

Mindfulness in Schools:

Benefits for Students, Teachers, and Parents

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ABSTRACT

Teaching mindfulness to children is a relatively new concept for our society and has been the subject of research in recent years. This paper aims to explore the benefits of introducing mindfulness into the classroom.

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Introduction

Our children are our legacy and our future. As a parent, you want your child to have every opportunity to succeed in life. While success might look different for each person, everyone needs a basic skill set for his or her life's journey. We hope that our children are learning and/or having these skills reinforced at school. All too often though, school is a source of stress, whether from peer pressure, parental pressure, test anxiety etc. Or, children can bring the stress of home into school, such as poverty, homelessness, parental neglect etc.

There is a growing trend in our country to bring the concept of mindfulness into our schools. Mindfulness refers to the ability to direct the attention to experience as it unfolds, moment by moment, with open-minded curiosity and acceptance (Kabat-Zinn, 1996; Weare, 2013). Mindfulness teaches us to pay attention in the present moment, not the past, not the future, but where you are right now. It allows us to respond more skillfully, more appropriately to what is actually happening (Weare, 2013). It is a concept that is often at odds with a society obsessed with the ability to 'multi-task' and defines being productive as accomplishing as many tasks as possible.

Mindfulness, like any other skill, is strengthened by regular practice. "...maintaining focus improves with practice, and students trained in mindfulness can better focus on the task or lesson at hand and filter out distractions (Rodgers, 2014; Leland, 2015). Practices may include breathing techniques, meditation, yoga/movement, tai chi, concentration/focus exercises (Parker et al, 2013; Flook et al, 2010). While benefits of a mindfulness practice are numerous for everyone, who benefits most when it is introduced in a school setting? Students in general, a particular sub-set of students? Teachers? Parents?

Several studies have shown proven benefits of mindfulness for children and adolescents to include: stress reduction/management; decrease in anxiety; improvement in attention; less emotionally reactive (Garey, 2016); self awareness and self-regulation; ability to feel peace; ability to calm one's self; being present in the moment; ability to focus (Leland, 2015); improvement in executive function (Weare, 2013); decreased test anxiety by enhancing memory and concentration while reducing mind-wandering or daydreaming (Leland, 2015) and ADHD symptoms (Viafora, 2014).

How do you introduce the concept of mindfulness to children? Different studies have attempted different approaches. While all approaches are mindfulness-based approaches, there are some key distinctions in how the information is presented, by whom, the location and the frequency of instruction. The majority of approaches that have been studied in the classroom are universal programs, meaning the aim of the program is to "broaden and strengthen the protective factors that defend against risk factors in an entire population...because of its potential to alleviate emotional distress that all youth may face, including feelings of anger, anxiety, or depression" (Viafora, 2014). There are also targeted programs that are modified based on the specific and unique needs and characteristics of a particular group, for example, urban youth or children diagnosed with ADHD (Napoli, 2005). For the purpose of this paper, we will focus on universal programs.

The program can be taught by an outside instructor that has specific training in teaching mindfulness, "a particularly distinctive feature of teaching mindfulness is the teacher's own ability to apply the practice in her own life to the extent that it is fruitful in her daily living and working" (Viafora, 2014). School teachers can also be trained to teach mindfulness in their classrooms, following a set curriculum such as the Master Mind Program (Parker, 2013).

Programs generally target students, but teachers are invited and encouraged to participate as well, so they can reinforce the teachings in their classroom.

Mindfulness Programs/Studies

The Master Mind program was developed by Innovation Research and Training and is a mindfulness education, substance abuse prevention program for elementary school students. It was created in part to fill the gap in programs available to provide mindfulness education and substance abuse prevention, as well as to contribute to the growing knowledge base of the effectiveness of mindfulness training delivered by the regular classroom teacher in a classroom setting (Parker, 2013). The Master Mind program set up a month long program where the teacher taught a 15-minute lesson a day, every day for four weeks. Overall, both teachers and students enjoyed the program. Teachers found the lessons easy to prepare and teach. Students that participated in the intervention group had higher executive functioning skills and girls had lower anxiety problems post-test. Teachers also noted that the students had fewer social problems and aggressive behaviors after completing the program.

The Attention Academy was developed to help students improve their quality of life through practicing mindfulness (Napoli et al, 2005). The program was taught by professionally trained mindfulness training instructors. Classes were held bimonthly (12 classes over 24 weeks) for 45 minutes during the student's physical education class. "The results showed a statistically significant difference between experimental and control groups as assessed by the measures. It appears that an increase in selective attention or the ability to choose what to pay attention to, and a reduction of both test anxiety and teachers' ratings of students ADHD behaviors provided the greatest variance in terms of performance improvement."

The MindfulKids training is a curriculum developed by two authors (GL and RB) of this study (Weijer-Bergsma et al, 2012). "It is modeled after the MBSR and MBCT training for adults and inspired by the MindfulSchools program (Biegel and Brown, 2010)." The trainer, GL, an experienced mindfulness teacher, held two 30-minute classes a week for 6 weeks. The trainings took place in the classroom, with the classroom teacher present and participating. At the end of the training, teachers perceived increases in student respect,

student friendship and belonging, and student shaping of the environment. Effects on stress and mental well-being were more pronounced at follow-up (as reported by children and parents), as opposed to immediately after the training. “Exploratory analysis revealed that children who ruminated more are affected by the intervention differently than children who ruminated less. Children who ruminated more already had high levels of bodily awareness and attention to others’ emotions initially, but analyzed their emotions less as a result of the intervention. Children who ruminated less showed an increase in bodily awareness and attention to others’ emotions as well as a decline in anger and aggression due to the intervention.”

Mindful Awareness Practices (MAPs) program is a curriculum developed by one of the study’s authors (SKG) (Flook et al 2010). It is modeled after classical mindfulness training for adults and uses secular and age appropriate exercises. This study was conducted primarily to test the effect of mindfulness on students’ executive function (EF). Executive functions “encompass a host of interrelated, yet somewhat independent processes involved in planning and carrying out regulated, goal-directed activity (Garon, Bryson, & Smith, 2008; McCloskey, Perkins, & Van Diviner, 2008; Welsh & Pennington, 1988).” “Poor EF is associated with cognitive deficits, poor socio-emotional adjustment, and poor academic functioning (Biederman et al., 2004; Blair, 2002), which may manifest as a lack of concentration, a lack of understanding of cause and effect, an inability to understand mental states, and/or impulsivity (Riggs, Jahromi, Razza, Dillworth-Bart, & Mueller, 2006).” Results showed students had improvements in behavioral regulation, metacognition, overall EF, and specific domains of EF based on teacher and parent report. More improvement in EF was reported for those children with initially poorer EF.

Mendelson et al (2010), with the Baltimore-based Holistic Life Foundation (HLF) developed a targeted intervention program for urban youth. The program’s aim was to “counter the psychological and neurocognitive effects of chronic stress exposure by cultivating a state of calm attention and awareness.” The study “showed promise in reducing problematic physiological and cognitive patterns of response to stress among

youth....provided some support for a model in which yoga with mindfulness was related to changes in self-regulatory capacities, as indexed by involuntary stress response.”

Conclusions

While this topic of research is still relatively new, the results are promising. In each study, learning mindfulness techniques was found to have an overall positive impact. While all students benefit, it appears for certain populations, the benefit is greater. Teachers share in the benefit by having classrooms with students better able to control/handle their emotions and situations as they arise. “Teachers also experience the well-evidenced improvements in physical and mental health that tend to follow the learning of mindfulness, including conditions particularly relevant to the teaching profession such as stress and burnout” (Weare, 2013). Parents benefit when their children come home and are better able to deal with stress, and when their children share the mindfulness techniques and practice them at home.

Going forward, mindfulness programs in school need support from the top down. Teachers and staff should have training to help reinforce the lessons taught by a professionally trained mindfulness instructor. “Saltzman (2008) describes findings that that the degree of positive classroom teacher support significantly impacts the students’ capacity to benefit from the mindfulness course” (Viafora, 2014). Parents need to be involved and incorporate a mindfulness practice at home. A separate course designed for parents (or perhaps the same as designed for teachers) to help reinforce the lessons could be beneficial for the whole family.

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