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**MINDFULNESS: Building Attention and**

**Decreasing Stress & Behavioral Issues in the Classroom**

**Mindfulness**. The human mind is a gift which allows us to plan, organize, analyze, remember, calculate and many other activities. Often, however, it causes us suffering. Recent scientific research suggests that the adult human mind wanders about 50% of the time.[[1]](#endnote-1) We are present in body but acting on autopilot, lost in thought. While daydreaming can be wonderful, science has shown that when the mind wanders, we are usually less happy.

Mindfulness is a practice to pay attention to the here and now with openness, curiosity, and kindness (non-judgmental awareness). It is a natural ability, but due to the evolution of our minds, it is challenging to maintain for any length of time. Because our brains are designed to protect us, they often drift to unsettling issues of the past, worries about the future, or comparisons of self to others. We practice mindfulness to notice the mind drifting, let go of distracted thinking and refocus attention.

Mindfulness training also teaches us that we are not our thoughts and we always can make choices about our speech and actions. In order to be present with open, curious attention and more skillful in our responses to life, we also train in developing curiosity and wonder, cultivating equanimity, strengthening feelings of kindness and compassion toward self and others, and finding gratitude for the gifts of life.

**Mindfulness Research with Children in Schools shows:**

* Improved attention and focus,[[2]](#endnote-2)
* Enhanced cognitive development;[[3]](#endnote-3)
* Improved behavior in school;[[4]](#endnote-4)
* Reduced Post Traumatic Symptoms[[5]](#endnote-5) and stress;[[6]](#endnote-6)
* Improved empathy & perspective taking;[[7]](#endnote-7)
* Decreased anxiety[[8]](#endnote-8) and depression;[[9]](#endnote-9)
* Improved social skills[[10]](#endnote-10) and emotional regulation.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Mindfulness has also been shown to have positive effects for teachers, including reduced stress and burnout, better classroom organization, improved social emotional competence with students, and feelings of greater efficacy on the job.

**Connection with SEL and Restorative Discipline***:* Mindfulness focuses on practices of engaging attention. Mindfulness supports the SEL skills of self-awareness and self-management. Mindfulness goes hand-in-hand with restorative discipline practices to make them more effective.

**Key Instruction with Practices to Train Attention:** Notice when mind wanders. Label it “thinking” or “wandering” and return attention to focus. Each time mind wanders it is an opportunity to “flex our muscle of attention.” Attention can be trained in 3-5 minutes daily with breathing, hearing, seeing, or noticing body sensations. Never force a student to participate (it’s always a choice).

Breathing:

* 3-6 long, slow deep breaths (exhale longer than the inhale) engage the parasympathetic nervous systems of rest and digest. It’s a quick hit of relaxation.
* Students ages 6 and up (and some younger children) may follow breath at nose, chest OR belly for short periods of time. Counting breaths can help with focus.
* Hand-breathing can be a fun practice for all ages and can help with focus.

Hearing:

* Ask children to listen for sounds outside or from inside the building or from within their bodies, noticing as they come and go. Don’t search for sounds; rather, rest the mind on listening.
* Notice the sounds as if they have never heard them before, because they have not heard them! For example, what is the sound of rain on this day?
* Ask children what they heard and what it sounded like to them (builds descriptor vocabulary).

Seeing:

* Ask children to quietly gaze around the room. What details do they notice that they have never seen before?
* Ask children to gaze out windows. What do they notice that is different from before?

Noticing Body Sensations.

* Go to neutral places of hands or feet. What sensations do they notice today? (builds descriptor vocabulary).
* Feel their bodies on the chairs and how they are being held and supported in the moment. Can they relax and let go of body tension, allowing it to melt down into the chair?
* Do seated or standing movements when children are restless or have lots of energy. Ask them to notice what sensations they experience. (Builds descriptor vocabulary).
* Walking practice to lunch, recess or other activities. What sensations do they notice in legs and feet as they walk? What do they notice in their environments? Counting steps is also possible for more concentration.

**Descriptors for these experiences**: Children can find many descriptors and even make up their own descriptors (for example, it feels *wiggy*). Try to stay away from ‘good’ and ‘bad.’ They do not tell us anything! What is good for you, is bad for me and vice versa. I don’t know what you mean when you use one of those words.

Some of the many **descriptors** **for body sensations** include: achy, airy, big, blocked, bubbly, burning, buzzing, churning, clenched, closed, congested, constricted, contracted, cool, convulsing, cool, cold, dark, deep, dense, dizzy, drained, empty, energized, expansive, explosive, fiery, floating, fluttering, frozen, full, glowing, grinding, hard, heavy, hollow, hot, hurting, itchy, jittery, knotted, large, light, melting, moving, open, popping, pounding, prickly, pulsing, queasy, radiating, raw, relaxed, releasing, rushing, settled, slow, shaky, sharp, shivery, sluggish, small, soft, spacious, steamy, stiff, still, streaming, strong, suffocating, sweaty, tender, tense, throbbing, tight, tingling, twitchy, trembling, twitchy, warm, weak, whirling, wooden, AND MANY MORE!

Some **descriptors** **for sounds** include: audible, brassy, clacking, clattering, clanging, clicking, clucking, crashing, creaking, explosive, fizzing, grinding, groaning, growling, grunting, gurgling, honking, hooting, high, howling, hushed, long, loud, low, percussive, piercing, pinging, pulsing, roaring, rumbling, screeching, screaming, scrunching, squeaking, sighing, squealing, sharp, short, shrill, soft, thudding, thumping, thundering, whining, whirring, whispering, yelping, yowling, AND MANY MORE!

**Key Understanding About Thinking:** We can choose our thoughts, but many of our thoughts we do not choose. This means that *we are not our thoughts*! We can observe our thoughts and make choices about whether or not we want to focus on them and let unhelpful thoughts go. Many of our thoughts are also distorted and biased. We can learn when we are caught in this thinking to let it go!

**Practicing STOP.** STOP is an acronym that stands for **S**top, **T**ake a breath or several breaths, **O**bserve your body, mind, and emotional body, and what we NEED in this moment before we **P**roceed. It helps us take a pause to respond, instead of to react.

**Gratitude Practice.** No matter how much we have or what obstacles we face in this life, we can develop gratitude for people who have helped us or created the gifts we have in life (food, shelter, transportation, roads, technology, medicines). We can be thankful for our families, friends, teachers, mentors, and the people who provide services (grocery, gas, medical, mail, transportation). We can be grateful for nature (water, food, trees, skies, rivers, mountains, animals) and our bodies (skills, abilities). Take a few minutes to think of something for which you are grateful today. You can also have students share the things for which they are thankful.

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