



MINDFUL KIDS

Inner Awareness Brings Calm and Well-Being

by Daniel Rechtschaffen

When I walk outside, students run to me from the school playground, but they don't yell out my last name as they circle around and grab onto my legs, as it can be a bit much to remember and pronounce correctly. Instead, I usually hear "Hey, Mr. Mindfulness," or even, "The Mindfulness Dude!"

My job is to help to bring the art and science of mindfulness to students and teachers in schools, juvenile detention centers and sports teams, as well as to clients in my private psychotherapy practice. Happily, research is beginning to show that applying mindfulness can decrease stress, attention deficit issues, depression, anxiety and hostility in children, while benefiting their health, well-being, social relations and academic performance. Children can easily learn the techniques, and when learned young, they become lifelong tools.

Mindful Benefits

Mindfulness means intentionally and compassionately

"You feel... more connected to everything. It felt sort of like flying."

Excerpt from a fourth-grader's Mindfulness Journal

opening our awareness to what is here and now. Mindfulness, in the forms of medical and psychological modalities such as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction and Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy, is gaining attention as research suggests that it can improve mood, decrease stress and boost immune function. Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D., and others have been studying the medical effects of mindfulness for 30 years with impressive results.

Brought into schools, it can be a powerful antidote to many struggles facing our youth. In the California Bay Area, for example, the Mindful Schools program has used mindfulness to teach concentration, attention, conflict resolution and empathy to 10,000 children in 38 schools; 66 percent of these schools serve low-income children. Inside Oakland's juvenile detention centers, the Mind Body Awareness Project offers daylong, silent retreats for teens; although they presently live behind bars, they are learning to access greater inner freedom.

In sports, a season invested in training the Alameda High School's boys' basketball team in mindfulness techniques helped us reach the Northern California playoffs, an unprecedented achievement in the school's athletic history.

These youth are learning the attention skills they need to succeed in today's fast-paced, multitasking world. With practice, students are also learning emotional balance and new ways to feel connected to their communities. The most vital result I see is a new baseline of peacefulness evident in these young people's minds and bodies. Mindfulness offers a general sense of well-being that all other skills for learning and productivity can build on.

True Education

The word education comes from the Latin roots *ex*, "from within," and *duco*, "to guide." Thus, education originally meant to draw out, to guide a student in unfolding the wisdom that is inherently within each person, at any age. This is a fundamentally different approach than the conventional educational paradigm that approaches students from the outside in and from the top down.

In using what I call the "fire hose" method of learning, spewing information at students and penalizing them when they can't retain what the powers-that-be deem important, we make the mistake of assuming what each child should be, instead of seeing them as they already are. Think of how different each of our own lives would have been if parents, teachers and other mentors helped us learn to become the person we were inherently meant to be.

This approach requires us all to discover and utilize our own mindfulness. When parents ask me, "What is the best mindfulness technique to teach my children?" my answer is always, "Your own mindfulness." Our own mindfulness is already present within us; it's not something we need to create.

Notice all of your thoughts in this moment: your doubts and interests, as well as sensations. Simply become aware of phenomena, without judgment or preference. The natural capacity to open up in the present moment to everything that is happening within and around us is mindfulness, an open, intentional, non-judgmental awareness.

When we embody mindfulness practices, we become a living example to the children in our lives. If you are interested in learning how to bring mindfulness practices to youth, begin by offering it to yourself. Join a mindfulness group, do some reading or even better, finish reading right now, let your eyes close, check in to your body and let go into this present moment.

Daniel Rechtschaffen, MA, a pioneering trainer in his field, helps implement mindfulness-based curricula in schools and organizations. Collaborations include the Mind Body Awareness Project, Mindful Schools and Mindfulness Without Borders. He also convenes an annual Mindfulness in Education conference and teacher training at Omega Institute (search eomega.org). He has a private psychotherapy practice in the San Francisco Bay Area as a marriage and family therapy intern. Visit MindfulChildren.com and NowCounseling.com.