Mindfulness Practices are Effective in Treating Childhood Stress and Anxiety

Erin Sheehan

Lesley University
Introduction

Children and teenagers are exhibiting increased levels of stress and anxiety in today’s fast paced world. They ingest secondhand stress from their parents and have mounting pressures of their own. According to a 2013 study conducted by Harris Interactice Inc., (on behalf of APA), Findings from Stress in America™: Are Teens Adopting Adults’ Stress Habits, teenage stress rivals that of adults. A growing body of research is showing that the inclusion of mindfulness practices into the lives of children brings positive results for their emotional, social, behavioral, and academic well-being. While the particular elements of the practices and their implementations vary, they are becoming more widespread as educators, parents, and other professionals look for solutions to better support the mental health of children and teenagers.

Discussion

Childhood stress comes from various sources and life circumstances. Modern culture exhibits a certain attachment to technology and instant communication that sometimes can be classified as addiction. Christopher Willard points to the existing trend of children using electronics, “...kids spend more time on passive entertainment such as portable game systems, cellphones, and television rather than actively engaging the world” (Willard, 2010). He suggests that mindfulness offers an effective path for people of all ages and backgrounds to develop a healthy response to a chaotic world around them and often inside of them.

Some of the stress felt during childhood and adolescence is a natural element of their development. According to a recent study, “Emotional distress is common in adolescence … is a critical phase in the construction of personal and social identity, and
vulnerabilities associated with it include depression, anxiety and negative mood states” (Martorell-Poveda et al., 2015). The study documents strategies for self-care for these children because, “research has shown that adolescents tend to reject and have negative attitudes toward seeking professional help, preferring self-help to treat these problems (Martorell-Poveda et al., 2015). Mindfulness practices can provide a useful tool for self-care.

Other examples of stress manifesting in the lives of children and teenagers are more problematic and tragic. Consider the example of the affluent suburb of Newton, Massachusetts where teenagers are carrying adult-level stress with pressure to achieve and perform at high levels. The town received a $30,000 grant to deal with the stress of teens and their parents. The conversation became even more important when three high school students committed suicide. They sought help from the Benson Henry Institute of Mind-Body Medicine to offer stress-reduction sessions for the parents and teens. Teenage stress is not limited to well-off communities where kids worry is usually linked to academic performance, college acceptance, and social events. Dr. Marilyn R. Wilcher of the Benson Henry Institute explained that many inner-city youth are exposed to real violence, and therefore their stress becomes, “are we going to be alive” (M. Wilcher, personal communication, 2014). In lower income communities, teens deal with the chronic stress that comes with living close to poverty.

Meditation and mindfulness practices are becoming more commonplace and popular in the United States. There are a number of organizations that have implemented programs to include meditation and mindfulness into school curriculums in the United States and the United Kingdom. The “Extra Edge” program from the Benson
Henry Institute for Mind-Body provides private classes with age-appropriate series of intellectual and experiential exercises that support learning to handle stress. Children complete the program with the tools they need to develop effective stress management skills that will serve them in learning and all throughout their lives (http://www.bensonhenryinstitute.org).

The David Lynch Foundation is a not-for-profit organization established in 2005 to fund the implementation of scientifically proven stress-reducing modalities, including the Transcendental Meditation program, for at-risk populations such as underserved inner-city students as well as several other populations of adults and children (http://thedavidlynchfoundation.org).

Luster Learning Institute is a not-for-profit that is dedicated to diminishing stress, anxiety, and the emotional and physical violence that prevents human beings from experiencing their highest potential (http://www.calmclassroom.com). Their Calm Classroom program was launched at three public schools in Chicago and as of 2013, has reached 70,000 students and their families, 4,000 teachers/school staff, and 1,000 administrators from 125 schools (http://www.calmclassroom.com).

The Hawn Foundation developed their research-based MindUP™ program to train educators and children. Students learn to self-regulate behavior and mindfully engage in focused concentration required for academic success (http://www.thehawnfoundation.org).

Studies are showing that mindfulness methods are providing better results for children and adolescents then previously used strategies that are also consistent, “As the tenth separate research study of the MDT development team, it has once again
confirmed the effectiveness of Mode Deactivation Therapy and its superiority over standard treatment protocols for a male adolescent population with behavior problems and severe trauma-related comorbid conditions” (Swart and Apsche, 2014). Mode Deactivation Therapy was formulated by, “combining unique assessment and process components with the acceptance and mindfulness elements of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Dialectical Behavior therapy as well as family systems theory” (Swart and Apsche, 2014). In their results, these researchers also pointed out that they believed the methods used would be equally effective for adolescent girls.

Mindfulness practices are also effective in aiding traumatized youth because, “There is evidence that using mind-body intervention can foster overall emotional regulation. Many who have experienced trauma lack the ability to cope with it. Teaching youth to observe and name their body sensations gives them the first steps to emotional regulation. Breathing, meditating, and the expressive arts can help restore mind-body balance” (Kuban, 2015).

The implementation of mindfulness strategies in assisting youth to develop a strong mental health can even be done effectively in small doses. According to a study “The pilot study showed support for the efficacy of “low-dose” mindfulness training in general. This study used just four 50-minute sessions in three weeks compared to adult mindfulness training programs that require as much as 26 hours and eight 2.5-hour classes over 8 weeks” (Jennings and Jennings, 2013).
Conclusion

The growing body of research showing improved behavior, test scores, retention, and emotional well-being as the result of mindfulness practices are giving caretakers and educators tools to promote the mental health of children and teenagers. If the trend continues, and more examples of strategic and effective implementations are cultivated, youth might show very different levels of stress in the future.

The possibility of creating social change drives the strategy of population level prevention. Influence one student and change one student. Influence many students and change culture. While no science clearly defines the percentage of students that must be reached to achieve population level effects, it seems logical and likely that the magnitude of effect will be directly proportional to the fraction of the population influenced” (Keeling 2004).
References


