

Students Need A Mindful Role Model: Practicing Mindfulness in the Classroom to Build Student Mental Health

We've all been there. Recess ends, and a line of sweaty, over-excited kids file back into their remote classrooms and plug into the video conferencing tool with a din that shakes loose any bit of calm you'd reclaimed while they were on a break. The kids finally take their seats, but that's when the real struggle begins: how do you bring their attention to the lesson at hand?

Of course, this is an age-old challenge for classroom instructors. But COVID-19 and the resulting social uncertainty and stress have made it even harder for students to concentrate and make progress on their lessons.¹ And that's why so many K-12 instructors are turning to the power of mindfulness to both improve their own mental health and performance and instill the next generation with the tools they need to achieve success amid uncertainty.

Mindfulness, or the discipline of repeatedly bringing one's attention to the present moment, can deliver remarkable benefits to anyone who practices it. Here are three important ways teachers who model this practice can deliver those benefits to today's students:

Mindfulness helps students improve attention, focus, and memory

Attention, focus, and memory are three key traits necessary for academic, professional, and personal success, and mindfulness helps with all three. For example, researchers have found that using attention to complete tasks helps children learn to self-regulate and allows them to gain control over their own learning.² In the same study, researchers also found an 18% reduction of inattentive behaviors during mindfulness practices, and when interventions were removed, students were less able to pay attention.

In a series of mindfulness sessions designed to enhance memory, Texas A&M University researcher Monteiro found that students showed a 40-50% increase on standardized measures

¹ "Almost everyone is concerned about K-12 students' academic progress," Brookings Institute, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2021/03/23/almost-everyone-is-concerned-about-k-12-students-academic-progress/>

² Wilson, A.N. & Dixon, M.R. (2010). A mindfulness approach to improving classroom attention. *Journal of Behavioral Health and Medicine*, 1(2), 137-142.

of attentional skills.³ If learning new skills requires control of attention, then students will need strategies from teachers to learn to maintain focused attention.

Achieving focus and being present in the moment is a necessary, observable component of attention, like when a child makes eye contact with the materials they're using or the person speaking. Another researcher, Bringus, comments that focus requires discipline and when practiced successfully, it's as if the rest of the world does not exist; the child becomes totally absorbed in a task⁴ — an invaluable skill for teachers to impart on students in a world full of distraction.

Mindfulness helps students improve emotional stability

Part of being human is accepting that emotions are with us in every experience and at every moment. Mindfulness gives students the power to respond and not react to negative experiences. Teachers who teach mindfulness can offer students control of their impulses and help them in becoming aware of oncoming emotional responses.

Kids from underserved, urban communities are especially prone to reacting to afflictive experiences. One study focused on school children in those communities was aimed to determine if mindfulness could help disadvantaged and chronically stressed youth by enhancing self-regulatory capacities.⁵ Activities included yoga, breathing exercises, and guided mindfulness practices. The results were promising: one 5th grade girl noted that she was able to remain calm when feeling stressed out or angry, and other students in the study noted less rumination, fewer intrusive thoughts, and lower emotional arousal.

Mindfulness helps students improve academic performance

All of these benefits of mindfulness to essential skills such as attention, focus, memory, and emotional stability combine to allow students to achieve greater academic performance. The research bears this out, as well, with one study where 91 schools in 13 states used mindfulness practices and resulted in a decrease in rule infractions (50%), suspension days (38%), and

³ "The Impact of Mindfulness Based Attentional Skills Training Program," Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi
<https://tamucc-ir.tdl.org/tamucc-ir/bitstream/handle/1969.6/653/Monteiro,%20Marta%20dissertation.pdf?sequence=1>

⁴ Bringus, Rose. (2016). The Effects of Mindfulness on Students' Attention. Retrieved from Sophia, the St. Catherine University repository website: <https://sophia.stkate.edu/maed/187>

⁵ "Feasibility and Preliminary Outcomes of a School-Based Mindfulness Intervention for Urban Youth," Springer Science + Business Media,
<http://hlfinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Feasibility-and-preliminary-outcomes-of-a-school-based-mindfulness-intervention-for-urban-youth1.pdf>

absentee days (25%).⁶ Other schools saw benefits such as increased GPAs, getting into more prestigious schools, decreased suspensions, and less truancy.⁷

Most importantly, research shows that mindfulness programs can be suited for students of all ages. One public elementary school (K-6) used a 5-week mindfulness program that showed improvement in academic performance categories like paying attention, self-control, participation in activities, and caring/respect for others.⁸

Teaching life-long skills for life-long students

Teachers have a unique opportunity to step beyond the curriculum and give students tools that will make a real impact on their quality of life. By adopting and sharing mindfulness practices, teachers can share valuable lessons and crucial skills that will help students succeed both inside and outside the classroom.

So, the next time you step into the virtual classroom, ask your students to close their eyes and imagine sitting next to a river. Tell them that a leaf falls from the canopy overhead, hits the water, and begins to float downstream. That leaf represents a thought. It might be a conversation they had earlier in the day, or a scene from their favorite film. Instead of putting all their mental effort into the leaf, you tell them to acknowledge it and watch it float by — along with the everyday stressors and anxieties preventing your students from making the most of their education.

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⁶ “Infographic: Meditation in Schools Across America,” Edutopia,
<http://www.edutopia.org/stw-student-stress-meditation-schools-infographic>

⁷ “Meditation Helps Lower Truancy and Suspensions,” Edutopia,
<https://www.edutopia.org/video/meditation-helps-lower-truancy-and-suspensions>

⁸ “Mindfulness Training and Classroom Behavior Among Lower-Income and Ethnic Minority Elementary School Children,” *Journal of Child and Family Studies*,
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10826-013-9784-4>