

NO PLACE LIKE OM:

MEDITATION MAKES A DIFFERENCE AT THE COUNTRY SCHOOL

by Holly Novick



The Country School has decades of experience teaching self-awareness, empathy, and interpersonal skills through emotional intelligence training, and we also know that humans are naturally

curious creatures, eager to learn and explore new ideas. Recently, we combined these two concepts into a new practice of daily meditation in all grades, from our tiniest preschool tots to our high-school-bound eighth graders. The results are nothing short of stunning.

Research underpins everything we do at the Country School, and we work hard to stay at the forefront of new ideas, especially those that benefit our students' well being. Recent evidence of the effects of mindfulness in elementary classrooms is quite promising. According to Alice Walton, medicine, psychology, and neuroscience contributor for *Forbes* magazine, regular meditation has a staggering array of benefits for children, including:

- Increased attention
- Increased attendance in school
- Higher grades
- A reprieve from outside trauma
- Better mental health
- Increased self-awareness
- Increased self-regulation
- Social-emotional development

PRESCHOOL PRACTICE

With potential benefits like these, it only made sense to put the theory to the test.

Here's how we did it.

Teacher Tina Quesada combined her extensive knowledge of child development with her ten years of experience facilitating meditation for adults and designed a mindfulness program that harnessed the preferences and needs of very



young children. Quesada explains that children need to move, and their boundless energy easily fuels imagination-based meditations:

Smell the Rose, Blow out the Candle - "Children inhale by smelling the rose, and exhale by blowing out the candle. This gets even more exciting for them when you have actual play props."

Listen to the Conch Shell - "The children sit in a circle and take turns listening to the conch shell. It is not about making children quiet. Rather, the goal is to give children an exercise in listening. As the year progresses, I ask the children what the conch shell 'says' to them. They get to exercise their imaginations and come up with a response.

"Science Shows Meditation Benefits Children's Brains And Behavior"

Go to your Happy Place - “Children are natural creators and artists. The practice is first modeled by the teacher. Sitting in a circle, we move one child at a time. The child closes their eyes and describes what their happy place is. Visualization is a powerful tool to exercise creativity and reduce stress.”

Blow Up the Balloon - “We do this one the most often. We sit in a circle and collectively place our hands over our bellies. As we inhale, the balloon “grows” and our hands extend out further and further until we pretend to “pop” the balloon. This one gets the most laughs.”



From her own research into meditative practices, Quesada knows that “bringing awareness to the breath physiologically impacts the body in positive ways.” The meditation techniques above give children a safe place to exercise their imaginations and share their thoughts with their peers. While outdoor time provides children with a place to outwardly express themselves, meditation models inner expression. It is not about sitting still, but rather experiencing another way of being. More specifically, it teaches a state of receptivity. It illustrates to children what calm *feels* like.”

The Dalai Lama describes his personal meditation practice as a perpetual investigation of the self: “It is crucial for a spiritual practitioner constantly to examine his or her attitudes and actions. If we examine ourselves every day with mindfulness and

mental alertness, checking our thoughts, motivations, and their manifestations in external behavior, a possibility for change and self-improvement can open within us. Although I myself cannot claim with confidence to have made any remarkable progress over the years, my desire and determination to change and improve is always firm” (“The Dalai Lama on his Own Mindfulness Practice”).

This is the core of emotional intelligence, being able to recognize and rest comfortably with our own thoughts and feelings, and in turn recognize the thoughts and feelings of other people.

It is abundantly clear, even in our youngest practitioners, that our students are connecting not only with the most visible and obvious benefits of meditation, such as calmness, stress relief, and a providing a peaceful environment, but they are also doing the hard work of getting in touch with the self. Through exercises like collective stillness, community circles, and collaborative problem-solving, we as a community are learning to take the time to examine our thoughts, our attitudes, our actions, and to find the space, breath and thoughtful time to understand ourselves and others better. This is the core of emotional intelligence, being able to recognize and rest comfortably with our own thoughts and feelings, and in turn recognize the thoughts and feelings of other people. As the Dalai Lama makes clear, the focus is on the investigation, not on the result. This is why making mindfulness a daily practice is so powerful.

ELEMENTARY PRACTICE

Our elementary teachers are instilling this practice into their classrooms in many ways. As our students move onward from their preschool days, meditation

practice often becomes more self-directed. First grade teacher Francie Iglow schedules the practice according to the needs of each day, sometimes choosing to let the day play out and insert meditation where it’s most needed. On the days where it is not specifically included in the daily schedule, the students notice and ask when it will be. “We usually do it after lunch recess,” Francie

says, “when the kids are quite active as well as getting tired. Their bodies and mind appear to be 'asking' for it at that time. The students usually pick a place in the room to meditate; they love being alone under a table, sitting in a teacher chair, or lying down in a corner of the room After meditating, they come back to the group calm and relaxed. All in all, meditation has been very successful for all of the first grade students, as well as for me.”

It’s not just the teachers who are witnessing positive classroom changes as a result of meditation; our students are recognizing the changes in themselves as well. A recent poll of fifth graders sheds light on the matter:

“The class is calmer, and I notice we don’t talk as much when the teacher is talking.” - Peyton

“I feel like it makes all of us more flexible and responsible. When we’re calm we are more independent. It gives me confidence because then I feel more well rounded.” - Julian

“When we meditate, sometimes it makes us a quiet class. When we don’t meditate it feels like we are less in control.” - Tommy

“I like that meditation makes me feel calm.” - Roman

“It helps me not talk as much.” - Liam



themselves psychologically and emotionally for those transitions.

From third grade on, our students take standardized tests, in our case, the Education Records Bureau tests, or ERBs. In 8th grade, ERBs help determine a student’s acceptance into the high school of her or his choice, which can make them quite nerve-racking. Middle school language arts teacher Carly Gilmore reports the particular benefit of meditation as preparation for large tasks. She tells us that “the 8th grade meditated every day before they started ERBs in my class, and I really felt like I saw an overall shift in the stress level in the room compared to the same group of kids last year, even some of our more anxious test takers.”

The Dalai Lama roots his daily practice in this truth: “Whether we are doing something good and worthwhile with our lives or not, time never waits but keeps flowing. Not only does time flow unhindered, but correspondingly our life too keeps moving onward all the time.” It is our hope that, with this daily mindfulness practice, we can help our students find the tools to make all of their lives truly good, truly worthwhile.

Sources:

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MIDDLE SCHOOL PRACTICE

Young Jace has stated quite simply a central tenet of meditation: the deep calm we can achieve is deceptively hard work. As we grow older and more adept at examining the self, that hard work pays off. We begin to see in greater focus the benefits outlined by Alice Walton. As our oldest students make their way through middle school, they begin to look past our borders into the unknown territory of high school and beyond, and meditation can help them prepare

MEDITATING WITH CHILDREN

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