

A Mindfulness Pilot Project at Dawn and Dusk Before and After School Program

(A follow-up to the article on Mindfulness in Child Care Bridges Fall 2017, Volume 3)

After the four-week Mindfulness Pilot Project with a group of 10 kindergarten children aged 4 and 5 years old, Winnipeg's Dawn and Dusk Before and After School Program Inc. discovered that their general approach to running their child care centre is conducive to Mindfulness-based activities for children.

With a view to exploring the potential of Mindfulness to enhance their programming, Dawn and Dusk was excited to give it a try. To that end, I developed a four-week Plan with three daily Mindfulness activities that they could do with the kindergarten children. I also went to Dawn and Dusk once a week to undertake some of the planned Mindfulness activities with the children. The activities in the Plan were based on three learning objectives agreed upon at the outset by Dawn and Dusk, namely, teaching children to:

- **Focus** and maintain sustained attention on whatever activity they are doing in the present moment.
- Experience **Calm, Stillness, and Quiet**.
- Develop **Personal Insight** into what is happening to them physically, emotionally and mentally in response to a given activity or situation.

The Plan contained three new activities for each day for a total of fifteen activities over a course of a week which were then repeated over the subsequent weeks with some variations. Based on my observations and feedback received from Dawn and Dusk, some clear guidelines for the future emerge from the Pilot.

Guidelines For Success In Implementing Mindfulness For Kindergarten Children

Scope

- In terms of the scope of a Mindfulness program, the originally planned three activities a day was over ambitious within the context of a before and after school kindergarten program that seeks to give the children as much unstructured play time as possible. Dawn and Dusk found that one Mindfulness activity a day would be more realistic with a smaller variety of Mindfulness activities to implement thereby facilitating repetition of activities with the children.

Goals

- The goals of teaching focus and attention, and practicing stillness were both successful in the Dawn and Dusk Pilot. The children were able, for short periods, to listen attentively to instructions and to engage in activities that foster quietness.
- One of the original goals - Personal insight - was difficult to achieve with kindergarten children and would be better suited to older children.

Activities

- To name a few of the Mindfulness activities that worked well with the Dawn and Dusk 4 and 5 year olds: a breathing exercise, Mindfulness stories, outdoor sensory appreciation, music meditation, and a game of mirroring each other.

Repetition

- Reinforcement happens through repetition of activities which is crucial to the success of instilling Mindfulness. In fact, to the extent there was an opportunity for Dawn and Dusk and I to repeat certain activities with the children, their comfort level and retention were noticeable. For instance, after just a couple of repetitions, the children were willing to take turns leading the group in a breathing exercise they had been taught; similarly, after observing a sound exercise with a chime, on a subsequent visit, the children were eager, when offered an opportunity, to take turns hiding then sounding a chime for the rest of the group to guess from where the sound was emanating.

Experience

- Having some experience with or exposure to Mindfulness helps those leading the program to add the dimension of going beyond doing the activities to seizing upon opportunities for teaching moments. The messaging to the children is what transforms an ordinary activity into a Mindful one. By way of example, I introduced the children to a smiling activity and then explained that a smile can be a gift that can be given to another when they notice that someone in class is sad or having a bad day.

Organic Approach

- Taking an organic approach to Mindfulness - i.e., weaving it into how one interacts with the children generally, not just when doing a particular Mindfulness activity - helps reinforce the benefits of Mindfulness. In fact, in their feedback Dawn and Dusk noted the value of an organic approach to Mindfulness in their program.

Engagement

- If initially the children don't seem engaged in a given Mindfulness activity, this is not necessarily cause to abandon practicing it. It is to be expected that throughout the practice of any Mindfulness activity with kindergarten children they will need on-going coaching and reminders to sit down, listen to instructions or refrain from talking. The key is to make the activities fun and age-appropriate, not something that the children dread.

Overall Conclusions

Dawn and Dusk noted that Mindfulness is important and valued within their day care centre's program as something that benefits the children and the staff. They feel that the experience of the Pilot highlighted for them that they are on the right track with the approach that they incorporate into their day to day activities to help the children focus and become aware of their emotions.

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