

Research Brief

Mindfulness for Youth Development Professionals

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Langer (2000) defined mindfulness as “a flexible state of mind in which we are actively engaged in the present, noticing new things and sensitive to context” (p. 220). Youth leaders can utilize mindfulness to improve the experience of participants during youth activities. Mindfulness results in greater sensitivity to an environment, being more open to new information, improved ability to structure perception differently, and an increase in awareness of problem-solving skills (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). People who develop a habit of being mindful enjoy a number of benefits. Among these are increased feelings of competence, fewer accidents, better memory, enhanced creativity, positive emotions, decreased stress, improved ability to focus attention, and even better health (Langer, 2000). The purpose of this research brief is to introduce the mindfulness concept, summarize select studies about mindfulness with youth, and, based on that research, provide a list of techniques youth leaders can use to increase mindfulness in their programs.

Mindfulness and Youth: Select Research

Mindfulness can be beneficial in virtually all youth development programs and learning environments. Learning experiences centered around mindfulness can serve to facilitate knowledge retention and lead to increased understanding (Ramsburg & Youmans, 2014). In school settings, mindfulness has been found to help gain and hold student attention (Langer, 2000; Semple et al., 2010). The use of mindfulness in schools has also shown improvements in focus, attention, and social skills among students (Napoli et al., 2005). A school-based mindfulness intervention for urban youth was found to decrease negative response patterns to stress (Mendelson et al., 2010). In schools and in formal learning environments, mindfulness has been shown to enable students to improve their learning and coping mechanisms.

The effectiveness of mindfulness has also been shown outside of schools where mindfulness was used for educational purposes to increase students' attention and participation. Among youth involved with summer camp, mindfulness was found to lower depression symptoms and anxiety over time (Liehr & Diaz, 2010). This is not a unique finding as studies indicate that mindfulness is also beneficial for emotional stability. Youth tend to live under a number of pressures which can lead to negative developments. Mindfulness can be beneficial for the emotional stability of youth. In a study of urban youth, mindfulness instruction mitigated negative results from stress and lead to lower levels of depression (Sibinga et al., 2016). A group mindfulness program intended to decrease and avert depression among teenagers was found to lead to lower levels of depression among adolescents (Raes et al., 2014). Similarly, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for children was found to be effective in lessening attention problems and helping to manage anxiety and other behavioral problems (Semple et al., 2010). Introducing youth to mindfulness can have positive results in helping them to develop to their full potential.

Select studies about mindfulness and youth development

- Ramsburg and Youmans (2014) conducted experiments to assess the effect of mindfulness experiences on students' retention of information they were taught. The groups who engaged in mindful meditation scored significantly higher on a quiz compared with their counterparts. Mindfulness helped to increase student retention by helping students to focus more on what mattered and may have minimized wasted energy or distraction.
- Zenner et al. (2014) examined prior research about mindfulness-based interventions in schools. The researchers found that such interventions led to improved cognitive performance and reduced stress, even among adolescents with behavioral disorders. Mindfulness can serve to regulate attention and emotions, elevate focus, and increase the cognitive capacity of learners in schools.
- Schonert-Reichl et al. (2015) conducted an experiment on a social and emotional learning program involving mindfulness. The study found that providing youth with mindfulness attention training along with opportunities to demonstrate gratitude, optimism, and kindness led to improved cognitive skill and increased social and emotional competence. Greater empathy and decreased depression symptoms were also observed in this research.

Based on these studies, we can see that mindfulness can be useful for youth. Mindfulness has been shown to help students improve their learning. It can be a tool utilized to manage stress, regulate emotions, and focus attention. Youth involvement with mindfulness training can be used along with opportunities to demonstrate other skills in order to help youth to become better-rounded individuals.

How you can promote mindfulness in your youth program

Youth can have a mindful experience in virtually any context. Mindfulness can be used effectively in schools or in youth programs, and in classroom settings or outdoors. The benefits of mindfulness for youth include better learning outcomes, increased attention, decreases in stress and depression, and greater ability to regulate emotions. It can be applied to youth camps and 4-H programs to generate greater interest among youth participants and enable them to have a more impactful experience. Select strategies follow.

- Avoid limiting learning experiences to factual information. Instead encourage youth to ask questions and share their unique perspectives. This general principle is critical to inviting exploration and directing mindful learning.
- Encourage youth to regard the object of your instruction in a mindful way. Mindfulness can be encouraged in a number of ways. A youth leader might, for example, encourage participants to notice details about something being observed. Colors, textures, aromas, possible theories related to the presence or appearance of the object may all be brought to learners' attention. Another strategy is to encourage learners to share different perspectives or initial impressions about the object being studied. All perspectives should be valued, respected, and considered.

- Encourage youth to practice mindfulness away from the program. This strategy will help youth participants develop a greater overall disposition towards being mindful. Sharing the benefits of mindfulness with parents or teachers can lead to a greater appreciation for it and other opportunities for youth to practice being mindful. This can help youth to become more mindful and less focused on distractors such as smart phones.
- Incorporate mindfulness into lessons by adding elements that motivate youth to engage their senses. Attitude, attention, and intention are three primary elements to mindfulness which are effective in working with children and adolescents (Burke 2010).
- Organize mindfulness workshops or sessions at camps or conferences. These programs would be a useful way to incorporate mindfulness into youth programs. Holding a regular time for participants to be active in meditation and reflection can help to reinforce lessons from prior activities. This could also be used to serve as an extension of other activities or lessons and could teach youth about the importance of quiet contemplation.

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