

Meditation Should be Taught in School

Instruction in the art of mindfulness is emerging in grade schools around the country to help children relax, focus, and help others. But it still has a long way to go to become part of the curriculum nationwide.

By: Katie Arnold Apr 17, 2015



The benefits of teaching your child mindfulness are far greater than just improved test scores or athletic performance. *Photo: Avalon_Studio/istock*

On a recent Thursday just after lunch, 20 first-graders gathered in a circle on the carpeted floor of their public school classroom in Santa Fe. Some sat cross-legged and others on their knees, each with one hand clasped in front of them or resting on their stomachs. Their teacher, Katie Norton, sat with them on a low crate and jingled a little bell. The children closed their eyes, looking surprisingly tranquil, even a little sleepy. But they weren't settling in for an afternoon nap. They were practicing meditation.

The room fell into a deep hush except for the steady, metronomic whooshing of little lungs inhaling and exhaling. I volunteer in my six-year-old Pippa's classroom once a week during science lessons (involving beetles and millipedes), so I can report with some authority that this was the quietest and calmest I'd ever seen this gaggle of wiggly, irrepressible six- and seven-year-olds.

Then, somewhere to my left, someone began vigorously flapping their lips. I snuck a peek at the arc of little bodies, each trying desperately to sit still. Pippa sat, hunched over, brows furrowed, one hand over her heart. Another girl sucked silently on one finger. Across from me, a boy rocked back and forth on his shins, his eyes closed. And still the flapping lips kept flapping. I closed my eyes and remembered what a meditation teacher once suggested: to use the noise to anchor me to the moment, like a lawn mower through an open window. As I did, I felt my heart slow and my hands settle on my lap. Is there any sweeter sound than that of small children breathing?

The ancient spiritual tradition of sitting in quiet awareness, meditation has been gaining serious scientific cred as a 21st-century tool for lowering blood pressure, reducing stress, improving sleep, and enhancing physical and mental wellbeing. **A 2011 study** from Harvard found that a mere eight weeks of daily meditation physically alters the brain's grey matter, increasing density in the hippocampus (linked to memory and learning) and decreasing density in the amygdala (associated with stress and anxiety). Pro athletes, **from Olympic skiers to golfers to NFL players**, swear by meditation as a means of sharpening focus and improving performance.

Mindful meditation, or simply mindfulness, reaps big rewards for children, too. **Research** published in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* in 2009 found that adolescents who participated in eight weeks of mindfulness-based stress reduction showed an 80 percent reduction in mental health problems. A 2013 study in the *Journal of Positive Psychology* reported that low-income third-graders who participated in once-a-week sitting meditation, yoga, and breathing exercises showed a noticeable decline in hyperactive behavior and ADHD symptoms. Studies have also shown mindfulness to **increase kindness, empathy, and emotional control in fourth- and fifth-graders** and to ease school-related violent conflict **by 65 percent**.

Not surprisingly, one of the biggest obstacles to introducing meditation curriculum in schools is time. "Meditation can be seen as non-essential," says Norton. "Teachers are under so much pressure that it can be hard to justify taking the time out of the school day." In her classroom, Norton solves the problem by teaching mindfulness in short ten- to 15-minute intervals, which can be easily squeezed in between math, science and literacy lessons. At the low-income Burton High School in San Francisco, the principal extended the school day by 30 minutes to implement mindfulness. "The teachers themselves have to be interested and see the value of mindfulness," says Norton, who was awarded a grant by the Santa Fe public school district to pursue her training.

Norton, who has been teaching first grade for six years and practicing meditation for more than 20 years, is one of hundreds of teachers nationwide who are bringing mindfulness training into the classroom. More

than 90 schools in 13 states now teach meditation, thanks in part to nonprofit organizations like **MindUP** (founded by actress Goldie Hawn), the **David Lynch Foundation**, and **Mindful Schools**, a Bay Area-based initiative that offers teacher training and structured curricula for kindergarten through high school.

At the Visitacion Valley School, a public middle school in an at-risk neighborhood in San Francisco, suspensions have **dropped 79 percent since 2011**, when the school implemented David Lynch's Quiet Time mindfulness program, consisting of two 15-minute sitting meditation periods per day. The principal at nearby Burton High School saw similar results after making time for meditation. Even school sports teams, like the boy's basketball squad in Mount Horeb, Wisconsin, are implementing quiet contemplation to find a competitive edge.

Back in our little circle of ohm, Norton rang her bell, rousing us from silence. The children opened their eyes and began to stir. "You just did 90 seconds of meditation," said Norton, who's been leading her first-graders in two mindfulness lessons a week since attending Mindful School's training program in February. "What did you notice?" The kids chimed in: They'd felt squirming bodies and heard smacking lips and tried to follow their breath. Norton reminded them to sit with what she called "mindful bodies" and straight backs. "Be like a tree," she said, "and reach your head to the sky."

Despite its spiritual roots, meditation isn't strictly a religious practice. Mindful School's curriculum includes short meditation periods, followed by secular lessons like mindful listening, gratitude, and what it calls "heartfulness." The day I was in Norton's classroom she went on to teach a short session in generosity, asking the kids to think of ways they could give others their time, love, and friendship, both at school and at home. Their homework: come back the next day with an example of how they'd acted generously.

That afternoon, after we returned home from school, for the first time in her life, Pippa offered to do the laundry. She stood there piling it all into the washing machine and watching it spin, in a kind of ecstatic trance, while I looked on, equally dumbfounded. This was the same girl who throws an epic fit when asked to pick up her coat off the floor. At school, Norton is noticing changes, too. "The children seem to settle more quickly after transitions," she said. "It's much easier for them to go from full speed to zero."

It's pretty thrilling to imagine a future where all public school teachers are empowered and enabled to teach mindfulness as part of the regular curriculum. Until then, it's not as daunting as it seems to instill the basics at home. Start with just 90 seconds of quiet sitting together, inviting your child to tune into his breath, or yours, as he inhales and exhales. Kate Reynolds, a family therapist and director of the **Santa Fe Center for Mindfulness**, likes the "rock-a-bye-baby" trick for calming little ones: put a stuffed animal on your child's stomach to help him focus on the rise and fall of his breath. Or help him tune into the present moment by doing a "five senses scan." That means paying attention to what he sees, hears, smells, tastes, and feels? "This one shows how the body is always in the present moment, but the thinking mind so rarely is," Reynolds said. "It's fun to practice while eating dessert!"

Another option is to have children send friendly wishes or heart-full thoughts to themselves and others, such as "May I be safe, may I accept myself, may I have fun times, may I have good friends, may I be peaceful, may I be understood, may I be happy." Finally, check out **this video** to inspire your kids to pause, take a breath, and wait for a good response.

In the competitive sport that is modern parenting, raising a serene little Buddha can seem like just one more extracurricular your child has to master. But sitting with the first-graders, I realized it didn't matter if meditation improves test scores or athletic performance. These kids are learning essential life skills in kindness, compassion, and self-acceptance—qualities I wish I'd been exposed to when I was six. If mindfulness helps Pippa become a better listener, tame her occasional wild-child tantrums, or pitch in around the house without throwing a hissy fit, that's icing on the cake. She already has a major head start in the most important lessons in being human.

Article source: <http://www.outsideonline.com/1967871/meditation-should-be-taught-school>