

Focus! Relax!

by Jeff Greenfield '84, head of the middle school; photo by Kimberly Manz

Have you ever implored your kids: 'Pay attention!'? Ever encouraged them to just relax? To stop worrying? I'm guilty of saying such things, but what do we expect our children to do when we give them advice like this? Seriously.

When was the last time you were able to relax solely because someone told you to? Last summer, at one of my sons' baseball games, a coach was trying to help his pitcher, yelling, "Relax and throw strikes!" The child grew more and more tense and frustrated.

What kids really need is not for us to *tell* them to focus or relax, but to give them the specific tools to be able to do those things on their own. We can enable our children to better regulate their attention and emotions. We can help our students learn to focus their attention on the task at hand, to be more sensitive to others' needs, and to manage natural feelings of anxiousness or worry.

“Mom, I think you could use a little mindfulness.”

Over several years I read widely about the role of what many call “mindfulness” practices for children. By “mindfulness” I do not mean meditation but “a nonjudgmental awareness of the present moment.” Mindfulness practice involves many focused activities related to natural practices like breathing and listening, the foundation of such familiar practices as yoga and Pilates.

Daniel Siegel, renowned speaker and teacher on the interface of neurobiology, psychiatry, and mindful awareness, writes that mindful awareness practices can develop long-term personality traits. These traits, research shows, can help us “suspend judgments, to act in awareness of our moment-to-moment experience, to achieve emotional equilibrium or equanimity, to describe our internal world with language, and to have a burgeoning sense of self-observation” (Baer et. al., 2006). In 2009, I visited schools in the San Francisco Bay Area that are considered “Mindful Schools” (see www.mindfulschools.org). I met with the directors of the Mindful Schools program, observed their training, and came away impressed. We had already sent two USN Middle School faculty members to a

Mindful Schools conference; they found its relevance for middle-school-age students equally compelling. These teachers shared their experience with a committee of intrigued colleagues last year, and our collective commitment to providing our students with the skills to be mindful grew rapidly.

After faculty training in the summer of 2010, we began the school year dedicating the first five minutes of each day to learning and practicing the mindful techniques of focused attention to breath, sounds, body, and heartfulness. Over the course of the year, our focus has shifted: though some teachers continue to



start the day with mindful practice, others have integrated techniques to help students bring focus and relaxation to stressful moments: before ballgames, at test time, and in difficult social situations.

It hasn't taken long for colleagues locally and nationally to start to follow our mindfulness initiative. I've been asked to write articles for national publications on this topic, and we've partnered with a local public school to provide mentoring for their teachers committed to bringing this tool to their students. A local group of educators ("MINEd," for Mindfulness in Nashville Education) meets monthly. Many middle school teachers have attended international conferences on the topic, and next year our progress will be closely watched by colleagues across the nation.

In 1890 William James wrote, "The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will. An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence." A lofty ambition, to be certain, but exactly where our sights are set. [usn](#).



We've heard from many students who find mindfulness practice helpful, and a number of parents have shared unsolicited stories of the effect of mindfulness in their family's life.

One parent shared her seventh grade son's experience with mindfulness: The few times I've asked him about mindfulness this year, he's responded along the lines of, "I don't really get it" or "It just doesn't work for me."

Until tonight, when, unprompted, he said, "I think I'm going to use mindfulness on my math quiz tomorrow so I don't get stressed out." And then a little later, "I think mindfulness is starting to work for me. You know last weekend when I got that bad headache? I tried mindfulness and just focused on my breathing and it made the headache not hurt so much."

Here is another parent's story:

One night at bedtime, I'm grumping around and grouching, and my son says, "Mom, I think you could use a little mindfulness." Now, I have been scrupulous about not asking him about his mindfulness experiences this fall because I wanted very much for this to be his thing. This is the first I've heard about mindfulness from him. I say, "Oh, really?"

He says, "Yeah. I just think it would do you some good." I say, "Well, maybe if you'll do it with me and show me how." So he sets me in a chair and tells me that the deal is to close your eyes. I close my eyes, and I say, "Now what?"

"We just sit, for about five minutes."

"And?"

"Just try to focus on your breathing. Just let your thoughts go."

We do this.

It transforms a person to shut up and stop crabbing about bedtime and pants on the floor. I open my eyes, he smiles and says, "See?" I tell him that it's really amazing, and really helpful, and he says, "Yeah. At first I thought it was kind of dumb, but not anymore."

As I was leaving the room, he says, "Mom. One thing. Whatever it was that was bothering you—whatever it was, it's important not to just forget about that. You really need to think about what was making you grumpy, and not just ignore it." You could have