

Does Mindfulness Actually Work in Schools?

Scholars want to know whether the practice helps young kids of color succeed academically.



Courtesy of Kathy Richland Photography

A research team in Chicago has spent a year studying whether students who are taught to be in touch with their emotions do better academically. And they say the initial results are promising.

Perhaps counterintuitively, when kids take a break from a classroom lesson on the solar system to spend a quiet moment alone watching a three-minute

nature video, or participate in a teacher-guided breathing exercise with their class after lunch, they seem to become better overall students. That's likely because the children have a renewed sense of focus, they handle transitions from one lesson to the next better, and they need less time to regroup if they become upset about something, said Amanda Moreno, an assistant professor at the Erikson Institute, a child-development-focused graduate school in Chicago.



Moreno and her team received \$3 million, most of it from the U.S. Education Department, to study what is known as “mindfulness” in more than 30 high-poverty Chicago public schools over the course of four years. They are watching approximately 2,000 kindergarten through second-grade students. My colleague took an in-depth look at mindfulness [here](#), but the basic idea is to allow kids, as Moreno told me, to “slow down and not be on automatic-pilot and not be overwhelmed by all the things they could be focusing on.” The idea has been popular in [some public and private schools for years](#), but there's been little in the way of evidence to back it up as an effective academic intervention, and where studies exist, they've tended to focus on older students. Erikson says its ongoing research is the largest mindfulness study of children funded by the federal government ever conducted and the only in the country to focus specifically on whether mindfulness exercises improve academic achievement for young kids of color from low-income families.

That focus is important because, if mindfulness proves effective, low-income children of color may stand to benefit disproportionately. Children growing up in poverty are more likely than their affluent peers to be exposed to violence and to experience long-term stress that can derail their academic

progress. Some research has suggested that children living in high-stress environments (drug-addicted parents, abusive caretakers, neighborhood gun violence) are constantly on edge, ready to fight or take flight, which can lead to outbursts in class that turn into suspensions and even expulsions, all detrimental for learning. And recent brain science suggests that exposure to stress can [shorten periods of brain development](#), meaning it's especially crucial to limit stress in the early years when brain growth is rapid.

When disadvantaged kids aren't focused in class, achievement gaps can widen, and, Moreno suggests, purely academic attempts to close those gaps miss the significant impact that the state of a child's emotional and social well-being can have on his ability to learn math. For kids who have suffered from prolonged stress or trauma, mindfulness seems to offer a way of "short-circuiting" the fight-or-flight response, Moreno said. It helps kids with the greatest self-regulation challenges adapt to slower, more methodical classroom settings. Moreno said she's heard from teachers with students who have gone from five or six tantrums a day to none because they know they can go to their classroom's "calm spot" whenever they feel like they're spiraling out of control.

Moreno pushes back at the idea, levied by critics of mindfulness in the classroom, that it is a [craze designed to turn kids into compliant robots](#) or a form of victim-blaming. "[Proponents] see mindfulness as a way to amp up an education system that will create compliant students who can manage their own behavior, focus on their assignments, and calm themselves when angry or frustrated with school. Such students can then turn into passive, unquestioning consumers and cooperative workers who will help their corporate employers better compete in the global economy," wrote David Forbes [in Salon](#). That is not the case, Moreno said. Kids aren't supposed to be robotic or unquestioning, but an angry or frustrated kid isn't going to be able to learn as well as a calm, focused kid, so mindfulness is intended to give kids

the tools they need to be active classroom participants. In other words, children are supposed to fail occasionally, Moreno said, but they need help learning tricks and techniques for getting back on track. “Mindfulness helps reduce their suffering,” she said.

But does mindfulness really work for little kids? Initial results seem to indicate it can when it’s taught in an age-appropriate way, said Moreno, who has a background in developmental psychology and insists she is “not a yogi.”

The traditional concept of social-emotional learning, a broad category that’s become an education buzzword these days, can be tricky for little kids to embrace because it asks children to think about how they acted in the past and how they’ll behave in the future. Consider a playground spat. After recess, a teacher might say to a first-grader, *Why do you think you shoved Johnny off the swings and what would you do next time?* Moreno says that’s not a bad thing and it’s proven effective in some cases, but there’s not solid data to suggest specific academic gains. Moreno says the Erikson study is more of a “complete equation” because it aims to take a particular type of social-emotional learning (mindfulness) and target it directly into classroom activities to study the academic impact.

"When disadvantaged kids aren't focused in class, achievement gaps can widen."

Around kindergarten, kids’ ability to control their thinking in a way that helps them achieve their goals begins to be tested in a classroom setting. *If I focus on what my teacher is drawing on the board, I’m going to be able to do this worksheet in front of me.* Where kids haven’t succeeded, and have acted out or spaced out instead, the response has often been, calm down and pay

attention, which is way too abstract for most kids (and, let's be honest, adults). So some schools in Chicago are trying a mindfulness approach, which is more visceral and less cerebral. It might go something like this: A teacher asks a student to turn off the lights. She puts a "Do not disturb" sign on the door, and then calmly reads from a script that asks students to breathe in and out, and focus on that sensation. Other exercises might ask a student to focus on a particular feeling, or a single emotion. By doing so, the theory goes, the kids are able to make bite-size, manageable work of the things that demand their focus throughout the day.

Moreno acknowledges that it's not easy to measure the impact of such abstract ideas as mindfulness or, more broadly, social-emotional learning. But researchers can get at the answer by both testing kids' math and reading abilities, and by surveying them about their sense of belonging, looking at how teachers handle discipline, how much time students are spending on-task, and assessing executive functioning. That last measure is often done using something called the [Flanker test](#), which helps give researchers a sense of cognitive flexibility, something Moreno and other researchers think mindfulness has a positive impact on. Moreno and her team also talk to teachers about their ability to teach well to get a sense of whether mindfulness helps prevent burnout, something that is more prevalent in high-poverty schools than at well-resourced schools.

In the first year, Moreno's team says the mindfulness program seems to be helping schools that already have a good sense of community, where teachers and students are supportive of each other and committed to learning, go from "good to great." For the schools that are really struggling, the program "can only do so much," she acknowledged.

In the Chicago study, the kids are even encouraged to get up in the middle of a lesson if they feel they need to and "refocus" by visiting their classroom's

designated “calm spot.” In an age where teachers face incredible pressure to make sure their kids are reaching certain academic markers, Moreno said that mindfulness was sometimes a tough sell in the beginning. But after a year, she says feedback has been positive and there are signs that suggest mindfulness decreases suspensions and expulsions by giving kids the tools to process their emotions in a productive way. “We should not be using imperfect skills as reason to disqualify kids from membership in the group,” she said.

Ultimately, she said, the students in her study have been spending anywhere from 10 to 12 minutes per day on mindfulness exercises. But classes appear to be gaining more instruction time as a result because there are fewer outbursts and disruptions. Some teachers have told her that where their classes used to need half an hour to settle down after lunch, a three-minute mindfulness exercise is now enough. (Moreno was careful to say that the team is still testing this theory and it’s too early to know for sure yet.)

And the notion that mindfulness requires those practicing it to be entirely quiet is false, she said. Kids in Chicago have been participating in music scribble exercises, where they listen to everything from African drumming to classical tunes and then scribble what they feel on paper, one of many practices developed by the [Luster Learning Institute](#) that the study utilizes. Some do stretching exercises, she said. A representative from Chicago Public Schools was not immediately available for comment.

Moreno is pleased that mindfulness is something the government and Chicago schools are open to studying. Teachers face so much pressure to “go, go, go,” she said, that the fact that the school system and Education Department are recognizing that educators need to focus on children’s inner lives to get anything into them academically is “powerful.” But the practice may find its way into more schools around the country because the nation’s

new federal education law asks schools to consider some non-academic measures, such as school climate, in evaluating how students are doing.

“There’s a productivity to it and a humanity to it, and people are beginning to realize the two are quite compatible and necessary for each other,” Moreno said.

She and her team are under no illusion that mindfulness is going to solve all of a school’s problems, and she’s upfront about the fact that the study is in the early stages. But Moreno’s initial results do seem to indicate that where little kids feel comfortable making mistakes because they have tools for getting back on track that don’t involve a trip to the principal’s office, they are better prepared to succeed as students.

This story is part of our Next America: Early Childhood project, which is supported by a grant from the Heising-Simons Foundation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



EMILY DERUY is a senior associate editor at *The Atlantic*, where she covers education.

 [Twitter](#)  [Email](#)