

How Can Mindfulness Help Students with Disabilities?

Kenny walks through the junior high hallway laughing and talking with his friends. He has a great sense of humor, and a processing problem. He likes hanging out at school, but keeping up with his work is hard. Every time a teacher starts class, he sits down and feels defeated. He hopes the teacher won't call on him and he gets really nervous if she does. His processing problems make him feel sad and a little angry. School is just so tiring!

Kim is in third grade. She has been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and it's hard for her to pay attention. She doesn't mean to get up so often or talk to the girl next to her, she just can't help it! Half the time she doesn't even notice until the teacher says something to her. Sitting for a long time makes her fidgety.

Kyle feels nervous a lot. He doesn't speak up in class and he gets nervous when he has to take a test. Sometimes, his brain goes blank and he can't even think of good answers! When it's time for a really big test, he usually gets a stomach ache.

Does your child have difficulty focusing, get nervous or tense when you talk about school, or seem sad about school from time to time? Many students, even teachers and parents, feel pretty stressed out these days. Whether it's homework, friends, or learning difficulties, a child with a disability may have a hard time managing feelings and reactions during a long school day. So, how can you help?

Mindfulness can be a big help. It can help a child feel less stressed out and more confident. Let's take a look at what mindfulness is and how it can help.

What Is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness just means being aware of the moment you are in now. When we can focus on one minute at a time, we don't feel sad about something we have done in the past or worry about what will happen in the future. Mindfulness lets us better focus, understand that most things will pass, and helps us to feel calmer and more in control.

To understand mindfulness and how it can work, we need to know a couple of things about the brain.

The brain is a wonderful and involved system. You don't need to know everything about the brain, but there are a couple things to understand about feelings and reactions that our kids might have at school. The two relevant parts of the brain to being mindful are the prefrontal cortex and the amygdala.

1. The amygdala is our helper. It takes care of us and makes sure we are safe. If we are playing at recess and a ball comes flying at us, it knows to duck – and fast! Since the amygdala works so fast, we can sometimes react without thinking about what we are doing. This part of the brain is all about feelings. It doesn't really have a way to communicate, it just reacts. If we feel anxious about a test, it ramps up our heart rate, makes us breathe harder and gives us energy so we can fight back! It seems silly to think about fighting a test, but our amygdala is always working and everything that feels uncomfortable or annoying starts a reaction in our body. If we don't notice how we feel, we just let loose. If we duck from a ball that's okay, but if we rip up a test we just make it worse. The amygdala wants to help, but it can be too helpful at times and our feelings of negativity, anxiety or anger can go on and on. It can feel pretty terrible.
2. The prefrontal cortex is the part of the brain that helps the amygdala calm down. It slows down our actions and gives us a minute to think about how we want to react. It's the part of our brain that has logic and reason. It stops us from ripping up a test and reminds us that we can do it! When we do mindfulness activities, this part of the brain gets stronger so that the amygdala doesn't work overtime. It can help us feel better about trying new things, like take a test while focusing on one question at a time, and it can give us a hint that we need to calm down before we go into overdrive.

So, what kinds of activities can help students with attention, anxiety and anger challenges? Below are a few ideas you can try at home to help your child feel more in control, less nervous and more successful.

Remember: slowing down reactions to certain situations takes time. Just like building muscles at the gym, making our thinking brain stronger takes time too. If you are patient and consistent you can help your child make better choices with a stronger, better brain.

Breathing –Teaching our kids to breathe slowly and into all parts of our lungs and body helps to quiet down the amygdala. Here are a couple of examples:

- Have your child lay down on the floor. Let her get comfortable and breathe normally. After she looks relaxed, put a small object on her belly. Have her breathe deeply so she can see the object on her belly go up and down. Start with 30 seconds and add a few seconds of time each day.
- If your child seems tense or anxious, instruct him to breathe in deeply and slowly. As he breathes in count to 3 or 4 or 5. Then, have him blow out the air forcefully with an open mouth and let his tongue stick out. Get all that air out! Repeat several times. This is called Lion's Breath and it is great for releasing tension.

Sensory Experiences – Get to know your child by having them try sensory activities aimed at helping them feel calm. Try different types of quiet music or have them tune in to sounds of nature. Which do they like the most? Which one makes their body feel calm? Take your kids outside and let them listen to the sounds going on around them.

You can also give them visual experiences like looking at a snow globe or playing I Spy. Busing brains with those activities will bring them into the moment. Also, letting them sniff different things like cinnamon or flowers or letting them hold different objects with different textures will all help to focus the mind and bring it back to the present moment. Note which activity works best for each child.

Movement – Breathing and moving at the same time have been proven to be one of the best ways to calm the amygdala. For young children, use yoga cards or books with poses in them. Many of the poses in yoga can be made to look like animals and children love pretending to be animals. There are plenty of videos online for yoga and tai chi. All of these exercises are done while moving and breathing at the same time. You can have your child walk very quietly and slowly while focusing on their feet. Ask them to breathe with each step. Breathing and moving is very calming.

Focus Activities – Being still and focusing on one thing is a skill. Focus can get better with practice. For example, have a child sit down and simply look at an interesting object. Start with 30 seconds and add 15 seconds every day or every other day while changing the item. You can also give them something good to eat (pop rocks are fun!) and let them really focus on what they are eating by touching it, smelling it and then tasting it like they have never eaten it before. You can also help your child focus on listening by having them clap each time they hear a word when you read a paragraph with their eyes closed. For example, you might read part of a story on a tree. Each time your child hears the word “tree” she claps. Work up to longer and more challenging passages.

Amygdala Reset Station – Each time your child begins to show signs of reacting negatively, give them the chance to reset their brain by going to an amygdala reset station (or whatever you want to call it). Set out a basket of quiet activities like listening to music, coloring, belly breathing with an object or any of the actions you have taught them from above. Teach them that doing mindfulness work before a test or when they feel anxious will help them reset the part of their brain that is upset by what feels hard. Mindfulness work will help them build the part of the brain that will make your children feel strong and capable.

Teaching our children how to use mindfulness will help them (and us) feel calmer, more confident and more in control of their lives.

Do not learn how to react. Learn how to respond.
—Buddha

For more information on Mindfulness

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