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October 2015 | Volume 73 | Number 2
Emotionally Healthy Kids Pages 58-62

The Five Literacies of Mindful Learning

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When we show students how to be present and focused, they not only learn better, but they also live better.

When we ask educators and parents what they really want for kids, it's rare that their first choice is "to be proficient in algebra." What they most hope for is for their children to be successful, to be happy, and to live good and meaningful lives.

If we begin with the premise that we want to support our students' well-being, we'll likely teach in a very different way. We'll focus on helping students learn mindsets and approaches that are foundational for their healthy development, both for academic success and simply to be good people. Through approaches like mindfulness, we'll teach students to be "literate" in five key areas: their bodies, their minds, their hearts, their community, and the world around them.

This Is Your Brain on Mindfulness

Before we get into how to teach mindfulness, let's talk about what mindfulness is—and its benefits. To practice mindfulness means to orient yourself toward your present-moment experience with attention and compassion—to be with what is, as it is. Research is clear on the advantages of mindfulness for adults. Now studies are showing that when students practice mindfulness, their stress, depression, and anxiety decrease, while their impulse control, emotional regulation, happiness, and empathy increase (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015).

Of course, it's great to help kids be happier, but you may be asking where this approach fits into an 8th grade math class. Amazingly, research indicates that mindfulness and social-emotional learning are profound drivers in academic success. A 2013 study found that mindfulness practice helped students raise their reading comprehension test scores 16 percent as well as build their working memory and limit their distracting thoughts (Mrazek et al., 2013). The Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning, working with eight major U.S. school districts, found that its interventions helped raise academic scores by 11 percent. It's not that mindfulness helps students memorize math tables. Such academic achievements are the result of practices that boost self-awareness, focus attention, and reduce stress (Durlak et al., 2011).

Many teachers hesitate to give time to mindfulness or social-emotional learning because our schedules are already overflowing. But these modalities aren't some intervention hoisted onto an already overburdened day; they're foundational ways of being that can be taught through short practice sessions. When we teach students the art of attention, they build executive functioning to maintain focus on the task at hand. Teachers don't need to wrestle the class back to a topic again and again. Most teachers incorporating mindfulness in their classrooms get much more done because their students are present—really present—emotionally regulated, and ready to learn.

Five Literacies

Any educator can use fun and accessible practices to foster a school environment where students' well-being is a top

priority. Instead of always telling students to pay attention, we can guide them to "play attention" or teach them breathing techniques that help them manage their emotions when flooded with intense feelings. Let's look at five areas of awareness and some practices that strengthen each area.

Somatic Literacy

Anyone who teaches knows that even if students are physically in the room, that doesn't mean they're "present" and attentive. For students to learn, they have to feel present in their bodies. Students are often hyperaroused—with so much energy they're popping out of their seats—or hypoaroused—so spaced out that we have to spend the whole class trying to draw their attention back to the subject at hand.

Some students live with trauma or come from unsafe living situations. These kids have natural defense mechanisms that put their bodies and nerves on high alert—and that high-stakes testing only exacerbates. Our executive functioning gets hijacked by stress and trauma, shutting down when tested or pushed. Whether in a privileged or a low-income school, all students have their own stressors and need to learn how to regulate their nervous systems. So we begin mindfulness training by helping students land in their bodies and feel comfortable and safe in their skins.

Educators so often tell students to calm down or stop fidgeting. But how often do we show them practices that help them truly settle? Engaging movement practices, relaxation techniques, and other strategies can help all kids get their bodies and systems ready to learn.

Try This: Have students deliberately tighten their fists, faces, and their entire bodies while they inhale, then fully relax as they exhale. After practicing this a few times, ask them to stop tightening up but to notice if there is any extra tension any place in their bodies. Draw their attention to that place as they inhale, then tell them to let all the tension go from there with a few relaxing exhales. Have students describe their physical sensations as they do these exercises, helping them develop a literacy of the body.

Cognitive Literacy

Once students are somatically present, work with attention, distraction, and thought processes. Attention is a skill just as playing piano is. We'd never get upset with a student who played piano poorly if we had never taught the student how.

Help students build their attention muscles. Start by teaching kids to focus their attention on their breath, a particular spot on the wall, or anything happening in the present moment. Students learn to watch how their attention gets distracted by thoughts, sounds, and other stimuli. Each time they bring their attention back to the focus they've chosen, they build their muscles of attention and strengthen their executive functioning.

Once students have built their attention muscles, they begin to become aware of how self-critical thoughts and judgments toward others—as well as self-compassionate and prosocial thoughts—surface in their minds. Teachers can help students realize when they are caught up in self-judging thought spirals and shift their awareness to self-compassion. It's like giving them instructions to operate a vehicle. But this vehicle is their mind, in which they can find balance and health.

Try This: We tell students that our brains are like a popcorn maker—but instead of making popcorn, brains make thoughts. Have students put a hand on their stomachs and feel their breath as they inhale and exhale. Every time they notice they get distracted by a thought or sound in the room, they pop up their hand. Then they bring the hand back to the stomach and their focus back to their breath, building their attention muscles.

Emotional Literacy

Emotions can be a sticky business. One 4th grade student told us that when she feels nervous, it's like there's bubble gum stuck in her hair. Anxiety, sadness, anger, and even joy or curiosity can be overwhelming, especially when you're expected to sit still and follow directions for hours. What's a student supposed to do when he or she becomes filled with sadness or anger in the middle of class?

Once they've learned to feel comfortable in their bodies and have built the muscles of attention, students can learn the language of emotions. Many schools tell students to take three deep breaths when they're angry—but mindfulness practices go beyond that. We invite students to mentally observe their ruminating thoughts or strong emotions and then to actually feel the correlating physical sensations in their bodies.

Students learn what emotions feel like physically and how emotions are connected to their thoughts. With this inner knowledge, they start to develop impulse control and emotional regulation. They become aware of their thoughts as independent from the impulse to act on them. Slowly, through mindfulness practice, they put a lag time between emotion, thought, and action, which greatly improves their success. They learn to name their emotions and—instead of automatically reacting—use strategies to find balance. Students also develop empathy, gratitude, and joy. Research shows that when students practice mindfulness, their dysregulation reduces and their well-being rises (Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, & Davidson, 2015).

Try This: Have students picture in their minds a time when they were frustrated. (It's better to probe for a time they felt "a little frustrated" rather than sad or angry, because remembering stronger emotions might lead a child to call up a traumatic memory.) Guide students to notice what their bodies feel like when they're picturing something frustrating. Then have them inhale, noticing where the stress is in their bodies as they remember the frustration and, on each

exhale, relax their body, loosening that place of stress.

This practice is a training ground. A student who gets comfortable doing this will have better mental resources to regulate himself or herself in emotionally stressed times at school. When a conflict arises or students are overwhelmed with emotion, remind them to check into their bodies, feel where the tension is, and regulate themselves with each exhale. We can bring this practice into our classrooms before tests, after transitions, or during other events that may bring on a flurry of feelings.

Social Literacy

Social-emotional literacy is dearly needed in our world, and certainly in schools. For instance, we visited one 6th grade classroom to lead mindfulness trainings. The teacher told us the group had been experiencing lots of exclusion and meanness among students. When we sat down with the students and invited them to each picture someone they really liked and say in their heads, "Just like me, this person wants to be happy," students found this easy and pleasant. But when asked to do the same thing picturing a person who annoyed them, most said it wasn't easy. Students had amazing explanations of how their hearts literally tightened up as they tried, not wanting to open to this person. We then suggested they each imagine the person they were annoyed with winning an award and see whether they could feel excited for them. One student said, "Wow, I didn't realize I could do that. I felt good for him even though I don't like him. That was weird."

Through such practices, we can teach kids the inner mechanisms for forgiveness, acceptance, and kindness. When we bring mindfulness into social interactions, it opens our eyes to really understanding others and our impact on them. Kids face so much bullying and social friction, and rarely do we teach them how to understand the roots of such friction. Using mindfulness, with some guidance, students begin to inquire into themselves, asking questions like, *Why do I include some people and exclude others? Why do I judge? Why can't I just accept those who are outside my realm of understanding?*

Try This: Sit with students in a circle and settle into your mindfulness practice, then have each student mentally check in to identify how he or she feels right now. Then, play Flow and Tell. Around the circle, each student says what he or she is aware of in the present moment. Gently tell students not to talk about what happened in the past or what will happen in the future, but just name what they're experiencing right now—what they feel, hear, see, or what emotions they notice. This practice offers students an experience of community authenticity.

Ecological Literacy

We tell our students to be good stewards of the earth, but this can seem like an abstract idea if we don't give them ways to feel their place in the greater ecosystems. An effective mindfulness practice begins with self-awareness, extends out to understanding others and our community, and eventually opens awareness to larger systems and the natural world. It helps students understand that they aren't the center of the universe, that they have a responsibility to make their world a healthier place for all.

Ecological literacy can be practiced by going into nature and experiencing the elements that living creatures rely on to live. Or students can sit in their classrooms looking at a pencil and discuss together where elements in it come from. Students can eventually extend their kindness and attention to all things; they can learn how the world affects them and how their actions affect the world. Through understanding interconnectedness, we empower students to be mindful ambassadors in the world.

Try This: Invite students to understand our interconnectedness. Offer a raisin, tangerine, or other small natural food. Give kids an opportunity to slow their eating down so they can be mindful of the taste and the sensory experience. Then ask, Where do you think this food came from? Through exploring this question, students will learn how rain, soil, sun, and other natural forces were needed to grow this food. They'll build understanding about the farmers, truckers, and other workers who labor to feed people.

Don't Forget the Adults

In a sense, by exploring how to help students develop mindfulness, we've gotten ahead of ourselves. Adults need stress relief, well-being, focused attention, and the other benefits of mindfulness as much as or more than students do. So when we integrate mindfulness into a school, we begin with the adults.

We saw the importance of this when a principal called us the day before a professional development training to say that this might not be the best day because assessments were due and all teachers were on edge. We replied there could be no better day for mindfulness training. The group of teachers and administrators spent much of that training naming their stress, identifying what stress felt like, and using the methods described here to regulate their emotions, work with ruminating thoughts, and find balance amid the storm. This helped prevent stress from creating a toxic working environment and helped faculty remain present to themselves and their community.

Teaching mindfulness is easier when adults embody compassionate presence. We know it doesn't work to yell at students to be calm; punish them so they'll be kind; or simply tell them to be relaxed, focused, and empathetic. If it worked to tell kids how we want them to be, the world would have no problems: Didn't our kindergarten teachers tell us again and again to think of others and do the right thing? We've all heard ethical lessons—but something keeps us from

acting on them.

Mindfulness can be a pathway to being the human beings we want to be. First we can cultivate our own attention, self-awareness, and compassion. Then we can help students do so. Yes, we hope this will bring them academic success. But more than that, we believe it will make the world a better place.

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