

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

Enhancing Cognitive and Social-Emotional Development Through a Simple-to-Administer Mindfulness-Based School Program for Elementary School Children: A Randomized Controlled Trial

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SUMMARY: Today's schools struggle to find the best ways to improve children's academic performance, while also considering their social-emotional needs. This study assessed elementary children's (9-11 years) social and emotional learning after being involved in a classroom-based mindfulness training. The results of this study suggest promising outcomes for children who engage in mindfulness practices.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Children who received mindfulness training improved on cognitive, emotional, and stress control as well as reported greater empathy, optimism, social awareness, and interest and enjoyment in school activities.
- Significant decreases of depression and peer-rated aggression (e.g., "starts fights", "breaks rules") was more prominent among children in the mindfulness group.
- Children's peers indicated more prosocial behaviors and increased peer acceptance in those that received the mindfulness curriculum.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Help develop modules to incorporate mindfulness practices in classroom settings
- Collaborate with organizations connected with military parents to emphasize the importance of mindfulness curriculum for all families

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide education to military families to enhance mindfulness practices among all family members in the home
- Enhance education, activities, and curriculum related to coping behaviors and dealing with stress

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage the development and continuation of programs that can promote mindfulness in Service members, their partners, and children
- Recommend professional development courses for teachers to educate them about the unique benefits of mindfulness training, especially for military children and families experiencing stress due to deployment or relocation

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited from four elementary schools in a large western Canadian city.
- The research protocol was described to the four principals and teachers of all fourth and fifth grade classrooms, however only one classroom in each school was considered eligible to participate.
- Two classrooms were randomly assigned to receive a classroom-based mindfulness curriculum (MindUP), while the other two classrooms received a program focusing on promoting social responsibility.
- Statistical analyses were conducted to examine the differences in curricula through pre and post-assessment of behavior and cognitive change in children.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample consisted of 100 fourth and fifth grade children from a predominately middle-class, suburban community. Race/ethnicity information for the sample was not provided.
- Participants' ages ranged from 9 to 11.16 years ($M = 10.24$, $SD = 0.53$); 46% were female and 54% male.
- Most children came from two-parent households (84%), 9% indicated living with mother only, and the remainder (7%) reported living in joint-custody arrangements (e.g., half time with mother or father).

LIMITATIONS

- Conclusions were based solely on children in fourth and fifth grade classrooms located in one geographic area, thus limiting the generalizability to children across the United States or in various grade levels.
- Participants were from middle-class families. The experience of engagement in mindfulness practices may be different for children who come from upper or lower income families.
- Due to small samples in each classroom, statistical analyses could only be conducted at the individual child level. This limits the ability to generalize the findings to the entire classroom.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine the effects of mindfulness practices on children's cognitive and behavioral control throughout the day and across various grade levels
- Investigate how implementation of the mindfulness-based curriculum may have affected teachers
- Explore the effects of the mindfulness curriculum for the entire classroom using larger, more diverse samples

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