

Brief Mindful Activities with Students in their Classrooms

Friends Council on Education 2010

Goals:

- Enhance health and sense of well-being.
- Improve skills for centering and emotional balance.
- Strengthen skills for learning: concentration observation, relaxed alertness.

Simple practices for a school setting

1. Invite students to practice centering at any transition to support orienting to the present time, space, and task at hand.
2. Invite students to experiment with these practices to support calming the body and mind, centering before reacting, “cooling off” hot emotions.
3. Invite students to try any of these activities to re-energize and reboot the brain and the mind-body system when tired or tuned out.

Practice # 1: Focus on the sensations in the soles of the feet.

This can be done while sitting, standing, and/or walking. It is a simple evidence-based technique that uses a shift in attention and awareness away any frustrating or anger-producing situation to a neutral point on the body - the soles of the feet. After consistent practice, research shows increased self-control over frustrations, anger, aggressive behaviors.

Practice # 2: Focus on the sensations of breathing.

This can be done while sitting, standing, and/or walking.

Variations:

- 3 relaxing sighs.
- Pause, relax, and open.
- 10 breaths; 10 breaths counting backward.

Excerpts from “Mindfulness Helps Kids Cope with School Stress,” August 2009 at www.dukehealth.org *“Making a transition, whether it’s to a new school, a new teacher or a new grade, signals change,” says Michelle Bailey, MD, a pediatrician at Duke Integrative Medicine. “And any time we go through change it can generate feelings of resistance, fear and anxiety.” Those negative emotions don’t disappear once schedules become routine. Peer pressure, the constant juggle between schoolwork and extra curricular activities, and trying to succeed can keep stress levels high year-round. Mindfulness improves a person’s ability to pay attention to what’s happening in the present moment. It’s already proven useful for reducing stress in adults, boosting the immune system, lowering blood pressure, improving sleep quality and lessening the need for sleep medications. Bailey says research shows it can help kids reduce anxiety and improve their ability to pay attention and stay focused. It may lessen aggression in kids as well.*

Practice # 3: Walking

Variations:

- Invite the class to do a simple, silent walk outdoors as an observation exercise using all of the senses to explore the environment. Walk at a slow or normal pace giving attention to sights, sounds, and the sensory experience of the body in motion. Look for things you haven't noticed before. Focus awareness on the ground under the feet and the feet moving inside the shoes. Encourage students to use this technique on the playground, from the bus or car to the door of the school, in the hallway, on the playing field, in the gym. Share observations afterwards by writing in a journal, drawing, or sharing in partners: what did you notice? – what stood out for you?
- Invite the group to do a “crazy walk” that will begin with one kind of instruction for walking and then change with each sounding of the bell. At the sound of the bell, it is a time for standing still and noticing the sensations in the body standing still, different from the sensations of moving. Begin with a slow walk, focusing the awareness on the sensations on the soles of the feet. Bell. Walk carefully backward for 4 or 5 steps, then forward, then backward, etc being careful to avoid brushing against another person or object. Bell. Walk carefully forward 3 steps with eyes closed, then backward, etc. Bell. Walk very, very slowly counting the number of steps that are taken during an in-breath and the number of steps that occur during the out-breath. Continue with the awareness of breathing and counting being curious to see if the numbers change. Bell. Walk using silent words on the in-breath and out-breath, such as “here ... now,” or “calm ... easy.” Bell. Continue walking at a normal pace and each time the bell sounds stop to take in the whole external environment with full awareness.

Practice #4: Mindful Listening

Adapted from Mary Rose O'Reilly, *Radical Presence* (1998): *Pay attention...just be there. Don't be thinking about a solution, or how you should fix it. Just listen hard and try to be present... This is a great antidote to the critical listening that goes on in academia, where we listen for the mistake, the flaw in the argument. By contrast, we can listen without interruption and deep, openhearted attention.*

Activity for listening in pairs or triads. - practicing this skill helps students pay attention in class, at home, and in peer relationship dialogues.

1. Ring a bell or play a note on a musical instrument and invite students to listen to the entire sound until it ends.
2. Then, each person takes a turn talking about his/her day (or any other topic related to present experience, such as a reflection on a poem or story or field trip). Each listener gives full attention to the talker without responding or interrupting.
3. Sound a bell for the transition to the next talker. Each person takes a turn talking and experiencing this form of active, attentive listening.