Mindful teacher practice: Begin the journey

The scene: You finish the story you have been reading with the children at the same time that Devon needs help tying his shoe, a conflict arises between Sasha and Mike, and just as you need to transition children to hand washing and lunch. You juggle conversations with children during lunchtime, while thinking ahead to your next small group activity.

Throughout an early care and education (ECE) professional’s day, there is a constant stream of activity in the classroom, and attention given to the plans that lie ahead.

How can ECE professionals maintain a healthy sense of well-being and balance, while nurturing classrooms that focus on building relationships, cooperation, creative thinking, and problem solving? One of the most important ways is to understand the idea of mindfulness or mindful awareness.

Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn (founding executive director of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School) defines mindfulness as the awareness that arises through paying attention, in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment and in a non-judgmental way (Kabat-Zinn 1994).

When these processes come together, they build the foundation for mindful awareness. Research shows that developing mindful practice has positive psychological and emotional benefits (Weare 2014).

Build mindful “awareness muscles”

Dr. Patricia Jennings, a researcher in the area of social-emotional development and mindful practice for teachers, describes three core skills needed to strengthen the mindful “awareness muscles” (Jennings 2015). Core skills include developing focused attention, setting intention, and breathing to de-stress.

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<th>Focus your attention.</th>
<th>How can development of this skill strengthen your teaching practice?</th>
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<td>Focused attention describes the ability to intentionally focus and maintain focus on one thing. Focused attention skills develop with practice and over time. Dr. Jennings describes a practice exercise to strengthen the skill that involves sitting in a calm space and focusing attention on breathing. The exercise provides the opportunity to notice how the body and mind respond, as you maintain focus on the activity of breathing calmly. Start small, with a few minutes per day, and slowly add more time. With practice, you are able to gain a better sense of when your attention moves off focus, and how to flexibly move it back on focus.</td>
<td>Teachers strengthen the ability to form better relationships with children, and to actively listen and respond to children when they focus their attention throughout the day. They become more flexible in how they notice and actively participate with children. The teacher is able to stay in the present moment and is fully available to respond to children and to support learning. For example, a teacher who is aware and focused in the moment notices and responds to a child who may feel sad or scared. The teacher talks with the child about the child’s feelings in a supportive and calm way. The teacher’s focused attention on the child and his feelings helps the child feel cared for, less anxious, and ultimately, better prepared to engage in learning. In this case, the teacher’s ability to focus attention creates a pathway to better understanding of the child’s emotional needs, and better learning engagement.</td>
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The practice of becoming more mindfully aware contributes to a sense of personal well-being. Teachers who practice these strategies report better relationships with their students and less reactive emotional responses to students, like anger or frustration (Sharp and Jennings 2016). Teachers who become more aware of their feelings, thoughts, and interactions throughout the day, develop skills to strengthen teacher-child relationships and to become more effective educators.

**Set an intention.**

An intention is a guide to how one wants to be or live. For example, “Today I intend to be more positive.” The process of setting an intention is different from setting a goal. Setting an intention reflects one’s hopes and desires for continued growth in a certain area of choice. When an intention is set, an individual reflects on the intention during the day. This reflection or “checking in” is a helpful way to remember and focus on the intention, or possibly, to readjust the intention. The practice supports a way to continue one’s growth in a chosen area.

**How can development of this skill strengthen your teaching practice?**

When a teacher sets an intention during the day, for example, “My intention is to be more positive and caring with children today,” it focuses the teacher’s awareness on a certain area of practice. In this case, the area is social-emotional development. When the teacher notices and comments positively about a child, it sends the message of care to the child, builds the foundation for positive relationships, and supports a positive classroom community. Both teacher and child benefit from the interaction.

**Breathe when you need to de-stress.**

Using mindful practice to focus attention and to set an intention are two ways to start to become more mindfully aware. Noticing and knowing when to relax and calm one’s self are also an important part of developing mindful awareness. At times, feelings of frustration may creep into the day. For example, a teacher and children are actively engaged in a book conversation. Then, the photographer arrives earlier than planned to take school photos. The teacher feels her frustration level rising. A quick and easy way to lower the frustration level involves taking a few slow, deep breaths to readjust, calm down and center one’s self.

**How can development of this skill strengthen your teaching practice?**

Frustrations and stress can arise during a teacher’s day. The practice of calming down and centering one’s self is a positive way to regain focus on the children, classroom, and teaching. When teachers are able to return to a mindfully aware state, they are able to interact calmly, and engage with children in the learning process. When stress levels lower, the thinking part of the brain that helps to regulate feelings and behaviors is able to function more effectively. Managing stress and frustrations helps teachers build a more positive sense of well-being and become more effective in the classroom.

References