

Solutions Newsletter

May 2021



Effective School
Solutions

Solutions is a newsletter published by ESS for parents, guardians and caretakers. Each issue highlights an important topic related to children's mental health and provides practical applications for parents in the home environment.

The Mindful Path to Mental Wellness

May is Mental Health Awareness Month in the United States and has been observed as such since 1949 when it was started by the National Association for Mental Health, now known as Mental Health America (MHA). Each year, MHA chooses a theme to promote mental wellness. For May 2021, MHA is continuing the "Tools2Thrive" theme that was adopted in 2020, with an emphasis on fostering mental wellness and increasing resilience during the pandemic, a time of extreme and unrelenting stress. Among the key messages for this year's awareness campaign is the idea that mental health is essential to everyone's overall health and well-being; that now more than ever it is critical to reduce the stigma associated with mental health struggles; and that there are practical tools that everyone can use to improve mental health and increase resiliency.

Many students returning to the classroom after a year of disconnection and uncertainty are feeling overwhelming stress. Parents can support children who are struggling with this transition by teaching them some simple mindfulness skills and helping them practice these skills on a daily basis. There are many benefits of practicing mindfulness including decreased stress and emotional reactivity, and improved self-regulation, concentration/attention, cognitive flexibility, and interpersonal effectiveness.

Mindfulness is defined as the ability to stay present with one's here-and-now experience, while adopting an accepting and non-judgmental attitude. Mindfulness can be fostered in many ways since virtually every human behavior (walking, exercise, washing dishes, listening to music, etc.) can be framed as a mindfulness practice. One of the simplest ways to practice being "in the moment", however, is a sitting meditation during which one observes the sensations and sounds that are associated with one's own breath, without judging or modifying the breath in any way, gently bringing focus back to the breath when the mind inevitably wanders.

Research has shown that school-based mindfulness interventions deliver promising results, especially in relation to improving students' cognitive performance and resilience to stress. Those who practice mindfulness in their daily lives are less vulnerable to the "what if" and catastrophizing thoughts that are associated with anxiety. They are less vulnerable to self-defeating thoughts about losses or perceived failures, and to the self-blame, regret, and "why me?" thinking that worsens depression. They are better able to create a "then vs. now" distinction between the present

and moments of trauma in the past. They are more likely to accept reality as it is, and to look for what is needed in the moment to solve a problem or to make things better. They are more "present" with others and thus more likely to be effective in interpersonal relationships.

Parents can help their children learn mindfulness skills in many ways:

- ✓ Parents can prompt "mindfulness moments" throughout the day. This can include deep or paced breathing, tossing/catching a bean bag, running in place, tapping out a song's rhythm, stretching, yoga poses, blowing bubbles, etc.
- ✓ Introduce a mindfulness minute at the beginning and end of each activity to help your child transition and re-focus attention. Instruct your child to silently focus on his/her experience in the moment, e.g. "I am sitting at the dining room table, it's warm in here, I have a pencil in my hand, I am starting my math homework, I'm starting to feel a little hungry, I hear my sister in the kitchen", etc.
- ✓ Numerous times each day, prompt your child to observe and describe the thoughts, feelings, and sensations that are associated with each activity to stay connected to the moment: while watching tv, doing homework, at dinner, while playing a sport, while preparing for bed, etc.
- ✓ Ask out about social-emotional learning programs at your child's school that are teaching mindfulness and other skills so that you can help your child practice at home.

Resources:

[Download the 2021 Mental Health Month Toolkit | Mental Health America \(mhanational.org\)](https://mhanational.org)

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