6 (Rechtschaffen, 2016).

Research Method

To address the complex and multi-layered nature of the research subject, this study employs an integrated systems approach and synthesizes interdisciplinary clinical theories. The research framework is shaped by the intersection of three fundamental scientific fields:

Cognitive Neuroscience: Focuses on neural plasticity, the development of the prefrontal cortex, amygdala, and attention networks (Làng Mai, n.d.).

Developmental Psychology: Studies the stages of the 5-year-old crisis, the process of executive function formation, and attachment theories (Vũ & Đỗ, 2023). **Sensory Integration Therapy:** Analysis of the mechanism of processing sensory input and its impact on the excitatory/inhibitory state of the central nervous system (Lionbooks, n.d.).

Theoretical Framework

Neurobiological basis of mindfulness and executive function in 5-6-year-old children

The brains of children aged 5-6 are in a period of explosive development with extremely strong neuroplasticity. This plasticity is particularly concentrated in the prefrontal cortex – the latest evolving neural structure and responsible for higher-level cognitive functions. The prefrontal cortex acts as the command centre for the executive function

system, which includes three main pillars: working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility. When children practice mindfulness exercises regularly, structural and functional neurological changes occur through three core mechanisms (Thư viện Hoa Sen, n.d.):

Strengthening the neural network that coordinates attention: Increasing gray matter density and synaptic connectivity in the prefrontal cortex helps children improve their ability to navigate and maintain focus. Reduce the activity of the Default Mode Network (DMN): The DMN is often highly active when the mind wanders, thoughts wander, or worries about the past/future. Mindfulness inhibits the spontaneous activation of the DMN, freeing up space for working memory.

Enhancing overall cognitive control capabilities: Establishing a sustainable balance between top-down and bottom-up information processing systems.

To quantify the process of emotional regulation through mindfulness practice, this study uses a dynamic interaction model between the prefrontal cortex (cognitive control center) and the amygdala (outburst emotional response center):

In this case, the variables are specifically defined as follows:

- R: The intensity of a child's outward emotional reaction (e.g., crying, tantrums, screaming, aggressive behavior).
- S: The intensity of the negative emotional stimulus from the external environment (e.g., having a toy confiscated, conflict with a friend, sudden change of environment).
- EC (Executive Control): The level of activity and cognitive control performance of the prefrontal cortex.
- AR (Amygdala Reactivity): The level of activation and responsiveness of the amygdala to threatening or uncomfortable stimuli.
- ϵ : A very small positive constant ($\epsilon > 0$) that ensures the mathematical stability of the equation, preventing the denominator from approaching zero when the amygdala is in a completely resting state. Mathematical analysis based on the above model shows that the child's response structure depends entirely on the ratio between cognitive control capacity (EC) and emotional sensitivity (AR). When children are not yet trained in mindfulness, the AR index is usually very large due to overactive amygdala, while the EC index of the prefrontal cortex is not fully developed, resulting in a small denominator and causing the intensity of the response R to approach or even exceed the intensity of the stimulus S (Vũ & Đỗ, 2023).

Conversely, when children practice mindfulness regularly, their neurobiology changes in the direction of increased activity in the prefrontal cortex (increased EC value) and at the same time reduces the oversensitivity of the amygdala (decreased AR value). Therefore, the value of the expression $\frac{EC}{AR + \epsilon}$ increases significantly, leading to an increase in the denominator value and a sharp decrease in the

intensity of the R-outburst response. This change in biological indicators creates a clinical phenomenon called a "cognitive pause". This time gap between emotional stimulus and behavioural response gives the child enough mental space to activate the frontal lobe, thereby choosing an adaptive, gentle response instead of erupting in negative anger (Vinmec Healthcare System, n.d.).

Below is a detailed summary table of neurobiological changes in specific brain structures under the influence of mindfulness meditation and the corresponding behavioral consequences in 5-6 year old children:

Brain structure region	Neurobiological changes during mindfulness practice	Behavioural and emotional impact in 5-6 year old children
Prefrontal cortex (<i>Prefrontal Cortex</i>)	Increases the activation and strengthening of the synaptic networks responsible for executive attention.	Enhance cognitive control, analytical reasoning, cognitive flexibility, and problem-solving skills.
tonsils (<i>Amygdala</i>)	Reduce sensitivity and down-regulate overstimulation.	Minimize aggressive outbursts, and alleviate acute stress responses and anxiety disorders.
Default network mode (DMN)	Reduce spontaneous activity while performing tasks, and limit mental wandering.	Free up working memory capacity, improve reading comprehension and logical thinking.
The intersection of the sun and the vertex (<i>Temporoparietal Junction</i>)	Enhance the density of connections and the level of activation in the social cognitive region.	Promoting compassion improves the ability to understand others' perspectives and prevents the spread of negative emotions.

Besides individual structures, a child's attention system comprises three independently functioning but closely coordinated subsystems: alerting (maintaining readiness), orientation (information selection), and executive attention (resolving cognitive conflicts). Mindfulness practice positively impacts and improves all three systems simultaneously. This process helps 5-6 year old children filter out surrounding distractions more effectively, thereby improving learning outcomes at the transition stage and creating a solid foundation for sustainable emotional intelligence (EQ) development (Hệ thống Trường Tuệ Đức [Pathway], n.d.).

The close relationship between sensory integration and mindfulness meditation

A landmark discovery in clinical psychology and child therapy is the overlap and interaction between emotional disorders and sensory regulation disorders. For preschool children aged 5-6, intense emotional instability or disruptive behaviors often stem not simply from cognitive issues, but from an overloaded nervous system that fails to effectively process sensory input from the environment. When sensory channels are disrupted, the child's body constantly enters a state of physiological alarm. Therefore, combining sensory regulation exercises with mindfulness is a necessary step to bring the child's nervous system back to a state of physiological balance, preparing it for receiving higher-level cognitive stimuli.

To accurately identify whether a child is experiencing difficulties in sensory regulation, adults need to carefully observe characteristic clinical signs, including:

- A strong, evasive reaction when anyone touches the body or skin (tactile hypersensitivity).
- Excessive fear in response to loud noises or sudden sounds (auditory hypersensitivity).
- A state of apathy or unresponsiveness when called by name (auditory insensitivity).
- A condition characterized by constantly being startled by ordinary stimuli.
- The tendency to excessively and constantly smell objects, toys, or touch surfaces (sensory seeking).

When a child's sensory nervous system is in a state of severe imbalance, the prefrontal cortex is completely inhibited and unable to function effectively. In this condition, forcing the child to perform static mindfulness exercises (such as sitting silently, focusing on breathing) is completely impossible and counterproductive. Conversely, implementing sensory regulation practices through the tactile, auditory, visual, and vestibular/somatosensory channels will help restructure the distorted physiological responses.

This integration strictly adheres to the bottom-up processing principle in neurobiology. According to this principle, before training higher-order cognitive functions located in the cerebral cortex (through mindfulness meditation), primary sensory nervous system structures located in the brainstem and cerebellum must be soothed, stabilized, and successfully integrated through compatible sensory regulation exercises (Lionbooks, n.d.).

The process of emotional co-regulation between adults and children

A 5-6 year old child's nervous system, although rapidly developing, is not yet biologically mature enough to independently regulate emotions when faced with strong emotional storms. In crisis situations, children need

an external support system. Co-regulation is defined as a dynamic interaction process in which adults (parents or teachers) use their own stable and peaceful nervous system as a physiological and psychological support for the child, helping the child cool down an overstimulated nervous system, thereby gradually learning to self-regulate behavior (Snel, 2013).

This process places a mandatory requirement on adults: to integrate mindfulness practices into their own daily lives to model it for children. Adults cannot regulate an angry child if they themselves are experiencing an outburst of anger. The CAM (Calm - Awareness - Lead - Mentor) model provides a clear, four-step scientific roadmap to guide adults in supporting children in conflict or emotional outburst situations (Voiz FM, n.d.):

[CALM: Adults can calm themselves down]

[AWARENESS: Recognizing Emotions]

[LEAD: Leading the nervous system]

[MENTOR: Advise and resolve]

Step 1: Calm (Inner Calm): When children experience negative emotional outbursts, adults' instinctive automatic response is often anger, frustration, or anxiety. This inadvertently triggers emotional contagion, exacerbating the crisis. Therefore, the first action for adults is to immediately calm down by performing acute mindfulness techniques: deep breathing, actively relaxing the shoulders and straightening the back to maintain body and mind stability (Snel, 2013).

Step 2: Awareness (Emotional Recognition): Observe the child's behavior with complete empathy and without judgment. Adults need to apply the "See - Understand - Teach" lens to analyze the nature of the behavior. It is necessary to clearly identify whether the child is experiencing sensory overload from the environment or is having difficulty using language to express their internal needs.

Step 3: Lead: Adults actively regulate the surrounding environment by adjusting their own counter-physiological responses: lowering their voice to a low, warm level, moving their bodies slowly, or performing comforting hugs if the child agrees. Adults visually perform deep, steady breathing in front of the child to activate the mirror neurons in the child's brain, helping the child's nervous system mimic and automatically cool down.

Step 4: Mentor: Once physiological indicators show the child's nervous system has returned to a calm state, the adult begins the cognitive intervention process by helping the child correctly name the emotion experienced (e.g., "You felt very angry because your friend took your toy block, right?"). The adult needs to affirm the principle that all of the child's emotions are perfectly valid and worthy of recognition; however, destructive negative behaviors (such as hitting others, throwing objects, yelling) are unacceptable and need to be addressed through guidance on

healthy problem-solving steps or providing appropriate alternatives (Snel, 2013).

One of the most powerful healing and conditioning elements in collective mindfulness practice is the energy of Noble Silence. Empirical data from family retreats show that the quiet, peaceful, and fully present energy of an entire community or family simultaneously practicing mindfulness is capable of soothing, restructuring the nervous system, and healing children's psychological traumas more effectively than any dry theoretical lecture. When a child is immersed in a space with the full presence of adults, the child's primary nervous system automatically harmonizes and adjusts to the peaceful frequency of the surrounding environment through a bio-resonance mechanism (VN House Center, 2024).

Research Contents

Integration Matrix: Sensory Regulation and Mindfulness Activities in Harmony

To transform bottom-up theoretical principles into clinical practice procedures, this study built an integrated matrix between sensory systems, specific disorder manifestations, sensory support exercises and specifically compatible mindfulness activities for 5-6 year old children (Lionbooks, n.d.; Nhất Hạnh & Vriezen, 2011):

Sensory system	Manifestations of sensory regulation disorders in children	Supplementary sensory integration exercises (Soothing the brainstem and cerebellum)	Mindfulness-based activities (Development of the prefrontal cortex)
Tactile (<i>Tactile</i>)	Fear of physical contact, a violent reaction to being hugged or touched; or constantly seeking stimulation by smelling or touching objects.	Hug tightly, interlock hands, caress, and actively massage the arms, legs, and back; play with clay, draw with your fingers, tear paper, play with sand or dry seeds.	Games like "Texture Bag" (deep tactile object recognition) or "Blindfolded Tasting" allow you to perceive the detailed texture and shape of objects/food while mindfully observing.

Hearing (Auditory)	Fear of sudden noises, constantly startling; or conversely, indifference to surrounding sounds, not responding when their name is called.	Sound therapy involves 30 minutes a day using soothing instrumental music, gradually increasing the volume and frequency in a controlled and systematic manner.	The activity involves ringing the "Mindfulness Bell" and guiding the child to listen attentively, following the flow of sound until the bell completely fades into silence.
Vestibular System & Self (Vestibular & Proprioceptive)	Difficulty maintaining balance, clumsiness in movement, or constant hyperactivity, inability to sit still.	High-intensity gross motor exercises: jumping in place, long jump, jump rope, complex obstacle course, spinning, rolling with an inflatable ball, cycling.	Establish still yet energetic mindfulness postures (Superhero/Wonder Woman) or walking meditation (Safari) that incorporate very slow movements and deep body awareness.
Vision (Visual)	Difficulty focusing on a single target, avoiding eye contact, or being easily overstimulated by chaotic lighting.	Practice eye exercises by moving colorful objects in different directions; encourage activities like stringing beads and meticulous paper-cutting crafts.	Using the Glitter Jar tool helps engage the visual senses and focus the mind through observing the slow movement of glitter particles falling to the bottom of the jar.

Table 1. Manifestations of Sensory Regulation Difficulties and Integrated Sensory–Mindfulness Activities for Children Aged 5–6

Systematizing the support tools and practical guidance documents in Vietnamese.

To help children aged 5-6 approach mindfulness practices naturally and without coercion, the use of visual learning materials, gamification, and modern technological applications designed to suit their age group is essential. Based on practical surveys and systematic research of currently available high-quality Vietnamese-language materials and tools:

Type of learning materials	Document/ Application Name	Publisher / Author	Content and application methods for children
The book *Mindfulness Intensive*	Plant a smile	Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh (published by Thai Ha Books)	Detailed instructions on how to practice walking meditation, sitting meditation, and mindful breathing exercises with children, helping to nurture peaceful energy and love for all beings (Trường Mầm non Thường Sơn, 2025).
The book *Mindfulness Intensive*	Peaceful steps & True happiness	Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh (Thai Ha Books / Plum Village)	Providing a system of slow living philosophy, practicing mindful breathing and walking in all daily family activities (<i>Emotional co-regulation</i> , n.d.).
Picture books & Ehon books that evoke emotions	Baby's First Book Set (5 books), Happy Discipline (12 books), Lullabies for Babies	Lionbooks (A Vietnamese publisher of children's books)	Using lullabies and bedtime stories helps to install positive energy into children's subconscious, develop emotional vocabulary and soothe the nervous system (Viện Tâm lý Việt-Pháp, n.d.).
Picture books & Ehon books that evoke emotions	Sachi's Magical Hands , Nontan the Cat , and Zozo the Curious Monkey	Multiple authors (Reputable publisher)	Comic strips cleverly incorporate lessons on social behavior, acceptance of one's own and others' differences, and skills in managing disappointment (Vũ & Đỗ, 2023).
Mobile applications (Apps)	Plum Village	Center for Applied Ethics	The app is completely free, providing more than 15 guided meditations specifically for children, meditation music, mindfulness bells and lively Q&A videos of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh (Trường

			Mầm non Thường Sơn, 2025).
Mobile applications (Apps)	Mindfulness for Children	International reputable developer	The intuitive interface design aims to support children in deep relaxation before sleep with a system of nature sounds, guided body scan, creative visualization and deep breathing (YouMed Medical Journal, n.d.).
Mobile applications (Apps)	Mindfulness Bell	Hoang Mai Village	The compact app features a built-in chime that rings at preset intervals or randomly, reminding children and parents to pause their behavior and return to the present moment (Trường Mầm non Thường Sơn, 2025).
Mobile applications (Apps)	AN Space , Mindentify , Contemporary Meditation	Technology companies and psychology experts in Vietnam	It provides a huge database of guided meditation and breathing exercises in Vietnamese, combined with personalized relaxation music based on AI technology to help balance emotional state (Kabat-Zinn & Kabat-Zinn, 2014).

Table 2. Mindfulness Resources for Emotional Regulation in Children Aged 5–6

Clinical studies have shown that integrating Ehon picture books before bedtime in conjunction with low-frequency nature sounds (rain, ocean waves, instrumental meditation music) from mobile mindfulness apps creates an ideal environment to soothe a child's autonomic nervous system. This combination helps shift the nervous system's state from the sympathetic (fight or flight) to the parasympathetic (rest and digest) system after a long day of active activity at preschool (YouMed Medical Journal, n.d.).

Map of the educational, therapeutic, and practical training ecosystem in Ho Chi Minh City.

For parents and early childhood educators seeking practical, community-based internship environments, or in cases where children experience severe mood/emotional dysregulation requiring intensive intervention and support from clinical psychologists, the ecosystem of centers and facilities in Ho Chi Minh City offers the following diverse options:

Name of organization/unit	Contact address in Ho Chi Minh City	Featured Services & Mindfulness Activities
Pathway Kindergarten & Primary School (Tuệ Đức)	No. 280-A18 Luong Dinh Cua Street, An Phu Ward, Thu Duc City.	Integrating mindfulness meditation formally into the daily curriculum of preschool and elementary school aims to cultivate a sharp, calm mind and reduce negative behavioral impulses in students.
Inner Space Vietnam Center	No. 30, Street No. 7, Block 35, Hiep Binh Chanh Ward, Thu Duc City.	We organize completely free meditation courses for the community, incorporating art therapies such as emotional release painting, self-awareness drama, chanting meditation, and 1-minute quick meditation techniques for busy people.
Quan Am Monastery	No. 384 Truong Sa Street, Ward 2, Phu Nhuan District.	The organization holds a free monthly retreat called "Sowing Seeds of Compassion" specifically for children aged 5 to 12, featuring meditation activities and fostering filial piety, compassion, and inner peace.
Ngoc Thanh Monastery	Linh Dong Ward, Thu Duc City (Vipassana Vietnam System).	We offer a free one-day Anapana meditation course for children, teaching them techniques for observing their natural breath, interspersed with fun and healthy group activities.

Vietnam-France Institute of Psychology (Therapy Branch)	Landmark Plus & Landmark 81 buildings, Vinhomes Central Park, Binh Thanh District.	Providing in-depth services in clinical psychological diagnosis, counseling, and therapy (applying Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) combined with mindfulness) for children experiencing anxiety disorders, depression, or severe psychological crises.
Annateca Home Babysitting Service	Covering all districts and communes in Ho Chi Minh City.	We provide a team of professional nannies who are highly trained in home-based childcare methods based on the Montessori philosophy, with continuous supervision and professional consultation from psychology experts for groups of children with special needs.

Table 3. Selected Mindfulness, Psychological, and Child Development Services in Ho Chi Minh City

Clinical Challenges and Core Pedagogical Principles in Mindfulness Training

Translating an academic and adult-oriented mental practice method to 5-6 year old preschool children is a major challenge, requiring maximum flexibility and a deep understanding of developmental psychology. The facilitator (teacher, parent) needs to master the basic 5-step mindfulness practice process and "gamify" it, transforming it into vivid visual activities suitable for children's visual-figurative thinking (Pathway, n.d.):

Posture Setup: Absolutely do not require children to sit in the lotus position or maintain the rigid, formal posture of an adult. Guide them to sit with a straight back, firmly planted like a "majestic mountain," or stand tall with hands on hips proudly like a "Superhero," while keeping their shoulders naturally relaxed.

Breathing Anchor: Children often struggle to focus on the invisible flow of their breath. Try the "Belly Friend" exercise by having the child lie on their back and placing a small, lightweight teddy bear on their stomach. The child will focus their eyes and senses on observing the bear bobbing up and down with their natural breathing rhythm, without trying to change or control their breathing rate.

Recognizing Distraction: Because the prefrontal lobe is not yet fully developed, it is inevitable that children will fidget, get distracted, or interrupt with conversation after a few dozen seconds. Adults should not punish them, but gently guide them to recognize that: "Ah, your mind is

turning into a wandering monkey, right? That's perfectly normal and natural!" (YouMed Medical Journal, n.d.).

Returning to the Present: Once a distraction has been identified, redirect the child's attention back to the anchor of focus through a specific sound (a warm mindfulness bell) or a specific tactile stimulus (a gentle, warm parental handhold) (Trưởng Mầm non Thường Sơn, 2025).

Expanding Awareness: Guide children to carry this awareness out of the meditation mat into daily activities: eating a tangerine segment in complete silence to feel the sweetness, walking slowly feeling the soles of their feet touch the cool ground, or focusing on watering a flower in the garden (*Emotional co-regulation*, n.d.).

Throughout this training and mentoring process, educators and parents are required to strictly adhere to three core pedagogical principles:

Principle 1: Never use mindfulness as a tool for disciplinary punishment: This is the most common and serious mistake in educational practice. If, when a child is misbehaving, having a tantrum, or breaking a rule, an adult imposes a command with an angry attitude: "Go to the corner and meditate immediately!", the child will immediately associate mindfulness with punishment, oppression, and loss of freedom. This will completely and permanently destroy the core goal of mindfulness, which is to cultivate inner peace and a safe space for the child's nervous system.

Principle 2: Holistic integration through play and movement: Children learn through sensory and kinesthetic experiences. Exercises such as "Dragon's Breath" (deep inhalation and exhaling imaginary fire with long, slow breaths), "Blowing Soap Bubbles" (controlling the force of the exhale to create bubbles that don't burst), or the game "Safari" (mindful walking, role-playing as explorers moving extremely gently to observe animals) make children incredibly enthusiastic to participate without feeling like they are undertaking a stressful learning task.

Principle 3: Ensuring discipline and continuous systematicity: The biological adaptation and restructuring of neural circuits (neuroplasticity) in the prefrontal cortex cannot occur after a few individual exercises, but it can only be achieved through regular, sustained repetition every day. Parents and teachers need to proactively establish a routine – a fixed mindfulness activity time frame during the day (e.g., 5 minutes after waking up, 10 minutes before bedtime) to create a natural conditioned reflex for the child's nervous system (Voiz FM, n.d.).

Conclusion

The application of mindfulness combined with sensory integration therapies, following the bottom-up neurobiological principle, is not merely a temporary, situational intervention for negative behaviors in preschool children. It is a sustainable, scientific, and profoundly humane educational process.

When children in the crucial transitional age of 5-6 are surrounded and supported by a warm, safe, and emotionally supportive environment from adults, and are systematically equipped with the skills to recognize, accept, and embrace their emotional states from an early age, they will build a resilient brain structure and a strong nervous system capable of withstanding pressure. This is the most important preparation, helping them to confidently and powerfully transition into primary school with a stable state of well-being.

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