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TEACHING KIDS TO PAUSE, COPE, AND CONNECT

LESSONS FOR SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING AND MINDFULNESS

MARK PURCELL, PSY.D. • KELLEN GLINDER, M.D.

free spirit PUBLISHING®

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Dedication

For Veronica, who is a perpetual champion for the social and emotional health of children, especially our own. —M. P.

For Judy, Sophie, and Beckett, who have shown me the power of being present. —K. G.

Acknowledgments

This project saw many forms before materializing as a book. It certainly took a village—and a community—to get here. We would like to thank the folks at Free Spirit Publishing who believed that this was a much-needed project. Along the way we found inspiration from the late monk Thich Nhat Hahn, who tirelessly advocated for the mindfulness and playful spirit of children throughout the world, as well as from our own walking meditations through the caverns of Kepler's Books, a mindful sanctuary in the heart of Silicon Valley. Thank you to Linda Creighton, principal of Laurel Elementary School, and Gatee Esmat, principal of Arroyo Seco Elementary, who invited us in and welcomed our efforts. Teachers Ms. Mazzoncini, Ms. Reagan, Ms. Scher, and Ms. Baker helped guide our early efforts, and Sarah Newman at themindfulkids.com kept us on the right path. Lastly, we would like to thank you for your interest in the mental health of our next generation. We can make no investment too large for their future, and staying attuned to the needs of our children is a great way to build the community they need.

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INTRODUCTION

Mindfulness is ultimately about empathy. Through pausing to listen intently to how we feel, what thoughts we have, and what others are telling us, we develop compassion for ourselves and others. This is a biochemical process: mindfulness has been found to reduce stress hormone levels, blood pressure, and heart rate. It also raises oxytocin, the hormone of compassion. The compassion built through mindfulness practice helps teach us empathy for each other and spread that empathy.

The ability to observe what we are feeling without reacting is a foundational aspect of mindfulness. In social-emotional learning (SEL), this skill is known as emotional regulation. You can teach mindfulness to your students and, in doing so, give them a skill that can support them throughout their lives at school and beyond. Once kids know how to stop, breathe, and observe their feelings and surroundings in lessons and practice sessions, they are ready to apply these skills to their own tumultuous emotional worlds. This book provides a series of lessons designed to introduce elementary school students to mindfulness practice and help them build social-emotional awareness.

When your students can calmly observe their own intense emotions without automatically reacting, they are ready to try mindful observation of their social situations. Some of the lesson plans in this book can help students navigate social situations mindfully and develop compassion and understanding for themselves and those around them. Cultivating that compassion will help you build a culture of empathy in your classroom.

Of course, it takes practice to build such a community. The lessons in this book can help make the practice easy to do within already-full classroom days. Simply repeating small mindfulness practices daily goes a long way in building the habits that contribute to an empathetic community.

Challenges for Today's Children

Children today face many challenges that did not exist a generation or two ago. Children and adolescents are experiencing stress at unprecedented levels. As a result, students are at increased risk for anger, anxiety, and depression, as well as lower self-esteem and self-confidence (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2021; Mendelson et al. 2010). Among five-to-fifteen-year-olds, rates of emotional disorders (including anxiety and depression) have increased steadily over the years, from 3.9 percent in 2004 to 5.8 percent in 2017 (CDC 2021). In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020 resulted in epidemic physical and mental health challenges for children. During the pandemic, rates of elevated depression and anxiety symptoms among children worldwide nearly doubled pre-pandemic rates, from 12.9 percent to 25.2 percent for depression symptoms and from 11.6 percent to 20.5 percent for anxiety symptoms (Racine et al. 2021). Distance learning and social distancing led to increased isolation and social anxiety. More than ever, children need support to manage their emotions and form healthy connections.

Today's students also have more resources at their fingertips than any previous generation: smartphones, tablets, social media, and the internet. Yet as anyone who teaches or cares for children well knows, with all these technological resources, many students struggle with regulating their emotions, sustaining attention, and maintaining healthy social connections. The constant availability of electronic distractions creates an easy escape from difficult feelings and interactions and allows children to avoid uncomfortable situations. As they indulge in distractions and avoidance, challenging emotions fester and cause more stress—further preventing children from dealing with them. Elementary-age children who habitually rely on distractions during this critical period of early development can get really good at reflexively avoiding difficult emotions, and doing so often becomes so automatic that they never learn to confront these feelings. Daily, we see stressed-out, distracted children who struggle with simply tolerating uncomfortable feelings or direct social interactions.

As educators and parents, we often fall into similar patterns. When we see that a child is upset, we immediately jump to fix it. We want to help them avoid pain. But sometimes we prevent them from learning to live life fully and cope with its highs *and* lows. What frustrated teacher hasn't sent two students to the office because of a conflict rather than sit through the tedious task of having them talk it out? And what parent hasn't fixed a painful and embarrassing store meltdown over an item they've denied their child by succumbing and indulging the tantrum? Of course, children then learn to tantrum and get their way instead of learning to cope with disappointment and discomfort. Situations like these happen in many different contexts. These dynamics may prevent some children from learning to tolerate distress or work through disappointment and conflict. When this pattern is repeated over time, or reinforced in society, it can lead to more serious social-emotional issues, such as anxiety and depression, as well as risk for future substance abuse.

A NOTE ABOUT LANGUAGE

Throughout this book, we use the term *parents* to mean a student's primary caregiver(s) or legal guardian(s), while realizing that many children have a single parent and/or may not use the term *parent*.

The physical consequences of this inability to cope with difficult emotions can also be serious. Biological stress responses are automatic reactions to fear, and they are healthy in small and infrequent doses. But when continued avoidance causes constant, pervasive stress, the body starts to break down. Chronic stress causes high blood pressure, faster heart rates, over- or undereating, sleeplessness, restlessness, and secondary emotions of anger, aggression, isolation, and loneliness. Of course, these symptoms don't appear all at once—chronic stress changes our minds and bodies slowly—and they aren't identical in everyone, so we may have difficulty seeing these signs right away. Solutions take time too. Mindfulness can be an important remedy because it involves approaching our experiences with curiosity and acceptance rather than turning away from them. But like any other skill, it takes consistent practice to combat the distracted avoidance many of us experience daily.

To prevent these physical consequences of avoidance, it's important to teach children that disappointment and discomfort are part of life. As with the weather, there are sunny days and stormy days. The way to heal from pain and discomfort is to learn how to acknowledge it and work through it. Mindfulness is the first step in this process.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, known as the founding father of mindfulness-based stress reduction, defines mindfulness as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" ([1994] 2014). Another definition of mindfulness is simply "focused observation without judgment" (Bishop et al. 2004). Mindfulness expert Tara Brach describes mindfulness as recognizing what we are experiencing (on the inside) and sticking with it (2018). Taken together, these definitions of mindfulness mean developing self-awareness to (1) notice what you are experiencing *right now*, without judgment, and (2) *not* do something to fix it, avoid it, or make it go away.

This simple, unwavering awareness is the first step toward working through a difficult experience or unpleasant feeling. Too often we blame the outside world (people and circumstances) for our discomfort, or we seek something external to fix our tumultuous internal state. Mindfulness also paves the path for deeper social-emotional awareness.

In *Teaching Kids to Pause, Cope, and Connect*, you will find tools to help students develop this fundamental life skill of looking inward for the cause of and solutions for their own social-emotional challenges. Mindfulness and SEL are complementary approaches that increase self-awareness and social competence. As children develop the capacity to observe their own thoughts, emotions, and bodily experiences, they can develop the capacity to *respond* to situations rather than simply *react*. As self-acceptance grows, so does the capacity to accept others.

The Benefits of Mindfulness and Social-Emotional Learning

Integrating mindfulness-based programs with SEL in schools and other youth organizations has a broad range of positive outcomes. Mindfulness-based interventions have been shown to improve self-regulation, mood, and social-emotional development (Mendelson et al. 2010).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) describes SEL as the process through which we all acquire and apply the skills necessary to "develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions."

Many of the concepts and approaches presented in this book parallel those taught as part of SEL. We highlight outcomes that both practices have in common: observing emotions in order to manage them better, fostering empathy, creating healthy relationships, and responding thoughtfully instead of impulsively.

Mindfulness research indicates improved social-emotional functioning with continued practice. This book provides the practice, and teachers can implement it by using brief, regular activities that are engaging for students and easy to implement. Numerous studies show improved focus and performance for students who practice mindfulness regularly (Chiesa and Serretti 2009; Jha, Krompinger, and Baime 2007). Other studies show that mindfulness improves emotional regulation (Roemer, Williston, and Rollins 2015), diminishes reactivity, and improves focus (Goldin and Gross 2010; Ortner, Kilner, and Zelazo 2007). Students participating in mindfulness programs have also been found to develop more compassion and empathy for others (Condon et al. 2013).

In various studies, a broad range of mindfulness interventions with children have demonstrated significant positive outcomes:

- School-based mindfulness intervention can reduce perceived stress and modulate activity in a brain region associated with responses to fear and stress (Bauer et al. 2020).
- Exercise-based mindfulness practices, such as yoga and tai chi, have demonstrated a reduction in stress levels and an increase in resilience to stressful events in school-age children (Mendelson et al. 2010).
- Body-oriented mindfulness practices, such as breath work, body scanning, and walking meditation, help children focus. This type of mindfulness also helps kids self-soothe, sleep better, and be less distractible (Napoli et al. 2005; Abrams 2008; Singh et al. 2007).
- Children with learning disabilities who practiced mindful meditation experienced decreased anxiety, increased social skills, and improved academic performance (Beauchemin et al. 2008).
- A child-friendly variation of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program—an evidence-based, eight-week mindfulness training program designed to assist people with stress, anxiety, depression, and pain—improved students' attention, self-regulation, social skills, and general well-being. Several studies support the use of mindfulness to address anxiety and depression (Baer 2014; Semple and Lee 2011).
- A separate child-specific program called Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Children (MBCT-C) shows promise in treating childhood anxiety, enhancing emotional regulation, and developing social-emotional resiliency (Semple and Lee 2011; Baer 2014).

The large, and ever-growing, body of research in mindfulness interventions for children and adolescents shows that mindfulness improves student attention and self-esteem across a broad range of ages, learning styles, and behavioral challenges. What's more, mindfulness-based practices naturally appeal to children because they teach self-management and empower students to play a key role in their own growth and development (Semple, Reid, and Miller 2005). Teaching mindfulness to students creates the potential for greater self-awareness, improved impulse control, and decreased emotional reactivity to challenging events (Oberle et al. 2012; Thompson and Gauntlett-Gilbert 2008).