



School Om Work Kids Calm Themselves with Meditation

by April Thompson

Schoolchildren are learning the calming effect of tuning into their minds and bodies through a pioneering program in Baltimore, Maryland, that's replacing time outs and school detentions with mindful moments. Trained staff—including many former students—teach yoga, mindfulness practices, meditation, centering and breath work that empower kids to resolve conflicts peacefully.

Brothers Atman and Ali Smith and friend Andres Gonzalez founded the

nonprofit Holistic Life Foundation (HLF) in 2001 in response to the pressing need to help kids living in challenging urban environments better manage stress, anger and other heightened emotions. Today, the organization is sowing the seeds of mindfulness with some 7,500 students a week across 18 Baltimore-area schools, usually beginning through daylong, school-wide interventions and afterschool programs supporting targeted populations.

Frustrated kids cool off and center

themselves through breathing exercises and meditation in the Mindful Moment Room in the HLF flagship Robert W. Coleman Elementary School. "Sometimes when I get mad, I just breathe deep. I picture being in a certain place I like and I just stop being mad... I think of being a bigger person and doing something maybe a wise man would do," advises one fifth-grade participant.

"When we had to take a big test, before I took it and in the middle, I

**These are tools kids can rely on for the rest of their lives,
and use them to get back to their center.**

~ALI SMITH

took deep breaths to stay calm and finish the test. When everybody around you is making a lot of noises, you just try to tune them out and be yourself, do your breathing,” says another fifth-grader.

The training starts with educators learning mindfulness techniques both to help their students and also manage their own stress in the classroom. “The program was a fantastic experience,” says Lori Gustovson, a teacher at Baltimore’s Lincoln Elementary School. “We integrated the exercises into our daily schedules, helping many students and teachers focus their attention and regulate emotions such as anxiety, anger and frustration. We are a better school because of the time they spent in our classrooms teaching us the beauty of paying attention to breath, movement and each other,” she observes.

Participating schools have reported fewer fights, better attendance and higher grades, among other benefits, according to Ali Smith, all results backed by independent research. Recent studies in schools from San Francisco to Columbus, Ohio, have shown that teaching kids mindfulness practices can heighten attentiveness, self-control and empathy, while reducing stress, hyperactivity and depression, and improving academic performance.

The kids also apply their newfound

skills at home. “To take ownership of the practice and understand the benefits, you have to know how to explain it, so we use a reciprocal teaching model,” says Ali. “We teach the kids to say, ‘Mom, Dad, you look stressed; can you take a breather with me?’”

Martin, a Lincoln Elementary student, was pleased to report, “I went to my house and taught my mom how to do all the things you guys taught us.” Virginia, another student, noted, “This morning I got mad at my dad, but then I remembered to breathe, and then I didn’t shout.”

Other schools are following suit. Mindful Schools began in 2007 as a single-school program in Oakland, California, and then expanded to support online and in-person courses and a network of mindful educators spanning all 50 states and more than 100 countries. The David Lynch Foundation funds efforts to bring transcendental meditation to underserved kids in classrooms like the Brooklyn Urban Garden Charter School, in Queens, New York; Wilson High School, in Portland, Oregon; and Wayzata West Middle School, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, among others.

Find easy instruction at Tinyurl.com/MindfulnessStarterLesson.

Connect with freelance writer April Thompson, in Washington, D.C., at AprilWrites.com.

MINDFUL EXERCISES

This meditation exercise is recommended by the Holistic Life Foundation to help kids slow down, relax, de-stress or clear their heads:

Sit comfortably with one hand on your belly, with your head, neck and spine in alignment. Breathe through your nose. As you inhale, feel your belly expand and pause for a second. Then, exhale and feel the belly fall. Repeat for 10 breaths.

This mindfulness instruction is excerpted from a starter lesson at MindfulSchools.org:

Mindfulness is noticing what is happening in the present moment. It can help calm us when we are angry, sad or frustrated. It can help us notice when we are happy or grateful and also to focus, whether in school or in sports.

It’s important to let our bodies be very still. When that happens, it gets very quiet. When we have still and quiet bodies, that’s what we call our mindful bodies. Now, let’s close our eyes and just sit like this for one minute.