

## **Mindfulness Education**

External stressors and chaotic lifestyles can make it difficult for children to know how to relax. Traumatic experiences in the home can also prevent children from noticing their feelings and learning how to understand their emotions. Teachers and schools play an important role in helping children and young people overcome these challenges.

For Indigenous peoples, learning is a process that involves spirit, emotion, mind, and body. To learn, a student must see the issue or concept by envisioning it through spiritual awareness. They must then relate to the issue or concept by feeling it through a relational connection to self. Then they come to know the issue or concept, by understanding it through a cognitive process. Finally, they act on the issue or concept by doing something about it. Indigenous learning is holistic, reflexive, experiential, relational, and achieved through patience and time.

When we educate students through the heart as well as the mind, we create space for mindfulness. Mindfulness is a mental state achieved by focusing on our awareness in the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting our feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations. Being mindful allows us to be in tune with our inner lives. It is often used as a therapeutic technique with survivors of trauma.

Using the principles of mindfulness in classrooms and school programs helps reduce stress, anxiety, depression, and other chronic health conditions in students. Mindfulness fosters connectivity with others, which can lead to greater empathy and compassion. It also enhances a child's sense of well-being, which can result in less emotional reactivity. Mindfulness techniques also improve focus and cognition.

Here are some tips on creating mindfulness-based classrooms and schools.

**Sanctuary:** Create a quiet, peaceful space or a special corner away from wall postings, computers, and other equipment. Add a cushion or two. If you have a small tent, set it up. The space should be used solely for practicing mindfulness, viewed as a special sanctuary for the child when they need time to focus or become aware of their feelings and emotions. It should not be a daily play area.

**Breathing:** Before engaging in a group discussion or before they begin reading or working quietly at their desks, ask your students to describe how their breath feels as it enters and exits the body. Is it warm? Is it cool? Do they notice any other sensations? Encourage them to focus on what a deep breath feels like throughout their body. Do they notice any effects that their breathing has on muscle tension (tightness) that they may be holding onto anywhere in their bodies? It can help if children visualize their breath by adding colours or textures. Encourage the children's own descriptions – don't try to direct it.

**Mindful Eating:** Schools teach absolutely awful eating habits! We ask children to eat quickly in noisy, stressful lunchrooms, and then we encourage them to run outside and play, which inhibits proper digestion. Introduce the concept of mindful eating with a small

chunk of apple, a single grape, or a raisin. Have them hold the fruit and really feel it, looking closely at the colours and textures. Then have them hold the fruit on their tongue, tasting it without biting into it. Then ask them to chew it 20 times before swallowing. This illustrates how often we quickly chew our food without experiencing the taste or texture or noticing when we are full. Using all of their senses in this exercise teaches children to fully engage with the pleasurable process of eating – and with the relaxed way their body should feel when they eat.

**Mindful Movement:** Have students stand and stretch their bodies with their arms raised up high, imagining they are reaching for the stars or moon. Ask them about the bodily sensations they are experiencing: How does it feel to stretch your body fully? What do you notice about your breathing when you stretch? What do you notice about your body after you stretch? As an exercise, ask students to plant their feet firmly on the ground, with arms by their sides. Ask them to move their bodies side to side, allowing their arms to swing where they may. This may create some laughter or comments. Keep it fun! This is a shared process that should be joyful in its expression. The aim is to release tension while also encouraging students to be present in their mind, body, and spirit.

**Educator Practice:** Educators can't teach mindfulness without engaging in mindfulness. When an educator is experiencing a sense of awareness and presence within themselves, it enables the children to understand the essence of mindfulness on a much deeper level. Experiencing whatever is occurring in the present moment, without judgment, also has positive effects on an educator's practice. When teachers are relaxed, self-aware, and focused, they are less judgmental and emotionally reactive when dealing with challenging behaviours inside the classroom.