THE IMPACTS OF MINDFULNESS PRACTICES WITH CHILDREN IN THE HEART OF COAL COUNTRY WEST VIRGINIA

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Extensive research suggests that stress and trauma experienced during childhood can have a significant effect on social, emotional, behavioral, and physiological development. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), including abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction have been significantly associated with poor emotion regulation, worse mental health, and worse physical health outcomes (e.g., drug use, heart disease, liver disease; Centers for Disease Control, 2019; Cloitre et al., 2019; Felitti et al. 1988). In the state of West Virginia, the majority of children under the age of 18 (52%) have experienced at least one ACE, compared to 46% nationally (ACES Coalition WV, 2018). Adverse childhood experiences are more common in rural, and low-income households (Halfon et al., 2017; HRSA, 2020). As West Virginia is classified as a rural state with the 6th highest poverty rate in the United States (US Census, 2020), childhood trauma is a critical concern within the state. Further, children experiencing trauma have a greater likelihood of problem behavior and poorer school performance (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018). Thus, it is crucial to identify environments and mechanisms to mitigate the negative outcomes associated with these adverse events within the state of West Virginia. Fortunately, evidence suggests that some interventions, including school-based mindfulness training, can improve outcomes following exposure to trauma (Ortiz & Sibinga, 2017).

Jenny Harden, a principal at Rupert Elementary, became interested in mindfulness six years ago. After accepting the role of principal, she began to notice high rates of behavioral challenges among her students, including classroom outbursts and physical aggression. Indeed, 30 students were suspended in the 2015 – 2016 school year alone. She noted that many of her students had not yet learned to regulate their behavior and emotions in a healthy way and believed that a critical role of educators was to help children learn these skills.

“We teach kids math and we teach kids reading. We need to teach them behavior, we don’t need to punish them”.

One afternoon, a student was sent to her office for exhibiting problematic behavior in the classroom and was experiencing high levels of emotional distress and was also being physically violent. As a last-minute recourse to try and get the student to calm down, Jenny asked him to lay down and to focus on breathing with her. After observing the calming effect of this impromptu breathing exercise, Jenny became curious about the use of breathing and grounding for assisting youth with emotion regulation.

“It came out of nowhere and it worked, we have to figure out where this is coming from, and we started to dig into research.”
Her search for research and resources led her to mindfulness, or the practice of approaching emotions and sensations with kindness and curiosity (Viafora et al., 2015), often accomplished using breathing exercises, yoga, and meditation. Jenny began by simply googling “how to calm kids down”, which eventually led her to mindfulness resources from the author Annaka Harris (https://annakaharris.com/mindfulness-for-children) and to Amy Snodgrass the co-founder of Mindful WV (https://www.mindfulwv.org/), a statewide collaborative effort to promote the use of mindfulness in West Virginia to build youth, family, and community resilience. Slowly, Jenny began learning more about the use of school-based mindfulness and regularly using brief mindfulness exercises with students that came into her office requiring help with emotion or behavior regulation. Beginning in the 2016-2017 school year, mindfulness activities were implemented in the classroom at every grade-level. Teachers were encouraged to approach mindfulness training as a professional development opportunity, as way to better support their students, and to approach the exercises as their own form of self-care.

Results were almost immediate, and Rupert Elementary School saw a 70% drop in suspension rates that same year. Today, mindfulness exercises such as morning mindfulness, exercises involving music, yoga programs specifically designed for kids, and mindful coloring are among the resources used by teachers and staff within the classrooms. Children are also taught and given the space to self-regulate their emotions through “take a break” cards and mediation. The program has been widely accepted and students have been observed using these practices own their own in the hallways and at recess. “We had one student, last year who had a lot of trouble and was [sent to my] office a lot and would say that he ‘got so mad’, and now he initiates a ‘take a break’ cards [he’ll comes in on his own to my office] and I have a little Zen garden and he’ll decorate the Zen garden and put himself together […] and now I’ll see him 1-2 a week instead 3-4 a day.”
Since the start of COVID-19, parents that have children engaged in remote learning have also reported that kids are using these tools to express their feelings in a healthy manner.

“I have heard stories from my parents relating how their kids will sit down [when faced with anger or conflict at home] and say, ‘peace begins with me’ and then they'll try and figure things out.”

These mindfulness exercises have provided students with healthy resources for managing emotions and coping with challenges ranging from school- and home-based stressors to those associated with a global pandemic that has fundamentally changed daily life. Principal Harden concludes, “The resiliency we can teach them through a trauma informed lens, even though they're in trauma daily, they can feel safe, learn those tools and be a successful peaceful adult.”