

Early Childhood Educators Benefit from Mindfulness & Reflection

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Early childhood educators work with our youngest children, 6 weeks to age 8, and often work with a vulnerable population. Sometimes, educators are asked to work long days making minimum wage and some have more than one job. An early childhood educator is consistently busy throughout the day, attending to children's learning, managing the classroom and managing daily stress. Educators benefit from practicing mindfulness and reflection.

What is Being Mindful?

What is being mindful? The Association for Mindfulness in Education describes mindfulness as "...paying attention here and now with kindness and curiosity. Mindfulness reconnects students to their five senses, bringing them into a moment to moment awareness of themselves and their surroundings." Dr. Amy Saltzman defines mindfulness as paying attention to your life, here and now, with kindness and curiosity. Simply, it is the awareness and acceptance of the things that happen in the present moment.

What is a mindful early childhood educator? Practicing mindfulness is one way for educators to maintain their well-being while nurturing the children in their care. It is also a way to foster more enjoyment when teaching. Research finds early childhood educators using mindfulness benefits children by increasing their kindness, enhancing their self-regulation, increasing their working memory and decreasing their anxiety.

What is Reflection?

Reflection is the capacity to recognize the thoughts, feelings and intentions in ourselves and others. If we think about this definition, why would it be important for childcare teachers



During a recent mandatory training for childcare directors, Extension Educator Jaci Foged (center) incorporated mindfulness and reflection concepts into the existing curriculum.

and directors to be reflective? Jeree Pawl gives us the answer "...it is not possible to work on behalf of human beings to try to help them without having powerful feelings aroused in yourself." The work our early childhood educators do naturally elicits many emotions throughout the day.

I was lucky enough to land a spot as a toddler teacher right out of college. The first emotion I felt daily as I walked into my classroom of ten children 14-24 months was happiness. Still today, I miss the children racing to hug me and welcome me to the classroom. I often experienced many other emotions on the job. Joy, reading a book for the hundredth time to four children all scrambling for a spot on my lap. Sorrow, when I learned a child was leaving our program. Disappointment, when we could not go outside due to the weather. Frustration, when I was not able to reach a parent of an ill child. Delight, when a child learned to do something new (like put on their coat or use a cup without a lid).

The bottom line is without being reflective, I would not have been able to see each situation for what it was — a learning experience. I learned so much from each interaction I had with my co-workers, the children and their families. I wanted my

classroom and our program to have positive outcomes for the children and families who attended. The gift of time for reflection is valuable and can help us make better choices if we find ourselves in a similar situation in the future.

Local Management Required Trainings

Earlier this spring I had the opportunity to work with 18 childcare directors who were participating in a mandatory management training. These trainings were delivered twice a month over a period of four months for a total of 45 hours.

I was interested to learn if infusing brief guided reflection discussions and mindfulness meditations into the existing training would be both feasible and accepted. I decided to reach out to Holly Hatton-Bowers, an Assistant Professor and Early Childhood Extension Specialist and Carrie Gottschalk, an Extension Educator in Early Childhood. Both have experience in mindfulness and reflection. We came together and talked about simple strategies for integrating these practices into the training.

During the first session of the training participants received an overview of reflective practice, mindfulness, the benefits of using mindfulness both person-

ally and professionally and were invited to participate in a guided meditation. Participants were also invited to use a mindfulness meditation app (calm app) for at least 10 minutes five days a week.

Before and after the training the group of directors were asked to provide their feedback and share their experiences learning about mindfulness, practicing meditations and participating in guided reflection groups.



At the end of the trainings, childcare directors spent five minutes reflecting on a "hot topic" using inquiry and questions.

Directors were asked, "What does mindfulness mean to you?" Reflection and being present were the most commonly stated words.

"Being present" was the second concept most used to describe what mindfulness meant to the group of directors. When we are working with young children (or parenting children), it can be easy to become distracted with a task you need to complete which may make you miss something wonderful the children are doing. We need to take time to stop and delight in their learning.

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In a recent Cultivating Healthy Intentional Mindful Educators (CHIME) training, childcare providers practiced the "starfish stretch" which can be a useful bedtime routine for children which incorporates mindfulness of breathing.

