



MINDFULNESS IN THE CLASSROOM

CHAPTER 1

SLOWING DOWN TO SPEED UP SUCCESS

For fast-acting relief, try slowing down.

—Lily Tomlin

We begin our study of Thriving in the classroom with an examination of *mindfulness*, a concept that can be used to support all the social and emotional skills we address in later chapters. Teaching mindfulness in the classroom has positive benefits, not the least of which is providing a realistic approach to reducing stress and focusing attention.

●●● DISTRACTED STUDENTS

The ninth-grade teacher tries to lead a discussion on basic concepts from the previous day's lesson, but it is going nowhere. Two students are slumped in their seats with earbuds peeking out of their hoodies, several are surreptitiously checking the smartphones shoved up their sleeves or sneaking glances at their smartwatches, and three are arguing heatedly about something one of them recently tweeted. The teacher surveys the disarray and says loudly enough

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to be heard over the noise, “Okay, people, let’s just calm down and take a breath—we’ve got a big review to cover for the upcoming test. I need you all to focus.” The admonition is largely ignored, and the frustrated educator says to himself, “Just a few more days, just a few more days . . .” as he longingly looks at his desk calendar to check how many days remain until fall break.

In a classroom across campus, a primary teacher tries to rein in a rambunctious group of students by saying, “Okay, I’ve had it with the racket. Most of you are not paying attention. When I clap my hands, I want eyes on me. Stop fidgeting, stop looking out the window, and stop talking over each other.” She claps. Calm momentarily prevails, but it takes less than fifteen seconds for the pandemonium to resume. The teacher chants in her mind, “School is out in three more hours, school is out in three more hours . . .” as she reaches for an Advil.

Later in their respective lounges, both teachers lament about how students today are distracted and unfocused. One says, “I’m up there doing everything but tap-dancing on roller skates trying to get their attention, and nothing works.” The other tells his colleagues, “I don’t know how I’m supposed to compete with all their distractions and diversions. It’s like trying to hold thirty balls under water at the same time.”

Both of these teachers could improve their classroom environments and their own psyches with an inexpensive, readily available resource called mindfulness. ●

Why Don't They Just Pay Attention?

Ask a group of educators about 21st century challenges to student learning, and among the top responses will be a lack of student attentiveness. Competing forces from outside the classroom as well as the wave of readily accessible digital devices have added a fresh dimension of distraction. Those obstacles are compounded by the enduring challenges of engaging students who come from poverty, dysfunctional homes, and/or life-challenging circumstances that make them unavailable for learning.

School is often a difficult place in which to Thrive. It can be a noisy, chaotic place that stresses students, teachers, and administrators alike. Today, schedules are packed tighter, recesses and breaks are often suspended, course selection and availability are limited, and accountability measurement tensions are amplified. Researchers refer to extreme stress overload as *toxic stress* and have determined that over time it actually reshapes the brain in negative ways. A 2014 paper from the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child compared stress overload to “revving a car engine for hours every day. This wear and tear increases the risk of stress-related physical and mental illness later in life” (p. 2).

Students of the 21st century live in a quick-fix world of instant gratification distracted by an onslaught of more information than any previous generation. They are bombarded with a never-ending stream of messages for most of their waking hours. Seldom are they given time to be still and think. Feeling the pressure of high-stakes tests, teachers rush students through the mandated curriculum like it is a sprint rather than a marathon.

Adults are quick to admonish students to calm down and take a breath, but it seldom occurs to us that the act of taking responsibility for calming oneself is a skill that must be taught. Generally, when we ask or tell kids to be quiet for a period of time, it is for our benefit and not for theirs. When they complain about being bored, we hand them something to distract them rather than encourage them to take advantage of the downtime to pause and reflect on their situation. The model we adults present is the overworked, exhausted, stressed-out grown-up who consistently complains that there's so much to do and so little time to do it. Rarely do kids experience an adult who says, “I'm feeling inattentive (or stressed), and I need to take a minute to calm myself and regain my focus.”

Daniel Goleman, psychologist and author of *Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence* (2013) and other best-selling books on social and emotional learning (e.g., Goleman, 1995, 1998), says that he would like to see schools teaching exercises that strengthen student attention. He believes honing the ability to focus is a secret element to success that often gets ignored. When interviewed by Katrina Schwartz in 2013, he said,

The more you can concentrate the better you'll do on anything, because whatever talent you have, you can't apply it if you are distracted. . . . This ability is more important than IQ or the socio-economic status of the family you grew up in for determining career success, financial success, and health.

If students don't learn how to shut out distractions and center their attention, they are at risk of suffering both academically and physically. They are setting themselves up for having serious problems in many aspects of their lives both now and later on. How do we help our students learn to slow down, think things through, and purposefully focus their attention?

Mindfulness: What It Is and What It Is Not

Since 2007, educators across the United States have been formally introducing students to a practice called *mindfulness* in the classroom. Most educators are familiar with the concept. It is hard to pick up a journal, attend a conference, or listen to a podcast about current trends in education that does not at least mention mindfulness. Type "mindfulness" into Google, and you get twenty-seven million hits. In 2012, Tim Ryan, a congressman from Ohio, published *A Mindful Nation* and received a \$1 million federal grant to teach mindfulness in schools in his home district. Integrating the tenets of mindfulness practice in classrooms seems to have garnered increasing support.

Research has shown that helping students learn how to self-regulate their behaviors through mindfulness has a pronounced positive effect on classroom management issues in terms of reduced conflict and bullying as well as on individual behavior such as controlling impulsivity and attentional focus. Of course, mindfulness is not without its detractors, but the research on its positive impact on both

social and emotional learning as well as on academic achievement is promising.

You may be in a school that practices school-wide mindfulness, you may already have a program in place in your classroom for teaching and practicing it with your students, or you may have just heard about it and want to give it a try. (And you may be reading this and asking yourself, “What is *mindfulness*? Is it just another *educational fix du jour*?”)

Pause Your Reading and Try This



Pause

(Seriously, don't skip this part. Actually do it! It just takes two minutes.)

Take one hand and gently tap your thumb to each finger on the same hand. Think only about what you feel as you alternate finger taps. If your mind drifts to other things, just gently bring it back to your fingers. Notice but disregard all other fleeting thoughts. Focus on your fingertips. How do they feel right now? After a minute or two, relax your fingers and take note of any differences you feel in your hand. If you closed your eyes during this exercise, open them. Gently stretch your entire body and reflect on what just happened. If you have never done a mindfulness exercise before, congratulations—you've just completed your first one!

Mindfulness is not new. Generally, it is acknowledged as being based on age-old practices from the time of the Buddha, but some scholars believe that similar practices were advocated as well in Christian, Jewish, and Muslim teachings. Originally, it was grounded in religious practices, but most of today's researchers and practitioners are focused on the more secular applications of its short-term effect on self-regulation and its long-term impact on the neuroplasticity of the brain. The mindfulness practices we are advocating are not tied to any religious affiliation; they are proven ways to help adults and students alike prepare mentally to better handle distractors in daily life. They are not meant to be a new relaxation technique or a hippy-dippy esoteric fad. The activities we present offer students and the adults who teach them a way to calm the emotional center of the brain through nonjudgmental and nonreactive awareness.

The concept of mindfulness is gaining recognition in the fields of neuroscience and psychology and is also expanding its traction with educators and parents as a way to help learners grow and control

their brains in a particular way. Mindfulness is a way of learning to be fully present in the moment without being distracted by past anxiety or future uncertainties. It is a way to become aware of our habitual reactions and emotional triggers as we practice a method for calming our minds and bodies. The basics are very simple but are not all that easy.

Using Mindfulness in the Classroom

In mindfulness exercises, we encourage students to practice limiting their focus to their breathing and/or a single concrete thing. The instruction will inevitably have students breathe deeply and think only about their breath as it enters and leaves the body—to focus on the here and now, not what might have been or what they're worried could be. The ultimate goal is to give them enough distance from disturbing thoughts and emotions to be able to observe them without immediately reacting to them.

In the beginning, the exercise should last no more than a minute or two. We tell our students their thoughts will naturally wander but to be aware of that and gently bring their attention back to the task at hand. We let them know they should not judge themselves or their thoughts but rather just take note of what is going on and redirect their focus. It is important to let them know this is not an easy process but it will become easier with practice.

We need to debrief students often in the beginning to get them to talk about how different things popped into their minds or maybe how they suddenly realized they have a pain somewhere or that they are hungry or cold or tired. Have a conversation with them about how the mind fills us with thoughts and messages that are not necessarily true but may just be a voice of concern or guilt or apprehension. For instance, a person should not say to himself, "Oh, I really shouldn't be thinking this particular thought. I must be a bad person." Instead, the learner might say, "Wow, that's a strange thought. I wonder where that came from," while continuing to return to the focused objective. Students are to notice but not judge thoughts. Tell them the goal is to watch your thoughts without identifying with them, much like sitting beside the road and watching cars go by. Sometimes you jump in one of them and it takes you down the highway, but then you remember your purpose, get out, and watch cars passing by you again.

Eventually, students will begin to be aware of body and mind messages constantly vying for attention. By increasing awareness of internal mental and physical states, mindfulness can help people gain a greater sense of control over their thoughts, feelings, and behavior in the present moment. By paying closer attention to the sensations they feel when they are anxious, angry, threatened, or the like, they learn to recognize certain triggers and also how to control their automatic reactions to those feelings. Ultimately, students learn to understand that they do not have to react or respond to every thought they have. They begin to realize they are strong individuals who can calm themselves, think things through, and consciously choose a course of action.

Beginning a Mindfulness Practice

You may already be practicing mindfulness yourself, and you may be experienced in integrating this practice into your classroom. Or you may be saying to yourself, “That’s an interesting idea, but I have no idea where to start. I wonder how it’s done, what it takes, and if it really works.” In the Thrive Skills in Action section of this chapter, we offer a few of the more popular mindfulness activities along with some basic strategies we think will help you in any classroom. We highly recommend that you watch the video *Room to Breathe* as a staff development activity and discuss the possibilities for your school.

Sometimes teachers begin with a very simple breathing exercise. The breathing exercises in mindfulness are a strategic way to teach learners how to check in with what they are actually feeling. So many children are caught up in a state of constant stimulation and unexamined action–reaction response that they are oblivious to what is actually going on in their brains and the rest of their bodies. Intentional breathing prompts them to slow down, tune in to the present, and take a mental note of how they feel.

It is important to stress to students that this activity should be nonjudgmental. They need to try and push away any thoughts of self-labeling, shame, or guilt. The purpose of mindfulness is to simply acknowledge what is going on and be aware of it. Later in this book, we will examine how this awareness can bring about a higher sense of gratitude, more self-regulation, and better decision making, but first things first. Practicing the ancient art of mindfulness is a crucial skill for helping students improve their lifelong Thrive skills.

●●● ROOM TO BREATHE



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The movie *Room to Breathe* is about troubled students at Marina Middle School in San Francisco, California. The film presents a true story of the surprising transformation of struggling seventh graders in a school that has a high rate of disciplinary suspensions, overcrowded classrooms, and a markedly negative learning environment. One classroom of students is introduced to the practice of mindfulness meditation in an effort to provide them with social, emotional, and attentional skills they need to succeed. A teacher from the Mindful Schools organization persists in introducing them to mindfulness in spite of their initial resistance and markedly unenthusiastic response. She meets with the students for thirty minutes a week over a six-week period. Her first goal is to get students to become still and quiet when they hear a chime. Even that simple task seems to be at first unachievable for some. By the end of the program, she has the students applying the breathing techniques they learn in class to situations both inside and outside the school. At the end of the training, these same students report they are better able to control their anger, more focused on schoolwork, and more tolerant of each other, and they feel more in control of their futures. To watch the video, visit www.mindfulschools.org/resources/room-to-breathe ●

The important first step for teachers is to plan a time to implement mindfulness activities on a regular basis in their classrooms. There are plenty of YouTube videos, phone apps, articles, and other resources to help with specific procedures and routines. We present some of our favorites in this book and on the *Thrive* website (www.teachingkidstothrive.com).

Research on Mindfulness in the Classroom

Yoga, Tai Chi, and Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) theory of *flow* are based on some of the same tenets of focused attention. Mindfulness as taught in schools usually focuses on concentrating, breathing, and making conscious choices. Ronald D. Siegel (2014), a psychologist and Harvard professor, cites study after study of hard science that supports the benefits to individuals (including children) who are being taught the practice of learning to pause and reflect before acting. He and other researchers have found that mindfulness practice over time actually changes the way the brain is formed. His catch line is Hebb's rule, "Neurons that fire together, wire together." In other words, people can actually help their prefrontal cortex to function more effectively over time with intentional practice of mindfulness.

Other neuroscientists also find that the permanent structure of the brain can be improved through mindfulness practices. World-renowned neuroscientist Richard Davidson at the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, along with his colleagues, wants us to know three things: (1) You can train your brain to change, (2) the change is measurable, and (3) new ways of thinking can change it for the better (Wolkin, 2015).

Davidson believes we can potentially influence the plasticity of our brains by focusing on skills and habits that benefit our well-being. Along with other measurable changes that have been observed, laboratory studies show the amygdala (center of our "fight, flight, or freeze" reactions and emotional control center) actually shrinks after sustained mindfulness practices. The connections between the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex are weakened, which allows less reactivity and paves the way for connections between areas associated with higher-order brain functions (such as concentration and attention).

Mindfulness is being studied as a countermeasure for use with students presented with such challenges as autism, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), attention deficit disorder (ADD), and an array of behavioral issues. Carolyn Gregoire (2014) reports that mindfulness practices have resulted in “increased mindful awareness among both parents and children, and reduced parental stress.”

While writing this chapter, we thought about how few times we actually practiced mindfulness as classroom teachers. Most of our classroom time was centered on lecture, group experiences, hands-on activities, and a rather frenzied pace to “get it all done” in our forty-five-minute class periods. Only rarely did we give our students time to disconnect from our fast-paced activities and hear themselves think. On one occasion, we took science students outside and asked them to select a tree that drew their attention, observe it, sketch it, and write something about it. Just sitting quietly and gazing at their tree selections had a profound effect on our middle-level students. Some actually had tears in their eyes as they begged to be allowed to just sit and be still for just a little longer.

We see now that in our efforts to hurry up and cover the mandated content we missed an opportunity to teach our students the important lifelong skill of being able to stop, breathe, and think about their thinking. The simple act of pausing to connect with one’s thoughts in a focused, nonjudgmental setting can yield remarkable feelings of awareness and control. Simply being able to label feelings and realize one has a conscious choice about whether or not to act on those feelings is empowering.

So many of our students come to school after having experienced a tumultuous morning at home, bullying on the bus, or any number of distracting and upsetting factors. By giving kids a fresh start with a mindfulness activity, we help create better conditions for learning. As Argos Gonzalez, an English teacher at an alternative school in New York, put it, “If you don’t address the noise in a kid’s head that they bring from the outside, I don’t care how good a teacher you are, you’re not going to have much success” (Davis, 2015). The fundamental purpose is to help students learn to calm themselves and clear their minds so they can better focus on the lesson at hand. It is very much like training their “attention muscles.”

Mindfulness is a commonsense lifestyle habit like brushing your teeth, exercising, or eating the right kinds of food. It is something that can be taught to every student. It offers educators a chance to reset the climate when chaos occurs or when tensions run high (for

●●● HEALING TRAUMA WITH MINDFULNESS

In 2009, second-year principal Lana Penley was trying to find a way to heal the trauma caused when her 460 students and 50 staff members were herded from their burning school building to a sports field nearby. Later housed in a vacant school building across town for three years during the rebuild, Penley was concerned about the impact of the ordeal on her many at-risk students. The staff decided they would have to find a social and emotional curriculum to connect with the hearts of all who were affected. They tried many ideas from Goldie Hawn’s MindUP™ program, but Penley noted the real change came from a simple shift in having teachers start each class in the morning with a few breaths to help students feel present. In the middle school, students did their breathing exercises after each passing period. Teachers began to embrace the concept of mindfulness and to use it for enhancing other Priority Academic Student Skills (PASS). The changes in tone and culture were dramatic. Discipline referrals dropped, teachers are happier, and this Title I school now has one hundred applicants for every open position (Schwartz, 2016a). ●

example, before a major test). Hopefully, schools will also embrace this relatively cost-free means of helping teachers and students develop positive, life-changing ways to think, relate to each other, and act in ways that help them Thrive. Jennie Rothenberg Gritz, in her article “Mantras Before Math Class,” describes the beneficial effects of mindfulness practices in a school located in an area of San Francisco with the highest rates of violent crime. Within four years, the suspension rate dropped to one of the lowest in the city. “Daily attendance rates went up to 98 percent, and the students’ overall grade point average showed marked improvement. This former troubled school now ranks first on happiness inventories administered throughout the district” (Gritz, 2015).

Implementation in the Classroom

At this point, those new to mindfulness usually ask questions like “But what does it look like in an actual classroom?” “What do I do if I have tables instead of chairs or no space for students to spread out?” “How often do I use it, and how long does it take?” Mindfulness in



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the classroom is an evolving practice that has only been used widely in the last ten years. The short answer to all those questions is that how you address mindfulness needs to be the way that best suits you, your students, and your school. Educators have chosen a wide array of making the concept work for their students. This is just a partial list of the variety of ways mindfulness has been implemented in classrooms:

1. Certified trainers are brought in at designated times during the week to work with students and teachers.
2. Teachers go through specific training and are then put in charge of leading their own students in mindfulness practices.
3. Classroom teachers set aside time every morning and every afternoon for mindfulness practices.
4. Middle and high school teachers begin each class with a few minutes dedicated to time for mindfulness. Thirty-minute sessions are offered three times a week.
5. A single forty-five-minute session is offered once a week.
6. A guided mindfulness practice is conducted in a high school for half an hour twice weekly.
7. In Britain, teachers follow a scripted program for nine lessons. Once students internalize the process, teachers and administrators use quick mindfulness practices whenever they think they are needed.
8. Schools in California and New York voted to add thirty additional minutes to the school day to implement a mindfulness program called Quiet Time (Gritz, 2015).
9. Counselors visit classrooms and conduct mindfulness activities.
10. Parents are encouraged to take mindfulness training offered by the school.
11. Regular mindfulness practice can be just moments of stillness or silence.



A high school in Massachusetts set up a mindfulness room, “offered daily from 9 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., complete with yoga mats, blankets, tranquil music and soft lighting, staffed by teachers trained in mindfulness to guide the students during their study hall breaks” (Wallace, 2016).

Mindfulness practice can be formal or informal. No matter how you choose to implement a mindfulness practice, the goal is to help students of all ages learn they can use it anytime they need to refocus their attention or reset their thoughts. They soon realize they have the power to check in with their bodies at any time, figure out what is going on, and restore the balance they need to best handle the situation at hand.

What Supporting Mindfulness Looks Like in the Classroom

BE AWARE OF THE PART YOU PLAY IN SETTING THE PACE AND TONE OF YOUR CLASSROOM

Students feed off of the energy of the teacher and the room. Whenever possible, start the day alone in your classroom with no distractions. Take a few minutes just to breathe deeply and focus on your purpose. Let go of the distractors—the tire that probably needs air in it or the colleague who just stepped on your last nerve—and be fully present for the students who will soon be right there, right now.

START EACH CLASS OFF WITH THE RIGHT ATMOSPHERE

As students enter the classroom, position yourself at the door or near the front to greet students and offer a sincere welcome. Calming music could usher them in, and taking a moment to start off with a focus activity can pay big dividends.

REMEMBER THAT MINDFULNESS IS NOT MANDATORY

When using mindfulness in the classroom, don't push students beyond their comfort level. Students can choose to participate or not. There is no judging. Some may wish to gaze out the window or put their heads down. The one requirement is that they do not disturb or distract others during the activities. Some may be open to describing feelings, and some might not be. Don't use the mindfulness area or any mindfulness activity as punishment. Students should see the act of being still and thinking as something that is positive and helpful.

BE A GOOD MARKETER

When teaching mindfulness (especially to middle school and high school students), it is helpful to sell it to your students and create a buy-in before you start your program. Explain to students why you are teaching the technique and what it can do for them. Start by having them discuss the stresses in their lives (see Activity 1.5, "Up in the Air," at the end of this chapter). You may want to share how these techniques have been used successfully in other schools. You might

want to talk about how you use these techniques personally. You can always close with the question, “What have you got to lose?” Encourage your students to try just a few short techniques and see how they work.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

For younger students, don’t overwhelm them with lots of complex terms for mindfulness. Keep it simple. Concentrate on breathing and focus. Present ideas in relation to the senses. “What do you hear, smell, feel?” In the beginning for all ages of students, plan to spend a lot of time debriefing to ensure they understand the purpose of the practice.

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

Students need to have consistent, ongoing opportunities to practice training in focus and mindfulness. This is not a stand-alone activity you can do at the beginning of the year and forget. Early ed teachers can use an activity called “Breathing Buddies” (described on the *Thrive* website at www.teachingkidstothrive.com). Teachers of middle and high school students can regularly conduct three- or five-minute breathing exercises. As they gain confidence in the procedures, students can take an active role in leading mindfulness activities.

USE MINDFULNESS YOURSELF

Practice mindfulness activities both with your students and when you are alone. Try to find a mindfulness buddy or buddies at school to share ideas and support.

SET UP A MINDFULNESS AREA OR STATION IN OR NEAR YOUR CLASSROOM

Create a place that students can visit when they feel the need to regain their composure, their focus, and/or their sense of well-being. It can be as simple as a chair, headphones, a blanket, and items that act to soothe (a squishy ball, a density column, Woolly Willy, worry beads, a stuffed animal). Talk with students ahead of time about suitable times to use the station and appropriate behavior choices while there.

START EACH CLASS WITH AT LEAST A COUPLE OF MOMENTS OF GUIDED MINDFULNESS

Routinely remind students to put all other concerns on hold and prepare to focus on what is happening here and now. Offer them a moment to breathe deeply, relax, and choose how they will respond to today’s class.

Frequently Asked Questions



1. Isn't having educators teach mindfulness training rather like asking us to become therapists?

Teachers have always served many roles including nurse, counselor, surrogate parent, coach, and others. We teach many things that are therapeutic to help with self-management as well as classroom management. That doesn't make us therapists; it makes us good teachers.

2. What do you do with a child who doesn't want to participate and disrupts the others?

In the movie *Room to Breathe*, the more disruptive students are removed from the classroom during the initial phase of training. Many of them later choose to return when they hear how much the other students like the program. It might be helpful to meet with the disrupting student(s) individually and say something like, "I can see that you are uncomfortable. What can I do to support you?" You can also offer the option of sitting quietly, reading, or just putting their heads down during the practice session. Don't be surprised if some troubled students are reluctant to even close their eyes. Don't push. The purpose of mindfulness is not to elicit compliance but rather to help kids learn a new way to self-manage. It will take more time for some than others.

3. How much class time can I afford to spend on this add-on activity?

First, it is our hope that teachers will not see this as an add-on activity but rather as an aid to help students learn an important lifelong skill. Anecdotal data from prekindergarten to twelfth-grade teachers suggest overwhelming support from those who have integrated mindfulness practices into their class time. They say that they more than gained the time invested in mindfulness back with the added attentiveness of students and the decrease in referrals and discipline problems. Hopefully, it will be your prerogative to establish the amount of time you want to spend. With younger students, you will

want to spend less time at each session. With beginners, you will want to spend less time in focusing but probably more time in debriefing. Some teachers say that after initially introducing students to the practice they spend only two or three minutes at the beginning of class to give students a chance to pause, breathe, and focus. After an upsetting event or particularly stressful day, you may want to give yourself and your students a few more minutes to calm yourselves.

4. What do you say to parents who think we are trying to inject Buddhism or other religious practices into the curriculum?

We think it is imperative that in introducing mindfulness into classroom practice you also introduce it to the parents and the community as a secular, research-based, neuroscientifically sound practice that has shown extraordinarily positive results in helping students reduce stress, improve self-regulation, and heighten learning. Many schools offer mindfulness training to parents at the same time they are teaching it to students. Once parents experience the nonreligious, medically supported practices, they usually are quite excited about the concept. Know your parents and be cautious about using vocabulary that may trigger hot buttons for them (*Buddhism, Transcendental Meditation, Universal Mind*, etc.).

5. How are schools paying for extra trainers in the school and/or for teachers to go to training?

Most of the programs we are familiar with are paid for with grants. Funding possibilities are available from several of the resources listed in the Taking Mindfulness to the Next Level section on the *Thrive* website (www.teachingkidstothrive.com) as well as the usual grant-awarding agencies that support innovative programs. There is a wealth of empirical data supporting these types of programs, so you should have no trouble backing up your proposal with facts.

Also, several of the major corporations and colleges studying the effects of mindfulness training on students are willing to help support your program if you offer them the opportunity to collect data at your school. One way of keeping the cost of your program low is by offering professional development in mindfulness to your teachers through your regular professional development service provider as part of your ongoing teacher training. Be creative. Ask for help. Let your community know what you want to do and why. Share pictures and stories locally to keep support high. Encourage your students to spread the word about what they like about the program.

6. I'm interested in trying this, but I don't know where to start. What do you suggest?

Undoubtedly, the best way to start is to begin practicing mindfulness yourself. Familiarize yourself with the exercises and just start practicing. You don't need a trainer or a coach, but it might help to talk with someone who is experienced in mindfulness. Get comfortable with doing it yourself first. Second, make a plan on how you would like to integrate this into your classroom and/or school. Third, meet with your administrators to discuss your plan and make sure they are on board with your ideas. They may ask you to head up an exploratory team for your department or school. Be sure to inform all involved parties about your ideas and your plans. As we suggested earlier, talk to parents about your new program. Communicate your reasons for wanting to implement the new practice and be prepared to back up your plan with research. Next, talk with your students; advise them about procedures and protocols. Then begin. It won't be perfect, you'll make some missteps, and you'll have some naysayers. Just stick with it, learn, grow, and be mindful. We would love to hear from you about how you are doing or with any questions you may have. You can reach us at debbie@debbiesilver.com and dedra@dedrastafford.com, or on Twitter at [@tchkids2thrive](https://twitter.com/tchkids2thrive).



Discussion Questions and Exercises

We encourage you to tweet your responses to @tchkids2thrive.

1. Do a *silent brainstorm* with members of your small group. Everyone takes a pad of sticky notes and begins writing one thought per note. As you write each thought, place it in the center of the table without talking. After about four minutes of writing, still without talking, try as a group to organize the words and concepts written about mindfulness into some kind of order. After about three minutes (or when the group has silently agreed with the organization), begin talking for the first time. Have a discussion on your prior knowledge, experiential background, and questions you still have about using mindfulness in the classroom.
2. Have you tried practicing mindfulness in your personal life? Why or why not?
3. What would be the benefits of having students take a couple of minutes at the beginning of each day or each class period to focus on their breathing and clear their minds?
4. What do you see as the major obstacles to implementing a mindfulness program in your classroom? How could you overcome them?
5. What support do you need to start a mindfulness program in your school or classroom? From administrators? From the community? From your colleagues?



ACTIVITY 1.1

The Five-Minute Mini-Meditation

Relax in the classroom, in your bedroom, or just about anywhere with this five-minute mindfulness exercise.

1. Find a quiet spot to sit, lie, or stand. Pick a place where you won't be disturbed.
2. Get in a comfortable position.
3. Rest your hands on your legs or at your sides.
4. Either close your eyes or focus on a single point in front of you.
5. Listen to your breath as you inhale and exhale.
6. Try to focus on your breathing and not what is causing you stress or pain.
7. Breathe in slowly and exhale slowly. That is one count.
8. Continue until you complete about ten counts of breathing.
9. If your mind wanders and you lose count, start again.
10. Open your eyes or shift your focus.
11. Notice how you feel.
12. Were you able to calm yourself even a little?

ACTIVITY 1.2

Musical Drawing

This activity is designed to allow students to experience how outside forces can influence your mood, pace, and feelings. You will need either several songs that vary in tempo and mood or one song that changes tempo and mood throughout.

1. Ensure each student has a piece of paper and a pencil.
2. Ask students to draw anything they want, real or abstract. But they need to keep drawing throughout the activity.
3. Have the music start out slow and relaxing, then have the music change to a fast-paced beat for about thirty seconds, then back to slow and relaxing, then back to fast with high intensity, and then on to peaceful nature sounds.
4. Ask students, "Did your posture change?" "Did the pace of your drawing change?" "Did the strokes become faster or slower?" "Did you change the grip on your pencil?"
5. Ask students why they think you did this activity with them. What does this activity have to do with mindfulness? Guide students into discussions of how the music affected their emotions and body during the activity and even possibly the outcome of the drawing.
6. Ask them how the body, feelings, and emotions are connected.

ACTIVITY 1.3

Blowing Wishes

This is a great activity to practice focus and start out the day with positive thoughts.

The teacher leads the activity with these steps:

Teacher: "Everyone stand and close your eyes."

Teacher: "Think of someone special. It can be a family member, a classmate, or even a stranger you saw on the way to school."

Teacher: "Think of a good wish for that person."

Teacher: "Now picture that wish as a feather."

Have students hold out their hand in front of them as you pass by and put a feather in each student's hand for them to hold (eyes are still closed).

Teacher: "Think about how light the feather is and how easily it can float through the air."

Teacher: "Now see in your mind the special person, and see your wish as the feather. In your mind, blow the wish to the special person."

Teacher: "See the wish (feather) making its way through the clouds and down to the person."

Teacher: "Take a deep breath. How does this make you feel?"

Teacher: "Open your eyes and look at your feather. It is a wish from your teacher . . . a wish for a wonderful day."

ACTIVITY 1.4

It Bugs Me, but I Breathe for Three

This is a great activity to practice letting go of the frustrations we let control our emotions and our day. It combines two activities from *Sesame Street* with a classroom activity. We can help students to connect breathing and thinking to control emotions.

1. Students brainstorm a class list of things that “bug” them (e.g., your mom nagging you to do homework, your little brother getting into your stuff, not being able to do something that is hard like ride a bike or skateboard).
2. Teacher prompt: “What happens when we get upset?”
3. Teacher prompt: “How do we calm down?”
4. Play the “Belly Breathe” song with Elmo, Common, and Colbie Caillat to teach students how to breathe through emotions. Search for “Belly Breathe song” on YouTube or access a link on the *Thrive* website (www.teachingkidstothrive.com).
5. Use the “Breathe, Think, Do” app by *Sesame Street* that teaches children the technique of taking three deep breaths, then thinking of possible alternatives to solve a problem. If you don’t have a smart device, there are videos on YouTube that walk through the same process as the app. Just look for “Breathe, Think, Do” on YouTube.
6. Use Activity Sheet 1.1, “It Bugs Me, but I Breathe for Three,” found on the *Thrive* website, to walk students through their frustrations and the techniques to cope with them.

ACTIVITY 1.5

Up in the Air

Talk to students about all the things that fill their minds each day. What activities, responsibilities, and stresses do they have from family, from school, from work (older students), and from other areas?

1. Have students brainstorm a list of those daily, weekly, and future stresses.
2. Ask one student volunteer to come to the front of the room.
3. Take a balloon (blown up ahead of time) and write one of the things mentioned on the balloon (e.g., "Homework").
4. Toss the balloon in the air and tell the volunteer it is his job to keep the balloon in the air and under control by gently hitting it to make sure it doesn't touch the ground.
5. Take another balloon, write another thing on it (e.g., "Worry about GPA or college"), and toss it up for the volunteer to also keep going (now he is working with two balloons).
6. Keep adding until you have five or six balloons being bounced in the air, and the volunteer is struggling to keep up.
7. Explain to the students that this is what their minds are like on any given day.
8. Talk to them about the mind's need to be calm and to clear out all the "noise" to let the thoughts, worries, and stresses fall to the floor (cue volunteer to let the balloons drop one by one).
9. Now look at the volunteer and point out how *still* he has become. Tell the students, "Your mind is full of 'noise' daily. It is full of worry, anxiety, stress, and pressure. Your mind is often working on overload. Research in neuroscience suggests that mindfulness strengthens the systems of the brain that are responsible for concentration and decision making. We all need to take time and let the thought balloons of our life fall to the ground as we practice the art of mindfulness."
10. Hold one balloon still in your hand. Ask all students to watch that balloon and focus on that balloon for thirty seconds.

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11. Ask students if they were able to focus for thirty seconds. Did their minds wander to other things?
12. Ask students to write their reflections in a journal. How did they identify with the volunteer as he tried to keep the thought balloons in the air? How much “noise” do they deal with on a weekly basis? Do they ever take time to be still with no distractions? Have they practiced? Do they want to learn more?



Access the website www.teachingkidstothrive.com to find more classroom-ready activities, author-recommended videos, websites, and other resources.