

FOCUS on Special Education

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Nurturing Mindfulness in Today's Youth

In looking for a gift for a friend who works in special education, I found one intriguing option on Etsy: A mug which states "Working in special education is easy. Like riding a bike. Except the bike is on fire. You're on fire. Everything's on fire." I laughed at that because it seems so painfully true at times. In our positions, each day brings unique challenges and opportunities, which is one of the joys that draws us to this profession. But ongoing challenges are also stressful, and sometimes draining and anxiety-producing. Though we commonly make things look easy, like the duck who seems to glide effortlessly across a pond, we're usually paddling furiously to stay afloat. And day after day and year after year we continue, because we love the youth we work so hard for and want to see them succeed.



Most of us handle this constant stress by use of certain coping skills we developed when young, primarily from interactions with adults who cared for us. In fact, we're wired to develop these skills! All humans possess mirror neurons which fire their signals, triggering learning, when observing a behavior. You can see them especially active in infants, who study our

faces intently and then proceed to imitate our facial expressions, reflect our moods, and attempt to imitate sounds we make. These neurons are the reason we acquire language, learn to imitate others in our surroundings, have empathy, and learn to regulate our emotions. Think of every social interaction as a learning opportunity, because it is! Those skills we possess (cont on page 3)

REVIEW OF TIMECLOCK/MISSED PUNCH PROCEDURES

Effective November 1, all missed punches will need to be sent to your immediate supervisor or principal for authorization. They will then send an email to Shelly or Kim with the missed time correction.

It is also important that if you miss a clock in/out, you need to continue to the next accurate clock in/out time. Don't clock in/out late to make up for the next time being out of sequence. Examples of

this are included in a guidance document attached to the email I am sending out with this newsletter, but if you need it again, please contact Shelly or Kim and they will help you to perfect the process. Thank you!

FREQUENTLY (RECENTLY) ASKED QUESTIONS

Often in Special Education, questions arise which you may need the answer to and others may benefit from that answer as well. Each month we will include a few of these questions, so please don't hesitate to ask.

Q: If we just had an IEP meeting, why do we still need to do progress reports?

A: Progress Reports are a legal requirement for all students' IEPs, to be delivered at regular intervals the same as general education students are to receive progress reports. Because our students are both general education students as well as students with disabilities, so they are to receive both. If you have just held the IEP, that's fine, but the progress reports should have been presented at that meeting, or included afterward as a part of the quarterly report-out. Please remember that in all circumstances, our goals are the best barometer for the achievement of our students based upon their needs, and they are a legal requirement. Do your progress reports on the day they are due please.

Q: Why do some students qualify for music therapy and some do not? A lot of our students love music and would benefit, but it seems rather random whether they get it or not.

A: The question as to whether or not students

qualify for music therapy comes down to the question of whether it is a necessity in order for the child to make progress on their IEP goals. Certainly most children would benefit from music therapy but benefit is not the same as need. Our music therapists do a great job of evaluating the effectiveness of the use of music in making progress on those goals which can actually be measured when the element of music is incorporated into their instruction, but there are relatively few students for whom this approach is necessary. That doesn't mean that you as a case manager shouldn't incorporate music into your instruction whenever possible as that has been found to be a very effective teaching tool.

Q: It seems like we are getting a lot more referrals for evaluation this year. Is this due to when we went remote in 2020?

A: Certainly the time when our students were

in a remote or hybrid learning environment didn't help our students who struggle. But that alone shouldn't be causing an increase in referrals. Part of the problem is that we don't always use the MTSS process to it's designed end in incorporating interventions in the classroom with fidelity. Let's face it—it's hard to find enough time in the day to address the needs of all of our learners. Because MTSS is not a special education function, we have limited influence on how those processes are carried out, and there often aren't enough interventionists around for the needs that are presented. The best that you can do is work closely with your teams to make sure that the CARE or SIT teams that are in place in your buildings are asking the right questions about the students that are brought to them to avoid overidentifying students who really just need a little more support in their general classrooms. Anytime there is a question, please don't hesitate to reach out to us or your psychologist.

MINDFULNESS AND YOUTH (CONT. FROM PG. 1)

are the reason that despite the stresses in our lives, most of the time we stay chill when things seem to be on fire, we don't catastrophize, and we generally stay calm when our kids' emotions run amok. It's terrific that we can do so, because each instance in which we demonstrate calm and focus when youth around us are unfocused and/or emotionally dysregulated contributes to their ability to develop those skills themselves. We might label these healthy, adaptive skills as mindfulness. While most of us tend to stay well-grounded most of the time, it's a skill we had to develop over time. Since it's usually not deliberately cultured, instead coming from social interactions, this means some youth struggle mightily with this skill. For instance, those raised by caregivers who themselves aren't well-grounded and whose emotions are volatile and unpredictable are likely to struggle with these issues themselves. The main symptoms of this in youth we

serve are an inability to hold focus, difficulty controlling emotions, and increased stress from being focused on the wrong things such as constant worry over things we don't control. The importance of these skills in having a well-adjusted life has led some to wonder whether we should deliberately teach these skills to youth who lack them. A search for the term "mindfulness" in the abstract and keywords of a major research database finds virtually no publications on the topic until around 20 years ago, when about a dozen articles were published a year. Then interest in the topic exploded, as a mindfulness-based intervention commonly deployed with heart attack patients was found to lead to much better medical outcomes. By 2006, more than 100 articles were being published on mindfulness each year, by 2008 that exceeded 200 a year, and by 2010 we reached the point

we are at today with about 400 scholarly articles published each year. Generally, those articles agree that mindfulness is a state characterized by paying focused and non-judgmental attention to the present moment. It involves observing one's thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations without reacting or passing judgement. Research generally concludes that teaching mindful practices offer a multitude of advantages for youth, especially those who have developmental or social-emotional concerns. These benefits include:

1. Enhanced Focus and Attention: Students improve their concentration and impulse control, enabling better engagement with classroom activities.
2. Emotional Regulation: Special needs students often grapple with heightened emotions. Mindfulness empowers them with tools to manage their feelings, reduce anxiety, and develop resilience.
3. Improved Social Skills: Mindfulness fosters empathy and

(continued on page 5)

Thank you to all of our teachers and service providers for continuing to do a great job with all of our students! Your efforts in managing the day-to-day behaviors and academic needs of your very diverse kids are greatly appreciated!!!

ECKCE Still in Need of More Paraprofessionals

We are blessed to have a great group of paraprofessionals this year—more than we have had for the last 3 years, and we are extremely grateful.

However, the needs of our kiddos are so diverse and the numbers are increasing, which creates the need for even more support. We

are still looking for at least one more per building on average, so if you hear of anyone who may still be looking for opportunities to switch to a more fulfilling job, please have them apply and join our team!



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KU Para to Teacher Pathway Project Announced

The University of Kansas has just announced a new low-incidence disability pathway for paraeducators, beginning in the Summer of 2024 which will pay tuition and fees for 35 candidates who are interested in becoming teachers for life skills programs. Applications are currently being accepted through May

of 2024 with classes beginning in July. The program also has a stipend attached to cover the cost of books and dependent care. I will be attending an informational meeting in February to learn more, but if you are interested in participating, please let me know and I can assist you in the application process. In order to be eligible you

must have a bachelors' degree and one year as a paraprofessional. For the rest of the eligibility details, please visit the application link at <https://rockcha.lk/para-teacher-pathway> or for additional questions, you can email the program at para2teacher@ku.edu. Again, please let me know and I will be glad to help you apply!

PARAPROFSSIONAL NEWS AND NOTES

We are delighted to know that so many of you are contributing to the lives of our students in all three districts! This year we have been able to bring so many new folks into our schools, but we can always welcome more. If you have friends who are thinking about going into education and are looking for a great job, please send them our way!

We had an update to

the new clock-in system which caused a few glitches, but we think we have those addressed at this point. Thanks for your patience in this changeover.

There have been a few instances of employees needing to be reminded to not be on their phones during school hours until you are clocked out for lunch or end of day. Remember that you are not only a support

for the students you are working with, you are also an example.

Lastly, please remember to clock in and out for lunch within the timeline your supervisor has given you—you need to take at least 20 and no more than 40 minutes for lunch unless otherwise arranged. Your students are counting on you being prompt as they need that consistency. As always, thanks for all that you to support our students in all districts!

MINDFULNESS AND YOUTH BY DR. JIM PERSINGER (CONT. FROM PG. 3)

self-awareness, leading to better interpersonal relationships and conflict resolution abilities.

4. Academic Achievement: Students who practice mindfulness often exhibit improved academic performance, as their ability to concentrate and retain information is enhanced.

5. Stress Reduction: Special education can be demanding for both students and teachers. Mindfulness provides a powerful coping mechanism, reducing stress and burnout.

The result of this research is that some countries now require mindfulness training in their schools. This includes Portugal, Sweden, the Netherlands, and most recently a pilot program in 370 schools the UK, intended to expand nationally. Introducing the initiative as intended to combat a rise in emotional challenges in youth, Damian Hinds, Secretary of Education, said:

“Children will start to be introduced gradually to issues around mental health, well-being, and happiness right from the start of primary school.”

Numerous free resources exist to explore mindfulness in education. If you are curious about this, Mind Up is perhaps the most evidence-based mindfulness program intended for schools. Founded in 2003 by the actress Goldie Hawn through her foundation, the Mind Up curriculum

resulted from a collaboration of neuroscientists, psychologists and educators relying on research to establish effective practices for youth. Free courses can be taken via their site, and YouTube hosts many of their videos focused on different techniques at different age levels. Besides the MindUp channel, YouTube is a great resource for many other great videos demonstrating mindfulness techniques for K-12 youth.

Some basic, effective techniques you might try, whether as practice to improve children’s mindfulness or as intervention when needed to help a child become focused and grounded, include:

1. Breathing: When many talk about mindfulness, they equate it to breathing meditation, though it’s so much more! That said, deep breathing exercises have powerfully physiological, calming effects. Google belly breathing, feather breathing, or just deep breathing exercises for kids to get ideas or try these search terms in YouTube. What this might look like for a young child learning a technique is to give them a feather and ask them to hold it in front of their mouths, and breathe in so slowly the feather doesn’t move, then watch the feather closely when they deeply exhale to see how it moves

do this for 3-5 breaths for increased focus.

2. Feet and seat: Ask them to listen carefully because you have an important question – “Think really hard about your feet. Focus on your left foot. Is it... warmer than your right foot?” It’s a silly question, which is helpful in getting them to focus! Variations of this are to then ask if one shoe is a little tighter than the other, if they can tell whether either of their socks is bunched up and where, etc. Or if the child is sitting, they can be asked to focus on their seat, e.g., “where your body is touching the chair, where is it pressing the hardest? The lightest? Is part of the chair colder than another part?” A child can’t answer these questions while remaining angry or anxious.

3. Mindful listening: In a quiet place, ask the child what background noises they hear. For instance, until they focus on it, they will have tuned out the sound of climate control, road noise from outside the building, or distant voices down a hall. Or ring a bell or triangle and ask them to raise their hand when they can’t hear it any longer.

4. Mindful movement: When the child is transitioning, such as sitting on the floor to standing, standing to sitting in a chair, standing up from their desk and walking a few feet to turn in a paper, try this: Challenge them to take at least to the count of 12 to complete their movement. Then very slowly count to 12 as the child stands, sits, or moves to a nearby location. If they go to fast, have them start over. This takes tremendous focus, especially to keep one’s balance, and is much

harder than it looks as those who have done tai chi can attest to. Another technique to try when a child is a bit hyperactive, for instance from having just come in from recess, is to try a rocking meditation. For instance, ask them to sit on the floor, and let them know that you can see they have a lot of energy, so you want them to enthusiastically pretend they are in a rocking chair. Let them go all out for a few seconds, then instruct them to slow down a bit, then again to slow down a bit, and again. You can help them set the pace by saying, “rocking, rocking, rocking” at whatever pace you want them to match, and they will reflexively match that pace. In a couple of minutes when they reach the point moving like a sloth, challenge them to see if they can move so slowly that you can’t tell that they are rocking. At this point, it’s their heart they will begin to focus on, as it will continue to make them imperceptibly rock. Little-known but compelling research says that movement-based techniques are preferred to those focused on breath!

Regularly practicing these techniques with some of your students, while it will take a few minutes out of each day, is expected to be a great return on investment as increased focus and emotional regulation helps youth be more available for learning. Better yet, you will have capitalized on their mirror neurons and reflexive imitation of others to teach them a healthy coping strategy.