

Mindfulness in Education

An Approach to Cultivating Self-Awareness That Can Bolster Kids' Learning



Emerging research has illustrated the many benefits of integrating mindfulness approaches and skills for both teachers and students.^{1,2} It's no wonder that more educators are incorporating mindfulness practices into a variety of educational settings, with children of all ages. This brief introductory document on mindfulness in education is designed to help practitioners at every level of the school system as they work with pre-K-12 students in school districts, classrooms, and other learning environments.

This brief introduces mindfulness as a strategy for facilitating social and emotional learning in school, explains the potential benefits for both students and educators, provides examples of mindfulness strategies, and lists resources for learning more about mindfulness.

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

Mindfulness has been defined as "maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment with openness and curiosity."³ Mindfulness is essentially the practice of cultivating attention to foster greater self-awareness and self-knowledge about thoughts, feelings, and sensations, and how they can affect one's actions.

Mindfulness strategies employed in school settings are largely drawn from mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), both of which are validated psychological and behavioral strategies for anxiety and stress management.⁴

- 1 Jennings, P. A., Frank, J. L., Snowberg, K. E., Coccia, M. A., & Greenberg, M. T. (2013). Improving classroom learning environments by cultivating awareness and resilience in education (CARE): Results of a randomized controlled trial. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 28(4), 374–390.
- 2 Napoli, M., Krech, P. R., & Holley, L. C. (2005). Mindfulness training for elementary school students. *Journal of Applied School Psychology*, 21(1), 99–125.
- 3 Mindful Schools. (n.d.). What is mindfulness? <https://www.mindfulschools.org/what-is-mindfulness/>
- 4 Marchand, M. (2012, July). *Mindfulness-based stress reduction, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, and Zen meditation for depression, anxiety, pain, and psychological distress*. *Journal of Psychiatric Practice*, 18(4), 233–252. <https://insights.ovid.com/pubmed?pmid=22805898>.

Mindfulness is complementary to other Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) approaches related to positive learning outcomes. Both mindfulness and SEL are focused on helping young people understand and regulate their *internal* life. Indeed, part of healthy social and emotional development includes learning about one's emotions and how to take care of and express oneself in different surroundings and in relation to other people, including peers, families, and communities. By helping young people learn how to handle difficult emotions and to better self-regulate, mindfulness also connects to SEL skills and programs that focus on how individuals interact with others *externally* in social situations and relationships.

BENEFITS OF MINDFULNESS FOR STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

Mindfulness can be a valuable approach for creating learning conditions that are responsive to all students, including those who have experienced adversity, such as exposure to trauma. Mindfulness can also support a positive school climate in which students feel safe, welcome, and a sense of control over their experiences by helping them to develop decision-making and communication skills that will serve them in school and beyond.

One way that mindfulness creates these conditions in schools is by helping teachers and other staff. Developing self-regulation and stress management strategies through mindfulness can help teachers cope with the complexities and demands of their own lives so that they stay in their jobs longer and help create more positive learning environments for students. Unfortunately, educator turnover and burnout is a common challenge, particularly in schools and districts serving under-resourced communities. There is evidence that mindfulness and other stress management skills may produce positive effects on educators' sleep and skills such as self-regulation and self-compassion, as well as on their overall job satisfaction.^{5,6}

There are also many benefits to students, including in relationships and learning, which are closely linked. Techniques involved in mindfulness practice can actually change the brain in ways that are supportive to kids' learning, such as reducing individuals' emotional reactivity.⁷ Studies involving neuroimaging have linked changes in brain structure to mindfulness practice; effects have been observed in the areas of the brain responsible for attention

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- 5 Frank, J. L., Reibel, D., Broderick, P., Cantrell, T., & Metz, S. (2015, April). *The effectiveness of mindfulness-based stress reduction on educator stress and well-being: Results from a pilot study*. *Mindfulness*, 6(22), 208–216. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12671-013-0246-2>
- 6 Mindful Schools. Benefits of Mindful Schools Courses. <https://www.mindfulschools.org/about-mindfulness/research/#reference-21>
- 7 Uusberg, H., Uusberg, A., Talpsep, T., & Paaver, M. (2016, July). *Mechanisms of mindfulness: The dynamics of affective adaptation during open monitoring*. *Biological Psychology*, 118, 94–106. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0301051116301831>

enhancement, emotion regulation, and stress reduction.⁸ One study of mindfulness in schools found that students who learned mindfulness-based conflict resolution strategies were able to use them outside of school with siblings and friends.⁹

In fact, by improving self-awareness and self-regulation skills that are associated with positive learning outcomes and success in school and through adulthood,¹⁰ mindfulness can have benefits for students that resonate throughout their lives. These skills can be taught to all learners at all ages, helping students better understand their own experiences and learn healthy ways to navigate through challenges. In early childhood education settings, mindfulness helps young learners develop self-awareness and self-regulation as they begin to navigate the social, emotional, and physical landscape of schooling. In elementary and secondary schools, students increase responsibility for their own self-regulation and are expected to master more pro-social behaviors; here, mindfulness can contribute to those students' own development as well as create safe, positive learning environments for all.

Any educational model or learning environment can incorporate mindfulness into education, and it doesn't require a full class period.

STRATEGIES FOR INCORPORATING MINDFULNESS INTO SCHOOLS

Any educational model or learning environment can incorporate mindfulness into education, and it doesn't require a full class period. In fact, much like other strategies to support children's social and emotional learning, mindfulness is best taught and learned as an integral component of wider school structures, routines, and curricula. It can be implemented slowly or quickly, one element at a time or as a comprehensive approach, introduced into the day by individual teachers or rolled out over the course of the year as part of a school-wide initiative. There's no one right way to do it.

8 Tang, Y., Holzel, B., & Posner, M. (2015, March 18). *The neuroscience of mindfulness meditation*. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 16(4), 213–225. <https://www.nature.com/articles/nrn3916>

9 Ager, K., Albrecht, N., and Cohen, M. (2015). *Mindfulness in schools research project: Exploring students' perspectives of mindfulness—What are students' perspectives of learning mindfulness practices at school?* *Psychology*, 6(7), 896–914.

10 Flook, L., Smalley, S. L., Kitil, M. J., Galla, B. M., Kaiser-Greenland, S., Locke, J., Ishijima, E., & Kasari, C. (2010). Effects of mindful awareness practices on executive functions in elementary school children. *Journal of Applied School Psychology*, 26(1), 70–95.

Figure 1 provides examples of how mindfulness can be integrated into education, with target settings and audiences, ideal learning objectives, specific examples of what the practice might look like, and potential benefits. Depending on local school policies, students may have the opportunity to opt in to some of these practices.

Figure 1: Examples of Mindfulness Strategies and Practices for Educational Settings

Setting/ Audience	Learning Objective	Mindfulness Strategies	Example of Practice	Benefits
Educators	Understand how to treat students with respect, fairness, and non-judgment	Cultivate self-awareness to identify preconceived notions or judgments that may stand in the way of treating students equitably	Through practicing moment-by-moment awareness of one's thoughts and feelings (e.g., by focusing on taking deep breaths or on bodily sensations), educators learn to notice their own judgments, biases, and assumptions that may limit their ability to be compassionate or may affect their language and actions toward students	Educators become more reflective, thoughtful, and culturally responsive in their language and actions toward students
Educators	Proactively manage the stresses of teaching and leading	Educators recognize triggers of their own stress and emotional reactions, and primary or secondary traumatic stressors	Practice pausing and taking several deep breaths whenever a strong emotional or physiological reaction is triggered, as a means to cultivate self-awareness and self-regulation instead of reactivity	Educators can manage stress, personal hardship, and trauma
Pre-K Elementary	Create safe, responsive classroom environments	Model and teach compassion through sending positive wishes to a classmate who is having a hard time or with whom another student has had a conflict	If a student gets angry and shouts or gets frustrated and cries, a teacher can pause the classroom activity and model how to focus on friendly, kind wishes for the child who is struggling	Students experience that the classroom environment is safe and loving

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Pre-K Elementary	Develop emotion recognition and physical awareness	Help students distinguish between sensations in their body and the thoughts and feelings that are connected to them	Lead a group activity in which each child is asked to respond to the prompt: "Right now in my body I feel..."	Students are able to identify their own bodies' needs, which lays the foundation for identifying their thoughts and emotions
Pre-K Elementary Secondary	Cultivate focus and attention	Integrate a deliberate pause to help students settle their minds and bodies in preparation for learning	Begin class with a "mindful moment" where students are guided through either (1) sitting and noticing their bodily sensations (e.g., their feet on the floor and their bottom on the chair) or (2) slow and deliberate movement (e.g., students are guided through standing movement in which they pair deep breaths with movements such as raising their arms over their heads and down to their sides in repetition)	Students learn to slow down, quiet down their nervous systems, and check in with themselves and any feelings or thoughts that might need attention as they get ready to learn
Elementary Secondary	Increase academic confidence, reduce stress, and manage anxiety	Use mindful breathing to help students self-regulate when under stress	Teach students to recognize the symptoms of anxiety in the body (e.g., elevated heart rate, fast-moving thoughts) and to practice taking several slow, deep, and full breaths to signal ease to the body when they feel these symptoms	Students are better able to manage stress and anxiety by practicing a healthy behavior

Setting/ Audience	Learning Objective	Mindfulness Strategies	Example of Practice	Benefits
Elementary Secondary	Reduce peer conflict and disciplinary incidents	Teach students to pause before reacting to something that they perceive as provocative or charged	Students can learn to count to five or take three deep breaths before responding to something that stirred up challenging emotions	Students learn to self-regulate by calming their minds and bodies and becoming aware of their own thoughts and feelings before reacting to them
Elementary Secondary	Encourage communication and relationships between students	Integrate mindful listening into the curriculum	Students learn to take turns as the speaker and as the listener; the listener does not interrupt the speaker while they are talking and instead practices focusing their attention entirely on what the other person is sharing. After the speaker shares, the listener(s) may offer feedback or ideas based on what they heard	Students become better listeners and learn how to provide constructive feedback that is responsive to their classmates
Elementary Secondary	Resolve interpersonal conflicts and restore mutual respect and value for one another	Use mindfulness practices to facilitate perspective-taking in conflict resolution	Use strategies noted above – such as pausing, body-centered awareness, and mindful listening – as tools in alternative discipline approaches, such as restorative justice practices	Students practice self-awareness, tolerance, and perspective-taking following interpersonal conflict

RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION ON MINDFULNESS

The resources linked below provide just a few ways to learn more about mindfulness in education.

- The [Association for Mindfulness in Education](#) is an association of organizations and individuals that collectively provide support for mindfulness training as part of K-12 education. The organization maintains a listserv and a map of existing mindfulness programs, as well as other resources for practitioners of mindfulness in education.
- The [Greater Good Science Center](#) at the University of California, Berkeley, studies the psychology, sociology, and neuroscience of well-being and focuses on equipping individuals with the skills associated with resilience and compassion for others. The center offers online trainings and access to diverse resources for individuals in all roles, based on the science and research of cultivating well-being.
- For a helpful summary of the research on mindfulness in education, visit the [Mindful Schools](#) webpage.



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