

Mindfulness in the Classroom

Part I: Common Teaching Practices

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Mindfulness practices are a part of quality early childhood education program; they just are not traditionally labeled as such. For example, teachers employ mindfulness strategies when they *describe* children's actions aloud, *ask* open-ended questions, and *acknowledge* children's efforts to engage in their community in positive ways.

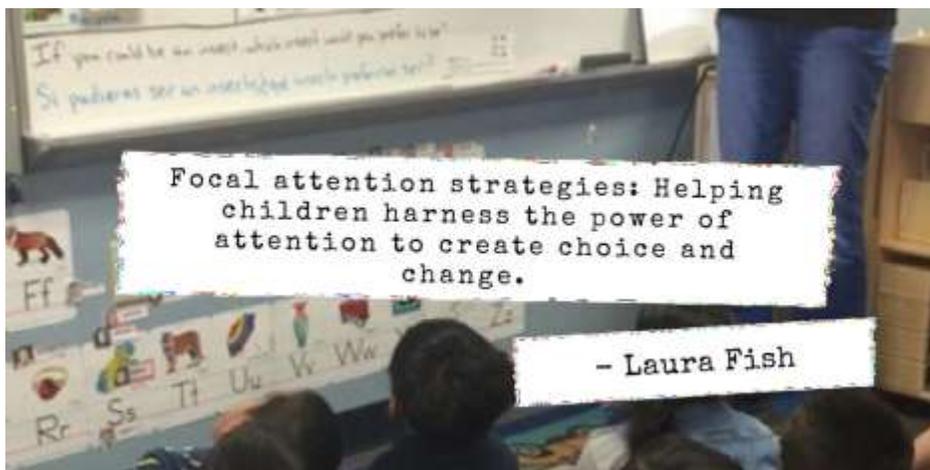
When implemented with fidelity, common teaching practices such as these encourage mindfulness as a habit of mind that develops and strengthens the brain's *social*, *emotional*, and *cognitive* skills.

Mindfulness strategies support brain development in several key ways:

1. **Promote integration - differentiation and linkage:** developing all parts of the brain and building connections, or linking, the various parts. When our brains are both differentiated and linked, they are integrated, a state which supports physical and mental well-being.
2. **Develop executive function skills:** the ability to plan, initiate, organize and carry out tasks while regulating emotions, resolving conflicts, shifting gears when necessary and tracking efforts to do so. Focal attention is a primary driver for developing these "school readiness" skills.
3. **Engage intrapersonal attunement:** tuning into one's interior landscape, including thoughts, feelings, sensations, all mental activity. Noticing "what's inside."
4. **Engage interpersonal attunement:** tuning into another's interior landscape. Noticing "what's there."
5. **Develop important functions in the prefrontal cortex:** most notably, attuned communication, fear modulation, physical regulation, emotional regulation, response flexibility, insight, empathy, intuition, morality, and decision making.

But What Is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness may be considered as having two components: the quality of **focal attention**, and the state of mind of **openness and receptivity** to whatever attention lands upon. I like to define mindfulness as *paying attention on purpose with non-*



judgment, compassion, and loving-kindness.

Focal attention promotes learning and affecting change of any kind. With *focal attention* engaged, the brain generates the growth of new cells, or neurons, and the *connections* between those neurons become strengthened. Each of the five “brain benefits” described above begins with the activation of *focal attention*.

Openness and receptivity allow for learning and change to proceed with greater ease and efficiency. An **open, receptive** state of mind signifies brain integration, creating the opportunity for greater responsiveness versus reactivity as experiences arise. In this state, the mind and brain meet challenges with *non-judgment, compassion and loving-kindness* for self and others.

Many common teaching practices promote mindfulness. Let’s first identify some of the practices commonly found in preschool classroom that engage the quality of **focal attention** in children.

Focal Attention Strategy	Example	Brain Benefits
<p>Narration/broadcasting/parallel talk: describing aloud what the child is doing and/or what they may be thinking/feeling.</p>	<p>Teacher: Looks like Jamie is creating a pizza out of playdough!</p>	<p>Just like adults, children go through many daily tasks on “autopilot,” without tuning in to what they are doing. Narration helps the brain engage focal attention, bringing children into the present moment, activating awareness that promotes learning. As a result, children have the potential to notice “what’s there,” interpersonal attunement and “what’s inside,” intrapersonal attunement.</p>

Focal Attention Strategy	Example	Brain Benefits
<p>Reflection: repeating back what the child says and/or imitating what the child does.</p>	<p>Child: I am building a huge castle! Teacher: You are building a huge castle!</p> <p>Child: And I'm going to use the magna tiles to make a bridge for the princess to walk across.</p>	<p>When teachers use reflection, children activate the power of focal attention to engage in the serve and return of healthy communication. Children feel seen and heard when teachers repeat their words, which encourages them to continue exploring their thoughts, feelings, plans, or ideas more deeply. This may strengthen both intrapersonal attunement and executive functioning.</p>
<p>Child self-talk: describing aloud what he/she is doing, sensing, thinking, and/or feeling.</p>	<p>Child: First, I must connect the tiles...next I put them on top of the others carefully...now they stick to make the tower!</p>	<p>Did you ever notice when you talk to yourself, it helps you stay on track? It's because the self-talk strategy helps you keep focal attention engaged! When children describe aloud what they are doing and thinking it helps them track, make decisions, and evaluate their efforts. These executive functioning skills help strengthen the prefrontal cortex.</p>
<p>Open-ended questions: questioning in such a way to elicit more than a yes/no response.</p> <p>May be used to replace directions and corrections, telling the child to do something or to change something.</p>	<p>Teacher: What do we do before we go outside? vs. Teacher: It's time to clean up. Put your toys away and line up. or Teacher: You aren't listening. It's time to clean up, not play.</p>	<p>With open-ended questions, children use the power of focal attention to stabilize the information they are taking in long enough to act upon it. Replacing directions and corrections with open-ended questions engages the child's "upstairs brain," most notably the prefrontal cortex, to come up with an answer while enlisting the help of the "downstairs brain" to potentially act on the question. This promotes both integration and the development of executive function skills. Open-ended questions about the interior landscape of the children activates intrapersonal and interpersonal attunement.</p>
<p>Priming or prompting phrasing that encourages the child to consider possibilities and to notice potentials.</p> <p><i>NOTE:</i> this strategy is not designed to serve as a reminder or a redirection.</p>	<p>Teacher: I wonder what might happen if you both tried to make the track together instead of two separate ones?</p>	<p>The priming strategy allows children to use focal attention to plan and initiate their play, two important aspects of executive functioning skills. Taking children off autopilot invites them to access the decision-making centers of the brain, strengthening the prefrontal cortex.</p>

With the help of **focal attention**, each of these strategies may result in one of the five brain benefits listed previously. And while the quality of attention primes the mind and brain to learn, so too does the *state of mind* with which you attend.

Mindfulness practices **couple** focal attention with the *intention* to notice whatever arises with an open, receptive state of mind that includes *non-judgment, compassion, and loving-kindness*. As you will see in the examples to follow, such teaching practices are woven into the fabric of a quality early childhood program.

Open, Receptive State of Mind Strategy	Example	Brain Benefits
<p>Positive, descriptive acknowledgment (PDA) and PDA Plus: using specific and descriptive language to describe the positive behavior children display and at times, <i>connecting it to a feeling state, outcome, or character trait.</i></p>	<p>Teacher: Andre and Denae, you are sharing the crayons!</p> <p>Or</p> <p>Teacher: Andre and Denae, you are sharing the crayons, you look <i>happy</i> to be sharing!</p> <p>Or</p> <p>Teacher: Andre and Denae, you are sharing the crayons, <i>now you can both color!</i></p> <p>Or</p> <p>Teacher: Andre and Denae, you are sharing the crayons, you are <i>being friendly</i> with each other.</p>	<p>With PDA and PDA Plus (instead of praise), children receive a description of the positive action they are doing and possibly their feeling state, character trait displayed or the impact of the action, promoting both intrapersonal and interpersonal attunement.</p> <p>When teachers flood the environment with PDA and PDA Plus, they help children install positive experiences that strengthen prefrontal cortex functions such as attunement and insight. The installation of positive moments helps children remain in an open, receptive state of mind and supports the cultivation of non-judgment, compassion and loving-kindness.</p>
<p>Emotional Literacy: identifying, understanding, and expressing emotions.</p> <p>Choose from a variety of strategies such as reading books about feelings, referencing feeling charts, asking children how they feel, scaffolding their feelings, and modeling feelings.</p>	<p>Teacher: Salina, you are jumping as you laugh with your friend! How do you feel?</p> <p>Or</p> <p>Teacher: Looks like you might be angry right now. I see your hands are clenched and your breathing is heavy.</p> <p>Or</p> <p>Teacher: Looks like you might be having a strong emotion, do you want to....draw me your feelings so I know what you are feeling; switch your emotion on the feelings chart; have the puppets talk about your feelings with you; tell me what your body feels like right now; do a body scan with me so we can see what your body is telling you about your feelings?</p>	<p>Emotional literacy strategies directly promote children's intrapersonal and interpersonal attunement as they practice identifying their emotions as well as the emotions of others. With this, children have the potential to strengthen the prefrontal cortex functions of insight and empathy that lead to non-judgment, loving kindness and compassion as well as an open, receptive state of mind.</p>

Open, Receptive State of Mind Strategy	Example	Brain Benefits
<p>Emotional Regulation: managing emotions.</p> <p>As with emotional literacy, a variety of emotional regulation strategies may be offered for children based on individual need, feeling state, and children’s abilities or developmental levels. For example, opportunities to: <i>smell a flower/blow out the candle, squeeze a stress ball, do a few wall push-ups, walk like a bear or other animal, receive deep or light pressure on various body parts, name it to tame it, count breaths, allow glitter to settle, draw, listen to music, hug a stuffed animal or a teacher.</i></p> <p>Regardless of strategy, a key component of emotional regulation is the teacher’s validation of the child’s feeling state both through verbal and nonverbal actions.</p>	<p>Teacher: So, you are feeling really angry because the block area is full right now. That makes sense. I can see why you feel angry about that.</p> <p>Or</p> <p>Teacher: You are feeling angry about the block area being full. It’s so hard to wait. It seems like anger is making your body feel uncomfortable right now. I wonder what might help anger relax its grip on you a little?</p> <p>Or</p> <p>Teacher: You are feeling angry because the block area is full? Ahhh...and your stomach feels heavy? So sorry. I have the relaxation kit right here. What strategy might help your tummy soften a bit?</p>	<p>Emotional regulation strategies integrate the “upstairs” and “downstairs brain” of the child. Strategies that help children learn to identify, understand, express, and then regulate emotions strengthen the prefrontal cortex and help the child return to an open, receptive state of mind following a strong emotion. To accomplish this, attuned adults provide co-regulation through an unhurried, calm, validation of the child’s feeling state.</p>
<p>Conflict resolution: solving problems and resolving conflicts in a systematic way that includes all children being involved in a non-punitive discussion and resolution process.</p> <p>Whenever possible, each child involved in the conflict contributes his or her perspective at <i>each</i> step. The teacher facilitates, but doesn’t dominate, throughout the steps.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Step one: What happened? How does EACH child feel? • Step two: What can we do? (discuss potential solutions, possibly look through visuals of solutions) • Step three: Pick one and give it a try! • Step four: Teacher gives PDA/Plus, follows up with children. 	<p>Resolving conflicts using a step-by-step framework helps children remain open and receptive to working with others to resolve challenges, rather than seeking out retribution.</p> <p>Children use intrapersonal attunement to describe their view of what happened, connect that to how they feel, and then interpersonal attunement to listen to other’s perspective and arrive at a solution. Inherent to collaborating to resolve problems is a sense of non-judgment, compassion for self and others, and loving-kindness.</p>

Now that you understand both components of mindfulness, **focal attention** and an **open, receptive state of mind**, try noticing what other mindfulness strategies you might use throughout the day. Once you start looking, you may notice that the strategies you use to promote social and emotional skills also promote mindfulness!

Two essential components of mindfulness in the classroom:

1. The foundation for promoting mindfulness with children is the teacher’s commitment to **being mindful** his or herself. Adults must develop a practice of ongoing **intrapersonal attunement**: going inward and tending to one’s thoughts, feelings, sensations, and behaviors to remain open, receptive, and

interpersonally attuned to children. Especially when challenging behavior arises. Mindful adults activate the potential for healthy brain and mind development in children by creating environments where children feel safe, seen, soothed, and secure.

2. All of the mindfulness strategies offered here must be adapted to meet the needs, abilities, and/or developmental levels of the children. Attuned teachers use discernment to develop a culturally and developmentally appropriate approach for each child to cultivate the components of mindfulness.

Please read [Mindfulness in the Classroom \(part 2\)](#) for more exciting strategies to promote mindfulness that may not be part of a typical classroom routine. This article and others may be found on my website along with my podcasts about *Attuned Communication*, *Mindfulness in the Classroom*, *Teaching with the Brain in Mind*, *Seeing the Child Behind the Behavior*, *Seeing the Adult Behind the Behavior* and additional resources for teaching and parenting with the brain in mind: consulting.laurafishtherapy.com.