

Teaching Mindfulness



Last Wednesday, Megan Cowan spoke to us about her work in teaching mindfulness as a way of improving focus and reducing stress in school. Although many studies have been done on the benefits of mindfulness for adults (see http://www.livingmindfully.org/benefits/mindfulness_research.php), bringing mindfulness techniques to children is a new area that is proving both beneficial and rewarding.

The first pilot was implemented in February 2007. As of Feb 2009, Mindful Schools, formerly Known as Community Partnership for Mindfulness in Education, has been in 19 schools, serving 4600 students. Most of the schools receiving the program are low-income schools where many children have numerous stressors in their life that prevent them from taking full advantage of their academic careers.

Because the children come from a variety of religious backgrounds, care was taken to secularize the mindfulness practice so that it would not be in conflict with the spiritual environment at home. The program is delivered in 15 minute lessons offered 3 times/week during a 5-week course. It is schoolwide so that everyone benefits from the same teaching creating a school culture of calm, focus and connection. Additionally, teachers are given four independent training sessions and receive a curriculum. The intention is that they will continue to incorporate mindfulness into their daily schedules.

The tools students gain from mindfulness can provide an essential underpinning for every other program they are offered. Mindfulness can be used now and forever to help students cope more easily in challenging times and thrive in good times. In addition to the children gaining benefit, the teachers experience less stress, more calm and patience in themselves.

The program teaches children to pay attention to their experiences. In a series of mindfulness exercises, students are taught to focus their attention on listening, breathing, movement, walking, eating, seeing, test taking, and more. Students learn to be and stay in the present, making them aware of their thoughts and feelings. In addition to improving focus in the classroom, this awareness gives students an understanding of their emotions and emotional reactions, allowing more control and the ability to make choices in response to difficulties, rather than habitually reacting.

Another important aspect of the program is sending caring and kind thoughts to themselves and others. This part of the program facilitates the building and sustaining of positive relationships with the potential to change school culture from one of adversity to one of community and mutual respect.

Here are some of the comments about the program from children in Grades 2 – 5:

"I like mindfulness because it helps me feel better and teaches me to concentrate."

"When I am down, mindfulness is what I focus on. I love relaxing and focusing on my breathing. You can be mindful happy or sad, anytime you want."

"It calms me down. It makes me healthy. It's really good for me. It makes me calm in my heart."

"I think if everybody knew how to do mindfulness there wouldn't be that much killing and fighting over little things. Mindfulness is very good for kids and adults."

"If people had mindfulness, our world might be safe. PS Keep up the good work."

"I like it because it is fun and it helps me be a better person in my life."

"It helps me in school when I am trying to do work. It helps me not get my name on the board. It really works - a lot of people should try it."

"Mindfulness makes me have more energy."

"It helps because school is sometimes hard and mindfulness helps me cool down."

"In my brain I think I can be anything I want to be today."

"I think if we do this everyday we won't fight anymore."

"I felt great and I felt calm and it made me feel important."

"When you are in any kind of expression that is bad, you should practice mindfulness."

"It makes me feel good. I wish it was every day."

"Mindfulness helps people to be nice and not to do bad things. I can now help my dad when he is mad at something."

These programs are proving very useful and cost effective (about \$25 a student for the 5 week program). As a result, others are implementing similar programs in their local areas, including, Modesto, Sacramento, Half Moon Bay, Colorado, Texas, and Israel.

For more information:

Program at Park Day School: <http://www.parkdayschool.org/13401031604022613/site/default.asp>

ABC News story on program:

http://abclocal.go.com/kgo/story?section=news/drive_to_discover&id=5187016

Conference at UC Berkeley (4/20/2009): <http://www-gse.berkeley.edu/program/SP/html/conference.html>

The program in Half Moon Bay at Hatch Elementary School is in need of volunteers. Please contact Carla Brooke at 650-726-7180, or Silkelegy@aol.com for more information.