

# Alternative Approaches: Implementing Mindfulness Practices in the Classroom to Improve Challenging Behaviors

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## Abstract

Managing challenging student behaviors can be difficult for any educator. Lacking knowledge of research-based, positively oriented behavior interventions, educators may resort to punitive, reactive disciplinary strategies. Mindfulness is a positive, proactive approach that may help students with emotional and behavioral disorders improve their ability to regulate their own behaviors. This discussion paper describes research-informed mindfulness practices that teachers can use in their classrooms to address challenging behavior.

## Keywords

mindfulness, emotional and behavioral disorders, alternative approaches

Almost one fifth of students in schools experience some type of social and/or emotional challenges (Thompson, 2011). These challenges can manifest themselves in externalizing behaviors such as disruptive behaviors or fighting and/or internalizing behaviors such as anxiety or depression. The most significant behavioral displays may result in students being identified with emotional and behavior disorders (EBD; Kauffman & Landrum, 2013). Although students with EBD comprise less than 1% of the total student population and 6% of students with disabilities (U. S. Department of Education, 2016), they have considerably poorer outcomes compared with students in any other category of disability (Thompson, 2011). Specifically, students with EBD have the largest high school dropout rate, receive the most in- and out-of-school suspensions and expulsions (Sanford et al., 2011), are at a greater risk for academic failure (Gable, Tonelson, Sheth, Wilson, & Park, 2012), and have the most negative postschool outcomes when comparisons are made with students in other disability categories (Sanford et al., 2011).

Although educators are not able to “handpick” students for their classrooms, they do possess the ability to determine which strategies to use when working with students exhibiting challenging behaviors. Research has shown a primary stressor faced by educators is problematic student behavior (Buchanan, Gueldner, Tran, & Merrell, 2009; Justice & Espinoza, 2007). Increasingly, educators are encountering students whose behaviors require intervention (Ducharme & Shecter, 2011).

Managing challenging student behaviors can be difficult for both novice and veteran educators (Atici, 2007). Lacking

knowledge of research-based, positive behavior interventions, educators may resort to punitive, reactive disciplinary strategies (Ducharme & Shecter, 2011). Patterns of classroom management are often established where increasingly difficult behaviors are met with increasingly punitive consequences (Clunies-Ross, Little, & Kienhuis, 2008). Relying on punitive consequences can be ineffective. Therefore, it is imperative for educators to implement positive, research- or evidence-based interventions that meet the needs of all students, particularly students with EBD. Teachers and school personnel have been encouraged to move away from punitive consequences and toward positive behavioral supports and interventions (Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, Myers, & Sugai, 2008). While many school personnel are tasked with reducing negative student behaviors, it can be difficult identifying and implementing effective programs that are feasible.

Researchers have defined social and emotional learning (SEL) as the ability for children and adults to understand, manage, and express emotions; build and maintain positive relationships; set and attain goals; and make responsible decisions (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2018). According to CASEL (2015), mindfulness—defined as being aware of what is

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happening in the present moment within and around one's self with acceptance and curiosity in a nonjudgmental way (Kabat-Zinn, 1990)—is considered to be an innovative practice aligned with SEL that has shown promise for reducing challenging student behavior. Mindfulness can be integrated into the classroom setting to improve self-awareness and class relationships, which, in turn, may promote learning across content areas for all students (Felver, Celis-de-Hoyos, Tezanos, & Singh, 2016; Meiklejohn et al., 2012). Mindfulness interventions are designed to be implemented with all children and youth to prevent or reduce risk factors while promoting protective factors, increasing the likelihood of successful outcomes for students. Moreover, unlike some interventions, there is no cost associated with practicing mindfulness. Although CASEL (2015) supported mindfulness as a universal intervention, research supports positive effects for students exhibiting more challenging behaviors, including students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, depression, or anger issues (Mendelson et al., 2010; Saltzman, 2014; Singh, Wahler, Adkins, & Myers, 2003). The purpose of this article is to discuss how classroom teachers can incorporate mindfulness strategies to help students with EBD and improve the overall classroom environment.

## What Is Mindfulness?

Again, mindfulness is being aware of what is happening in the present moment within and around one's self with acceptance and curiosity in a nonjudgmental way (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Practicing mindfulness means being fully present in what is happening in the here and now without dwelling on the past or worrying about the future. There are three fundamental components of mindfulness: intention, attention, and attitude (Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006). These components are not considered separate states by mindfulness researchers and practitioners; rather, they are believed to be interwoven phases that occur concurrently. Intention is described as helping individuals determine what is possible and can serve as a reminder for why a person has chosen to practice mindfulness (Shapiro et al., 2006). Attention is said to involve focusing on internal and external experiences moment to moment. Attitude is considered to encompass the practicing of openness, acceptance, and kindness.

Over the past several decades, societal interest in the benefits of practicing mindfulness has grown (Meiklejohn et al., 2012). Recently, interest in mindfulness has been described in school settings. Felver, Frank, and McEachern (2014) conducted a study with three elementary school students who displayed low levels of academic engagement and high levels of disruptive behavior. The students were taught a self-control strategy based on mindfulness called Soles of the Feet (Singh et al., 2003). The students learned

to shift their attention and awareness to the soles of their feet and stay calm when they found themselves becoming upset (Felver et al., 2014). Data indicated that all three participants spent less time displaying off-task behavior and more time engaged in academic tasks in the classroom after being taught the strategy. The Soles of the Feet intervention was also shown to result in a substantial reduction of aggressive behaviors demonstrated by an adult with intellectual disabilities and mental illness (Singh et al., 2003).

We believe that mindfulness interventions implemented in schools can result in many promising outcomes for students. Research suggests that mindfulness practices can result in reduced stress, anxiety, and depression and may contribute to improvements in mental health, reduced symptoms of ADHD, and reductions in behavioral and anger management problems for children and youth (Mendelson et al., 2010; Saltzman, 2014; van de Weijer-Bergsma, Formsma, de Bruin, & Bögels, 2012; Zylowska et al., 2008). As one example, Zylowska et al. (2008) examined the effects of a mindfulness intervention involving a sitting meditation and mindful awareness of daily activities among adults and adolescents who had been diagnosed either at the time of the study, or in the past, with ADHD. Seventy-eight percent of participants reported a reduction in their total ADHD symptoms, with 30% of participants reporting a clinically significant improvement (Zylowska et al., 2008). Martinez and Zhao (2018) sought to determine the impact of a mindfulness intervention among a small number of seventh- and eighth-grade students who demonstrated high numbers of office referrals for problematic behavior. The intervention involved participants listening to earbuds to receive guided practice in concentrating on their breathing. Students who participated in the intervention received significantly fewer office discipline referrals in comparison with control group participants (Martinez & Zhao, 2018).

In their review of evidence-based practices supporting mental health of children and youth, Vidair, Sauro, Blocher, Scudellari, and Hoagwood (2014) highlighted a study examining the effects of a mindfulness intervention incorporating yoga postures and breathing exercises implemented with fourth- and fifth-grade students (Mendelson et al., 2010). Participants evidenced statistically significant improvements on their scores in rumination, intrusive thoughts, and emotional arousal in comparison with control group participants.

There is also emerging empirical research supporting the effectiveness of mindfulness interventions on outcomes for youth with clinical levels of internalizing and externalizing behaviors (e.g., Biegel, Brown, Shapiro, & Schubert, 2009; Bögels, Hoogstad, van Dun, de Schutter, & Restifo, 2008). Biegel et al. (2009) sought to incorporate mindfulness into the daily lives of adolescents who were either receiving psychiatric care at the time of the study or had previously

received psychiatric care. The participants were taught formal mindfulness practices including body scan meditation, sitting meditation, Hatha yoga, and walking meditation. Comparing pretest with posttest assessments conducted after 8 weeks of intervention, participants evidenced significant improvements with large effect sizes on posttest assessments in the following areas: (a) decreased sleep disruptions, (b) decreased obsessive thought patterns, (c) increased quality of interpersonal relationships, (d) decreased depression, (e) decreased anxiety, and (f) decreased feelings of hostility. Bögels et al. (2008) examined a mindfulness intervention in a similar manner. Adolescents ranged in age from 11 to 18 years and had a primary diagnosis of ADHD, oppositional defiant/compulsive disorder, or autism. Participants were first given instruction in the mindfulness practices of body scanning, mindful breathing, breathing space, and mindfulness of thoughts and sounds. Participants were assessed after 8 weeks of intervention and evidenced statistically significant improvements from pretest to posttest in the following areas: (a) increased children's self-rated goals, (b) increased parent-rated child goals, (c) decreased self-reported Child Behavior Checklist scores (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991), and (d) decreased parent-reported CBCL scores.

Although there has yet to be a determination that mindfulness practices are evidence-based practices for students with or at risk for EBD through application of standards such as those of the Council for Exceptional Children (2014), we believe that the evidence base that we have highlighted suggests that mindfulness practices can teach students to manage their behavior from the inside out to improve self-awareness and encourage self-management (Semple, Lee, Rosa, & Miller, 2010). As delineated above, mindfulness strategies are positive, proactive approaches that may help students with EBD improve their ability to regulate their own behaviors (Singh et al., 2007; Solar, 2013; Thompson, 2011). Ultimately, students with EBD need to be taught how to regulate their behaviors (Moore, Anderson, Glassenbury, Lang, & Didden, 2013). In what follows, we present information and strategies related to practicing mindfulness that we believe teachers can use in their classrooms to improve the behavioral performance of students with or at risk for EBD. We first begin with how practicing mindfulness can improve teachers' well-being.

## Teachers Practicing Mindfulness

Before implementing mindfulness in the classroom, it can be important for teachers to establish their own personal practice because it may be difficult to teach something without first being knowledgeable of it (Saltzman, 2014). To begin, we believe that the simplest thing to do is to sit mindfully for 15 to 30 min daily. The point of the sitting

practice is to focus one's attention on one's breath, noticing when one's mind begins to wander. When attention wanders from one's own breathing, we suggest that one gently bring attention back to the breath. The sitting practice can help individuals notice preferences, tendencies, and habits within the mind. Typically, people find it beneficial to have support when practicing mindfulness. There are numerous resources available for individuals interested in developing a mindfulness practice. Table 1 lists books and websites selected because they are specific to teachers. Table 1 also lists several resources teachers can use when practicing mindfulness with students in the classroom.

Often teachers are not prepared for the social and emotional demands of the classroom (Jennings, 2015). Teachers face a variety of stressors on a daily basis (e.g., high stakes testing, students with behavior problems), which can lead to teacher burnout, being discouraged, and contemplating resigning from teaching. When practicing mindfulness, teachers can begin recognizing their own emotions and proactively regulate how they react. Mindfulness has the ability to help increase teachers' awareness of what is causing some students to demonstrate challenging behavior. Teachers may also strengthen student relationships and build positive learning environments when practicing mindfulness. In their review of mindfulness practices in kindergarten through 12th grade, Meiklejohn et al. (2012) found teachers practicing mindfulness can increase their sense of well-being, self-efficacy, ability to effectively manage classroom behaviors, and capacity to nurture supportive relationships with students.

## Facilitating Student Mindfulness Practices in the Classroom

Meiklejohn et al. (2012) suggested that the practice of mindfulness involves directing one's attention to a specific focus (e.g., breath, sensation, feeling) or other attentional "anchor." There is an expectation by mindfulness researchers and practitioners that one's thinking will frequently wander away from the chosen anchor to spontaneously occurring thoughts or feelings. The intention of mindful breathing is to notice the thoughts and feelings with acceptance and, when necessary, bring the focus back to the anchor. Being aware of whatever thoughts or feelings a person has with acceptance and nonjudgment is believed to allow for increased clarity of attention and may lead to being less reactive in the body's response to physiological stress (Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Saltzman, 2014). There are a variety of times throughout the day that mindful breathing may be practiced, including at the start of the day/class, during transition times, after lunch, or at the end of the day/class (Butler & Hoaldrige-Dopkins, 2017). Anecdotal data, surveys, or questionnaires can be collected from students to determine when they prefer

**Table 1.** Mindfulness Resources for Teachers.

Independent practice	Mindfulness in the classroom
Mindful Teachers— <a href="http://www.mindfulteachers.org">www.mindfulteachers.org</a>	Mindfulness in Schools— <a href="https://empoweringeducation.org/mindfulness-in-schools/?gclid=EAlaIqobChMIqrTVpPzb2glVA57ACh3MDAENEAAYASAAEgKv_D_BwE">https://empoweringeducation.org/mindfulness-in-schools/?gclid=EAlaIqobChMIqrTVpPzb2glVA57ACh3MDAENEAAYASAAEgKv_D_BwE</a>
<i>Mindfulness for Teachers: Simple Skills for Peace and Productivity in the Classroom</i> by Patricia Jennings (2015a)	<i>Mindful Games Activity Cards: 55 Fun Ways to Share Mindfulness with Kids and Teens</i> by Kaiser Greenland and Annaka Harris (2017)
<i>To Introduce Yoga and Mindfulness in the Classroom</i> — <a href="http://video.edweek.org/detail/video/5462709205001/to-introduce-yoga-and-mindfulness-in-the-classroom-this-district-starts-with-its-teachers?autoStart=true&amp;q=To%20introduce%20yoga%20and%20mindfulness%20in%20the%20classroom">http://video.edweek.org/detail/video/5462709205001/to-introduce-yoga-and-mindfulness-in-the-classroom-this-district-starts-with-its-teachers?autoStart=true&amp;q=To%20introduce%20yoga%20and%20mindfulness%20in%20the%20classroom</a>	<i>Mindful Kids: 50 Activities for Kindness, Focus, &amp; Calm</i> by Whitney Stewart (2017)
<i>Happy Teachers Change the World</i> by Thich Nhat Hanh	<i>Sitting Still Like a Frog: Mindfulness Exercises for Kids and Their Parents</i> by Eline Snel (2013)
<i>Mindful Teaching and Teaching Mindfulness: A Guide for Anyone Who Teaches Anything</i> by Deborah David and Suki Sheth (2009)	<i>Breathe Like a Bear: 30 Mindful Moments for Kids to Feel Calm and Focused Anytime, Anywhere</i> by Kira Willey and Anni Betts (2017)
<i>Mindfulness</i> by Greater Good Science Center (2018) <a href="https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/mindfulness">https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/mindfulness</a>	<i>Teach, Breathe, Learn: Mindfulness In and Out of the Classroom</i> by Meena Srinivasan (2014)
<i>Seven Ways Mindfulness Can Help Teachers</i> — <a href="https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/seven_ways_mindfulness_can_help_teachers">https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/seven_ways_mindfulness_can_help_teachers</a>	<i>The Mindful Education Workbook: Lessons for Teaching Mindfulness to Students</i> by Daniel Rechtschaffen (2016)
Mindfulness in Schools Project (2018). <a href="https://mindfulnessinschools.org/">https://mindfulnessinschools.org/</a>	<i>Learning to Breathe</i> (2018). <a href="https://learning2breathe.org/">https://learning2breathe.org/</a>

practicing mindfulness and if the practices are having a positive impact (Positive Psychology Program, 2017). In addition, direct data (e.g., observations) can be collected to determine if the mindfulness practice is affecting student behavior and the classroom environment. Regarding students with or at risk for EBD, teachers can select specific behaviors to target when collecting data to determine if mindfulness practices are reducing problem behavior(s). Moreover, school administration may want to collect survey data from students and teachers.

We believe that mindfulness practices are best taught to students with EBD when they are feeling calm. Over time, children and youth can also be taught to practice independently, particularly when they are feeling angry or upset (Saltzman, 2014). Teachers can cue their students by asking them if a break is needed to practice mindfulness. Furthermore, students can be taught to ask for a break to practice mindfulness. There are many strategies teachers can use to practice mindfulness in the classroom (see Table 1 for additional resources). Below, we provide three detailed examples of mindfulness practices teachers can implement in a classroom setting that have been found to help students with EBD (e.g., Bögels et al., 2008; Mendelson et al., 2010; Singh et al., 2003).

### Mindful Breathing

*Dillon is a hypothetical fifth-grade student with EBD who has been receiving instruction in a general education*

*classroom setting. When Dillon becomes upset in class, he often kicks his chair or desk, rips his papers, or begins shouting out and using profanity. Due to his behaviors, Dillon's Individualized Education Program (IEP) team members met and changed his educational setting from a general education classroom to a self-contained classroom, designed specifically for students with challenging behaviors, where he can receive small group and one-on-one instruction and learn how to better manage his behaviors. Although Dillon has been placed in the self-contained classroom, his IEP team's goal is to demonstrate appropriate anger management skills in the general education setting. Data revealed that the classroom management practices in place were having little effect on instances of challenging behavior demonstrated by Dillon.*

*Mrs. Reese, the teacher in the self-contained class, and Mrs. Hamilton, the paraprofessional in the classroom, attended a professional development training on implementing mindfulness for students who demonstrate challenging behaviors. Mrs. Reese and Mrs. Hamilton learned that practicing mindfulness promotes positive classroom management practices and that mindfulness can potentially help their own personal well-being by reducing stress. After the training, Mrs. Reese and Mrs. Hamilton decided to incorporate mindfulness as a complementary strategy to Dillon's individualized, function-based behavior plan. It was their hope to see a positive change in themselves and in their students, including Dillon, and share what they learned with other teachers at the school.*

**Table 2.** Steps to Teach Mindful Breathing: Leading the Game.

Step	Directions
1.	Lie on your back with your legs flat on the floor and your arms by your sides. If you like, you can close your eyes. Feel the back of your head touching the floor. Now feel your shoulders, your upper back, your arms, your hands, your lower back, your legs, and your feet touching the floor.
2.	Notice what it feels like to breathe in and out. There's no right or wrong way to breathe. It doesn't matter if your breathing is fast or slow, deep or shallow.
3.	Pay close attention to your in-breath. Can you notice when you first start to breathe in and then follow the feeling of your in-breath all the way to the very first moment of your out-breath? If it's hard to keep your mind on your in-breath, silently say the word <i>in</i> every time you breath in. <i>Let the children practice this for a minute or two.</i>
4.	Can you notice when you first begin to breathe out and then follow the feeling of your out-breath all the way to the very first moment of your in-breath? If it's hard to keep your mind on your out-breath, silently say the word <i>out</i> every time you breathe out. <i>Let the children practice this for a few breaths.</i>
5.	Let's put it together and pay attention to an entire breath, carefully following every moment. If it's hard to keep your mind on your breathing, silently say the word <i>in</i> every time you breathe in and the word <i>out</i> every time you breathe out. <i>Let the children practice this for a few breaths.</i>
6.	When you're ready, open your eyes and sit up slowly. Take a breath and notice how you feel.

Source. Greenland (2016). Reprinted [or adapted] with permission.

Mindful breathing is a mindfulness practice that is designed to allow students to pay attention to their breathing to encourage student rest and relaxation in the moment (Greenland, 2016). It can be completed in a quiet setting. Children and youth learn to be aware of the physical sensation of their breath moving in and out of their bodies. The "Mindful Breathing" practice in Table 2 is from the work of Susan Kaiser Greenland (2016) and is suggested to be implemented for up to 15 min. Through mindful breathing, children and youth can learn prosocial behaviors and how to regulate their emotions (e.g., Bögels et al., 2008; Harpin, Mazzone, Raynaud, Kahle, & Hodgkins, 2016; Martinez & Zhao, 2018; Mendelson et al., 2010).

*Through mindful breathing, Mrs. Reese and Mrs. Hamilton are teaching Dillon and his classmates to focus on their breath, allowing themselves to rest in the present moment without judging their thoughts or feelings. The students begin each day with "Mindful Breathing" and are learning to do this throughout the day when they are feeling unsettled or overwhelmed. They can simply take a couple of minutes to sit and focus on their breath. Data collected by Mrs. Reese and Mrs. Hamilton show a decrease in overall off-task behavior of students in the class. Moreover, data collected show incidents of Dillon kicking his chair or desk, ripping his paper, and using profanity when upset have decreased 50% over time after teaching Dillon how to use mindful breathing.*

### Thought Watching

Thought Watching is a mindfulness practice designed to enable children and youth the ability to acknowledge their thoughts without reacting to them appropriately (Saltzman, 2014). It is hoped that such a practice allows students to be proactive and better prepared to act more. It can be helpful to teach children and youth to acknowledge or "watch" their thoughts without taking their thoughts personally or believing them. Students are taught to become aware of their thoughts and observe their thoughts rather than letting their thoughts take over. Children and youth with EBD often have difficulty regulating their behaviors and may automatically act on their thoughts and feelings without even being aware of them. This lack of awareness, then, can be a trigger for exhibiting problematic behavior (Smith, Cumming, Merrill, Pitts, & Daunic, 2015; van de Weijer-Bergsma et al., 2012). Student thought watching has been shown to help students increase academic performance, as rated by teachers, regulate their emotions, and improve prosocial behaviors (Bögels et al., 2008; Harpin et al., 2016). Table 3 provides a script for teaching students thought watching, from the work of Amy Saltzman's (2014) curriculum, *Still Quiet Place*. The thought watching practice lasts between 5 and 7 min.

*Dillon struggles with regulating his behaviors when he gets frustrated. Mrs. Reese and Mrs. Hamilton introduced*

**Table 3.** Steps to Teach Thought Watching.

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Let's begin by sitting or lying in a comfortable position. Back straight, body relaxed, eyes closed, bringing our attention to the breath . . . the rhythmic expansion and release of the breath in the belly. Using the breath to settle into the still quiet place . . . (long pause—30 s)
Remembering, you can rest in the still quiet place anytime by focusing your attention on the rhythm of the breath . . . (pause)
Let's begin to watch our thoughts go by like you are standing on the sidewalk, watching people go by . . . Perhaps you can notice as a particular thought comes into view, passes by, and moves out of sight . . . (pause)
Perhaps noticing that thoughts, like people, have personalities . . . some are loud, others are shy, some are funny, and others somewhat cruel. Some are stubborn coming back again and again . . . just sitting, breathing, and watching the thoughts . . . (long pause—30 s)
Do your best to stay on the sidewalk and let the thoughts go by rather than walking down the street with them . . . (long pause—30 s)
And when you find yourself walking with the thoughts, which we all do, congratulate yourself for noticing, and return your attention to the breath. When your attention is stable, you can begin again to watch your thoughts . . . (pause)
You may notice that some thoughts are alone and others travel in groups, or that one thought can gather a crowd of thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations. Like a headache or a smile . . . just keep breathing and watching . . . (long pause—30 s)
If you practice, you may notice that your thoughts drift into the background . . . (pause).
And what is it that has the power to watch the thoughts? It's the still quiet place or another word for it is awareness so see if you can rest in awareness and let the thoughts walk by . . . (long pause—30 s)
Stay here watching your thoughts for as long as you like . . . and remember you can always choose to rest in the still and quiet place and watch thoughts go by without believing them or taking them personally . . .

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Source: Saltzman (2014). [Reprinted or adapted] with permission of the author.

*thought watching to the students after they had successfully incorporated mindful breathing into the school day. To begin, Mrs. Reese or Mrs. Hamilton cued Dillon by asking him if he would like to take a break to practice mindfulness, but they are working with him to regulate his own behavior by being aware of his feelings and choosing to ask for a break to practice mindfulness. Over time, Dillon is learning to manage his anger as he continues to practice mindfulness. He is learning how to be proactive with his emotions rather than reactive when he gets really upset.*

### **Soles of the Feet**

Uncontrolled aggressive behavior among students can jeopardize the safety of students, teachers, paraprofessionals, and other individuals with whom aggressive students come into contact (Kauffman & Landrum, 2013). Soles of the Feet is a mindfulness practice that is designed to teach students who demonstrate aggressive behavior to shift their attention away from aggression-provoking thoughts to a part of their body that is not capable of experiencing emotion: the soles of their feet (Singh et al., 2003). In this mindfulness strategy, students are taught to recognize what is happening in their external environment and internal conditions that lead to aroused physiological states. During periods when the

students are calm and receptive to learning a new strategy, they are first taught to identify the sensations, emotional and physical, they experience when they encounter adverse situations. Students are then taught that when they recognize they are entering a state of intense negative emotion, they can stop and focus their mind to the soles of their feet. Students learn to calm down so they can make a rational decision about how to react to the situation, thought, or event that triggered the intense negative emotion. Students can learn to utilize this strategy in a variety of contexts and environments. For example, it can be used when students are sitting, standing, or walking. We believe that when the strategy has been mastered, students have a tool for managing intense emotions, which is easy to use and applicable in many situations. Table 4 provides guidance for implementing the “Soles of the Feet” practice to help students learn to deescalate their own negative emotions by focusing their attention on a part of their body that does not experience emotion. The table is reproduced from the work of Singh et al. (2003). The practice can be practiced in 5-min increments.

*Through the Soles of the Feet practice, Mrs. Reese and Mrs. Hamilton desired to teach Dillon and his peers to stay calm rather than being reactive to situations that evoke intense negative emotions. Mrs. Reese and Mrs. Hamilton incorporated at least one group mindfulness practice each*

**Table 4.** Soles of the Feet Training.**Steps of the skill**

1. If you are standing, stand in a natural rather than an aggressive posture, with the soles of your feet flat on the floor
2. If you are sitting, sit comfortably with the soles of your feet flat on the floor
3. Breathe naturally, and do nothing
4. Cast your mind back to an incident that made you very angry. Stay with the anger
5. You are feeling angry, and angry thoughts are flowing through your mind, let them flow naturally, without restriction. Stay with the anger. Your body may show signs of anger (e.g., rapid breathing)
6. Now, shift all your attention to the soles of your feet
7. Slowly, move your toes, feel your shoes covering your feet, feel the texture of your socks or hose, the curve of your arch, and the heels of your feet against the back of your shoes. If you do not have shoes on, feel the floor or carpet with the soles of your feet
8. Keep breathing naturally and focus on the soles of your feet until you feel calm
9. Practice this mindfulness exercise until you can use it wherever you are and whenever an incident occurs that may lead to you being verbally or physically aggressive
10. Remember that once you are calm, you can walk away from the incident or situation with a smile on your face because you controlled your anger. Alternatively, if you need to, you can respond to the incident or situation with a calm and clear mind without verbal threats or physical aggression

**Scenes to use in role-plays**

1. Responding to someone who is saying something that offends you
2. Responding to a peer who threatens to hit you
3. Responding to a staff member or coworker who is not nice to you
4. Responding to someone who pushes you around

**Special considerations when teaching this skill**

1. Angry thoughts occur to all of us but not all of us act on all of them. In addition, anger can be justifiable and necessary depending on the context. Therefore, we do not want to eliminate anger entirely
2. Anger is a strength because it provides us with information about the situation we are in, and alerts us to do something positive to change the situation
3. Do not ask the individual to actively stop angry thoughts. The thoughts stop by themselves when the focus of attention shifts fully to the soles of the feet
4. Remind the individual to breathe naturally. It is not necessary to take deep breaths
5. This type of meditation can be done while standing, sitting, or walking slowly. Of course, with some modifications, it can be done while lying down but may not be convenient in the rush of daily activities

Source. Singh, Wahler, Adkins, and Myers (2003), p. 163. Reprinted with permission through Creative Commons License Number 4,521,380,926,104.

day. They also taught students in the classroom to practice mindfulness independently, particularly when they were beginning to feel frustrated or overwhelmed. Dillon reported being able to focus more on academic tasks and did not feel as reactive over situations that happened at school. Mrs. Reese and Mrs. Hamilton found through direct data collection procedures that not only did Dillon's challenging behavior decrease significantly, but the challenging behaviors of all the students was reduced. Dillon's IEP team met again and determined that he was ready to return to his general education classroom. In addition, Mrs. Reese and Mrs. Hamilton felt less job stress and believed they were better at managing their overall classroom due to their own personal mindfulness practice.

The school principal, Mr. Wright, talked with Mrs. Reese and Mrs. Hamilton about mindfulness and observed their classrooms. He also read about how mindfulness can have

a positive impact on students' SEL as well as overall teacher stress levels. After looking at data collected by Mrs. Reese and Mrs. Hamilton and observing the positive effects practicing mindfulness had on the students and teachers, Mr. Wright asked them to do a schoolwide mindfulness training so all of the teachers could begin practicing mindfulness independently with the goal of introducing mindfulness to all of the students.

## Conclusion

Practicing mindfulness takes consistency and time. There are mindfulness practices for all students at all ages. Although mindfulness is not a quick fix to the concerns resulting from students' challenging behavior, research supports that mindfulness activities can help students with challenging behaviors to manage their emotions and actions

in more constructive and proactive ways. It is important for children and youth with EBD to learn how to regulate their behaviors to be successful academically and socially at school and beyond. We believe that by providing students with or at risk of EBD tools in managing their emotions, it can improve their overall well-being and have lasting positive effects. Educators can teach students mindfulness practices rather than use punitive approaches when working with children and youth with or at risk for EBD.

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