

Building Resiliency Through Mindfulness
NJ DOE Division of Educational Services



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Introduction

Mindfulness

Many young people today face growing levels of stress. They must navigate a society with evolving pressures including the influence of social media, impacts of climate change, typical developmental challenges, academic demands and personal obstacles.

One effective way to support children's social, emotional, and mental health is through mindfulness. According to the American Psychological Association, mindfulness is defined as "awareness of one's internal states and surroundings," which helps individuals avoid destructive or automatic habits and responses by observing their thoughts, emotions, and present-moment experiences without judgment or reaction. (APA, 2007). The practice encourages us not to dwell on the past or worry about the future, but to remain in the present. Over time, we begin to understand that our current circumstances are not permanent—they shift from moment to moment. For a deeper understanding of the science supporting mindfulness and its benefits for children, please refer to Appendix A.

Mindfulness has a long-standing history of promoting overall well-being and has gained increased recognition in recent years for its application in educational settings. Over forty years ago, a 1982 study showed that participants with chronic pain and illness who took a mindfulness course experienced significant reductions in stress, anxiety, pain, and depression, along with an increased sense of purpose and fulfillment (Kabat-Zinn, 1982). Further research shows that mindfulness practices can physically alter the brain—literally! For example, the amygdala, which governs stress and anxiety, shrinks with mindfulness practice, while areas related to learning, memory, self-awareness, and positive emotions become more active (Holzel et al., 2011; Davidson et al., 2003).

Mindfulness techniques come in many forms, but some are "portable." That means they can be practiced anytime, anywhere, and without special tools. Appendix B includes links to numerous handouts featuring portable techniques, allowing kids to explore what works best for them in various situations. Whether it's before a test, a big game, or whenever they feel anxious, upset, or "off," these techniques can help them manage their emotions and refocus their energy.

Impact of Mindfulness in Schools

Mindfulness has been shown to have significant benefits in both social and academic contexts for young learners. One of the most notable outcomes is its positive impact on social functioning. Research indicates that mindfulness interventions can enhance social relationships by fostering empathy, reducing aggression, and minimizing disruptive behaviors (Phan et al., 2022). These improvements in social interactions can contribute to a more harmonious classroom environment with reduced conflicts and fewer disciplinary issues, creating a space that is more conducive to learning.

In addition to its social benefits, mindfulness has a direct impact on academic performance. Studies consistently demonstrate that mindfulness programs lead to improvements in academic outcomes such as GPA, test scores, and math performance (Phan et al., 2022). By enhancing focus and concentration, mindfulness helps students become more attentive and better equipped to engage with challenging academic material. It has also been shown to reduce test anxiety, which allows students to approach exams and other academic tasks with greater confidence and a more positive attitude toward learning.

Beyond the individual student experience, there is growing evidence supporting the broader impacts of mindfulness on both educators and school climates. Mindfulness-based practices for teachers can improve self-regulation, increase job satisfaction, and foster essential skills such as nonjudgment, observation, and emotional resilience (Frank et al., 2015). Research has shown that teachers who exhibit behaviors that are "calm, clear, and kind" are more likely to create compassionate environments that benefit students (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009). In turn, these positive teacher behaviors can contribute to a school climate characterized by increased empathy, well-being, and positive emotions (Birnie et al., 2010). Teacher mindfulness also supports reduced burnout, which can lead to more stable and positive learning environments for students, particularly in schools with high levels of stress and teacher turnover.

Mindfulness practices also play a role in supporting students' mental health, particularly those who have experienced trauma or adversity. By helping students develop self-regulation skills, mindfulness can provide a sense of control and safety, which is critical for fostering a positive school climate. Mindfulness helps students build decision-making and communication skills, which serve them both inside and outside of school. Additionally, mindfulness can impact brain development in ways that benefit learning. Neuroimaging studies show that mindfulness practices can lead to structural changes in the brain, particularly in areas related to attention and emotional regulation, further supporting improved cognitive and emotional outcomes for students (Flook et al., 2010).

Through these various channels, mindfulness can create an environment that promotes both academic success and social-emotional well-being. By benefiting teachers, students, and the overall school climate, mindfulness provides a holistic approach to education that fosters positive, lasting outcomes.

Mirror Neurons and Co-Regulation

The Teacher as the Foundation of a Mindful Classroom

Mindfulness in the classroom is most effective when it is implemented as a shared, community-driven practice. At the heart of this approach is the teacher, whose ability to regulate their own emotions and behaviors directly influences students. Research on mirror neurons and co-regulation highlights that students do not passively receive instruction—they actively mirror and respond to their teacher's emotional state. When teachers model emotional regulation, students learn how to manage stress, attention, and emotional responses by observing and internalizing those behaviors.

The concept of mirror neurons, first identified by Rizzolatti and colleagues in the 1990s, helps explain why students are so attuned to their teacher's emotional state. In a classroom setting, when a teacher demonstrates attentiveness, steadiness, and presence, students' brains register those behaviors as if they were engaging in them themselves. Over time, this repeated exposure strengthens students' ability to regulate emotions and attention (Rizzolatti et al., 1996).

Co-regulation begins with self-regulation. Teachers who maintain emotional balance help students feel secure and engaged, while teachers who are dysregulated can unintentionally contribute to student distress. This process is deeply connected to neurobiology. When a teacher provides a supportive presence, students' bodies release oxytocin, a hormone linked to trust and connection, while reducing cortisol, which is associated with stress (Bornstein and Esposito, 2023). Through consistent co-regulation, students develop healthier stress responses that have long-term benefits. Effective co-regulation involves providing emotional support, modeling behavior, and offering structure. Emotional support means validating students' feelings and creating a space where they feel heard. Modeling behavior involves demonstrating self-awareness, patience, and focus so

students can mirror those qualities. Structure ensures predictability and safety, which helps students manage expectations and develop the confidence to navigate challenges.

Practical Co-Regulation Strategies for Teachers

1. **Regulate Yourself First** – Take a few moments to center yourself before engaging with students. Your ability to be present sets the tone for the classroom.
2. **Check Your Physical Body** – Your posture, facial expressions, and body language communicate more than words. Adjusting these cues can create a more grounded and attentive learning environment. For example, try getting on the student’s eye level to communicate balance of power.
3. **Establish and Integrate Quick Mindfulness Techniques** – Participate in brief moments of mindfulness during lesson transitions with your students. Normalizing these moments makes them part of the classroom culture.
4. **Adjust the Classroom Environment** – Modify lighting, noise levels, and seating arrangements to support attention and self-regulation. Small environmental changes can make a significant impact.
5. **Acknowledge and Name Emotions** – When students express frustration or other emotions, acknowledge it by saying, “I see that you’re feeling frustrated.” Have resources and strategies available to help students manage their emotions in constructive ways.
6. **Offer Choice and Autonomy** – Providing structured options for emotional regulation gives students a sense of control and agency over their learning experience.

By implementing these strategies, teachers and students can encourage a classroom dynamic where teachers help students learn, and students help teachers teach. While teachers lead this process, it is important to note they also have their own stressors. Just as students may become frustrated with teachers or other students, teachers can also feel unsettled by disruptions like students talking out of turn or leaving their seats unexpectedly. These reactions are common. However, when teachers set the tone practicing steady emotional regulation, students begin to mirror that steadiness. Over time, this shift improves student behavior, making the classroom more manageable for the teacher. This ongoing exchange creates a positive feedback loop where teachers shape students’ behaviors, and students, in turn, foster a more focused and supportive academic environment.

Implementing Schools

Integrating These Techniques into the Classroom

Mindfulness can be shared with students in a variety of ways. You might consider what routines and systems you already have in place and where they may fit best. You may choose to find a place in your schedule that fits the best and keep it as a standard practice in your schedule. For example, you may choose to practice mindfulness every day at a certain time, or you may choose to find times in the schedule where students seem to be dysregulated or need support regaining focused attention. After recess, transitions, or at the start of a class may be helpful times to begin your practices.

Another approach to integrating mindfulness into the classroom is to embed brief practices into existing academic activities. For instance, you might begin lessons with a short breathing exercise to help students settle in or incorporate mindful listening during read-alouds by encouraging students to notice sounds or words that stand out. Mindful movement, such as gentle stretching or simple yoga poses, can be integrated during brain

breaks or transitions to re-energize and refocus students. Encouraging students to engage in mindful reflections at the end of the day or after group activities can also promote self-awareness and emotional regulation. By weaving mindfulness into everyday routines and academic content, students can experience these practices as natural parts of their school day, making it easier for them to apply the strategies both in and out of the classroom.

The wonderful thing about the specific techniques linked in Appendix B is that they do not require any materials and students can implement them on their own as needed. These practices can also be helpful to utilize in a Zen Den or Calm Corner for students to use when they are dysregulated and can use more individualized support. These strategies can be taught to the whole class so that students know how to utilize them and then practice them on their own as needed. The strategies are presented in a format that can be replicated as classroom posters. As posters, they can serve as a great reminder for both teachers and students.

Implementing Mindfulness in a Trauma-Sensitive Manner

One of the biggest indicators for creating resilience and giving our students resources to move past traumatic experiences is building strong relationships. Research shows that positive student-teacher relationships contribute to better emotional regulation and academic outcomes, particularly for students who have experienced adversity (Merritt et al., 2012). Learning doesn't happen in isolation but is built and created in community. Teachers' relationships with students and students' relationships with each other matter deeply in creating a safe and respectful learning environment where students feel a sense of trust.

Being a trauma sensitive educator means that we recognize that trauma exists and often do not know our students' previous experiences. While we may not and do not need to know who has experienced trauma, we can note that all people have at some point experienced overwhelm in their nervous system. Below are some ways to keep your mindfulness lessons trauma sensitive.

- Routine, clarity and predictability - Establishing a structured routine for mindfulness practices can foster a sense of stability for students. Research indicates that predictability in classroom routines can help reduce stress and improve student engagement, particularly for those with a history of trauma (Osher et al., 2018). When implementing mindfulness practices into your classroom, you may choose to pick a specific time of day, integrate mindfulness into transition periods, or use consistent language and cues to signal the start of each practice.
- Invitational Language - Mindfulness practices are always by choice, and it is clear to students that they have autonomy over their own experiences. Language that says "I invite you to..." or "You may wish to..." allows the participant to see that they are in control. This aligns with trauma-informed best practices, which emphasize student agency as a way to support self-regulation and reduce anxiety (Brunzell et al., 2016).
- Choice
 - Allowing students to choose how they participate—such as where they sit, their posture, or whether they keep their eyes open or closed—helps them feel safe and in control.
 - Providing alternatives if a certain practice feels overwhelming ensures that students have multiple ways to engage in self-regulation.

One of the first steps to bringing in mindfulness practices to your students is establishing a safe classroom culture. Before beginning these practices it's important to discuss the role that each person plays in creating the classroom experience together. An activity to help bring this to light is creating *community*

agreements. Community agreements are different from rules or guidelines. This is about establishing what each person wants and needs for the classroom to look and feel safe. It moves beyond just physical safety and gives space for students to think about what they need to feel safe to take academic risks, ask questions, and be fully themselves in the classroom. Once this list is co-created, it can be written and signed by all class members and hung where it can be seen. This collaborative drafting of behavioral expectations with students fosters a sense of ownership and psychological safety (Zins et al., 2004).

Gradual Expansion of Mindfulness Schoolwide

Social and emotional learning (SEL) serves as an umbrella term encompassing a range of practices and approaches that support the development of skills related to self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Mindfulness is one such practice that falls under the broader SEL framework, offering strategies to enhance students' ability to regulate emotions, focus attention, and build resilience. When integrated into a schoolwide SEL initiative, mindfulness can strengthen and complement existing efforts by providing students and staff with practical tools to navigate stress, improve focus, and foster a positive school climate.

While there are many avenues for implementing mindfulness schoolwide, a common first step in implementing schoolwide mindfulness involves identifying staff members who are already practicing mindfulness themselves. Before developing a whole school model of mindfulness, it is important to have teachers who practice mindfulness on their own and are adequately trained. Move slowly and find people who are champions of this work to have sustained success and fidelity to a quality mindfulness program.

Another key step in implementing schoolwide mindfulness is to develop a shared understanding of what mindfulness means for the school community. This can begin with providing professional learning opportunities for interested staff to explore mindfulness practices and how they can support student well-being and learning. When these learning opportunities are delivered by educators within the building, they can be especially impactful, as staff may feel more connected to the content and appreciate hearing how colleagues are successfully implementing mindfulness in their own classrooms. Hosting informational sessions or workshops can help build staff buy-in and ensure consistency in how mindfulness is introduced to students. Schools may also consider forming a mindfulness committee to lead planning efforts, gather feedback, and coordinate activities across classrooms and grade levels.

Once initial champions and cohorts are established, schools can gradually expand mindfulness practices through schoolwide initiatives, such as incorporating short mindfulness moments during morning announcements, offering mindfulness clubs, or creating designated calming spaces accessible to all students. Embedding mindfulness into existing schoolwide programs, like social-emotional learning curricula or positive behavioral supports, can further strengthen implementation. It's important to maintain an ongoing feedback loop with students, staff, and families to refine the approach and ensure the program is inclusive, culturally responsive, and meeting the needs of the entire school community.

There are many ways to bring regulation and mindfulness activities into the classroom before building out a school wide program. Start with single classrooms or a cohort of classrooms and establish teams of those who also believe in this work before scaling the program throughout a school.

Measuring the Impact of Mindfulness Practices

Measuring the impact of interventions, including mindfulness, is essential for understanding their effectiveness and guiding future implementation efforts. Collecting and analyzing data helps schools determine whether

mindfulness practices are meeting their intended goals, such as improving student focus, emotional regulation, and overall well-being. Regular measurement also provides valuable feedback for educators, helps sustain momentum by highlighting successes, and ensures that efforts are responsive to the needs of the school community. By tracking outcomes, schools can make informed decisions to strengthen and expand mindfulness initiatives over time.

Measuring the qualities of how mindful your students are before and after lessons can reveal the impact of your practices. These assessments work best when students receive direct mindfulness instruction and utilizing mindfulness practices. Different districts have different policies about surveys and student self-assessments, please consult your administration to be sure you follow your district's policy before administering a survey or self-assessment. Measuring the qualities of how mindful your students are before and after lessons can reveal the impact of your practices. These assessments work best in a place where students are receiving direct mindfulness instruction and utilizing mindfulness practices. There are many different curricula available.

In addition to student self-assessments, schools may consider collecting a variety of data sources to capture the broader impact of mindfulness practices. This can include observational data from teachers, feedback from families, and reflections from students during class discussions. Tracking school-level indicators—such as attendance, disciplinary referrals, or nurse visits—over time can also offer valuable insights into how mindfulness practices may be influencing student regulation and well-being.

When collecting data, it's helpful to identify clear goals for what you hope to learn and how you will use the information to inform future efforts. For example, if the goal is to improve classroom climate, teachers might use a simple pre- and post-practice student rating scale on how calm or focused they feel. Regularly reviewing and sharing data with staff, students, and families can highlight successes, foster continued buy-in, and help refine implementation strategies.

Importantly, data collection should be conducted in a way that is respectful of student privacy and promotes a supportive, non-punitive environment. When data is used thoughtfully, it can serve as a powerful tool for sustaining mindfulness initiatives and ensuring they meet the needs of the entire school community.

Below is a sample tool to consider for measuring the impact of mindfulness practices.

[The Child Adolescent Mindfulness Measure \(CAMM\)](#)

[The Child Adolescent Mindfulness Measure Research](#)

**Note- Different districts have different policies about surveys and student self-assessments, please consult your administration to be sure you follow your district's policy before administering a survey or self-assessment.*

Additional Resources for Mindfulness Education and Training

[Mindful Life Project](#)- A nonprofit organization that sends outside providers from the Mindful Life project to schools to build mindfulness school programming. Programming varies from year-long programs for the whole school community, professional development, or specialized programming.

[Whole School Mindfulness](#)- A nonprofit organization that trains a point person in your school as a Mindfulness Director. The Mindfulness Director is a stipend position that a staff member in a school can hold to grow a school's mindfulness program that supports mindfulness for the whole school community.

[Breath for Change](#)- This organization offers training that includes mindfulness yoga and SEL (social and emotional learning) certification. They also offer a wide range of free resources and professional development.

[Peace in Schools](#)- A nonprofit that offers an accredited high school mindfulness studies course, available for schools in the Northwest. They also provide free weekly mindfulness practices and live discussion events.

Disclaimer- The resources provided above are for informational purposes only. Their inclusion does not constitute an endorsement or indication of preference by the New Jersey Department of Education.

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Appendix A

The Science Behind the Techniques

Breathing

Deep breathing is often referred to as diaphragmatic breathing in the medical field because it optimizes the main muscle of breathing, the diaphragm. Located in the brain and carotid arteries are “chemoreceptors” that can sense levels of carbon dioxide in our blood. These receptors turn up the intensity of our sympathetic nervous system (SNS), which controls our “fight or flight response”. The SNS plays an important role in helping your body prepare to act in stressful situations, like coming face-to-face with a bear on a camping trip. However, for people who are always stressed, the SNS is always firing even when it should not. This is very harmful to the body. Deep breathing inhibits those “chemoreceptors”, turning down our SNS, and producing a calming, anxiety-reducing effect. On the flip side, deep breathing stimulates the vagus nerve, which turns on our parasympathetic nervous system (PNS). The PNS is our “rest and digest” system, and it counteracts the SNS. Deep breathing has been shown to help with depression, anxiety, insomnia, chronic pain, acid reflux, asthma, high blood pressure, performance anxiety and many other conditions (Toussaint et al., 2021).

Releasing

Building up tension in our bodies and then releasing it, is a way to help your body and mind feel more relaxed. These techniques utilize the principles of “top-down” and “bottom-up” processing. In top-down processing, your brain sends a signal *down* the spinal cord and to your muscles, telling them to tense up. Bottom-up processing happens when you relax. Your muscles send a message *up* the spinal cord and to your brain that everything is calm. This process goes both ways—your brain tells your muscles what to do, and your muscles tell your brain how they feel. In addition, these techniques can stimulate the vagus nerve. The vagus nerve, also known as the 10th cranial nerve, turns on our parasympathetic nervous system (PNS). The PNS is our “rest and digest” system, and it counteracts our “fight or flight” sympathetic nervous system (SNS). These techniques were first used to help people with depression and anxiety, but now they have been shown to help with headaches, migraines, chronic pain, insomnia, bipolar disorder, high blood pressure, and many other conditions (Toussaint et al., 2021)

Grounding

Grounding techniques help anchor you to the present moment, reminding you that you're here and now, not stuck in memories or overwhelming emotions. Imagine sitting through an intense 2-hour movie. The theater is dark, the sounds are booming, and the smell of popcorn is in the air. You're so caught up in the movie that you forget what's real. Then the movie finishes, and you walk outside into the bright sunlight—the real world. Grounding works like that: it helps you step out of the "movie" of overwhelming thoughts and come back to the present moment, where you're safe and in control. If you have more time, you can combine grounding techniques with deep breathing (see the handout on deep breathing exercises). Doing both together helps calm your body by turning off your "fight or flight" response (the sympathetic nervous system) and activating the part of your nervous system that helps you relax (the parasympathetic nervous system). Grounding and deep breathing done together are super helpful for people who have experienced trauma, particularly those who may suffer from anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), panic attacks, night terrors, or performance anxiety (Koniver, 2023).

Soothing

These techniques are most helpful for kids who suddenly feel stressed or upset because something triggers them. When you do things like hug someone, rest your head in your hands, or even tap your thigh, your body releases chemicals that make you feel good, like oxytocin, dopamine, and serotonin. At the same time, it lowers your stress hormones, like cortisol and norepinephrine. Research shows that touch can calm your heart, reduce anxiety and depression, boost your immune system, and even help with pain (Field, 2010). However, an interesting way to increase the benefits of these techniques is by applying the principle of “bilateral stimulation” (BLS). This means using both sides of your body, which activates both sides of your brain. BLS puts your brain to work. Since you’re using the whole brain, it has to spend most of its energy focusing on the here and now, and less energy focusing on the past (Shapiro, 2017). Each time you use BLS, your brain learns to weaken your body’s emotional response to the trigger. You have been doing BLS your whole life without even knowing it! Things like going for a walk, swinging on a playground, dancing, or reading all use both sides of your brain. These techniques are especially helpful for people with anxiety, PTSD, panic attacks, ADHD, and other conditions.

Appendix B

Breathing

- [Hand-Trace Breathing](#)
- [Box Breathing](#)

Releasing

- [Wall Push](#)
- [Progressive Muscle Relaxation](#)

Grounding

- [Rainbow Visualization](#)
- [54321 Grounding](#)

Soothing

- [Eye Palming](#)
- [Butterfly Hugs](#)