

Mindfulness is now very much on the agenda for most schools

Adults have been introduced to Mindfulness for some time, but the relaxation practice is now being taught in schools, says **Helen O'Callaghan**

CHILDREN in a classroom near you may not just be learning their seven times tables or their English reading — they may well be embracing the practice of mindfulness.

Mindfulness invites us to focus on the present moment — to bring mindful attention to our experience as it is happening right now. It's an approach that helps us become calm and feel good about ourselves. It helps us build inner resources for dealing with daily stressors.

Teachers are training up for two reasons, says Ann Caulfield of Mayo-based Mindfulness Matters. They want to enable their pupils be aware of themselves and to problem-solve. “And they want to create a nice calmness in the classroom, helping children learn better.”

Caulfield and her colleague, Derval Dunford, have worked with a few thousand teachers nationwide since 2011, who want to bring mindfulness into their classrooms. This year, 1,500 teachers signed up for the company's online course. Meanwhile, the UK-based Mindfulness in Schools Project (MISP) has trained approximately 90 teachers in Ireland and is running another course here this month.

Learning mindfulness gives children a toolkit of practices they can use whenever they need, says Claire Kelly, operations director with MISP, which has two curricula in which teachers train — paws.b is for seven to 11-year-olds, while .b (Stop, Breathe, Be!) is for older children. Set up eight years ago, MISP will have trained almost 1,000 teachers internationally by end of 2014.

Kelly says it's clear that anxieties and difficulties facing young people have increased beyond anyone's prediction. “Even at primary level, children are worrying about friendships, fitting in, being popular, doing well at school. They're tested much more and are constantly comparing themselves — what they look like, how they behave, what they should be aspiring to.”

With parents caught up in rigours of the daily routine, with social media pressures for instant communication and worries about money, Kelly believes children aren't seeing good role models at home for how to deal with stress. “Mindfulness gives skills to deal with the difficult stuff in life but also to notice the good stuff,” she says.

You don't just do mindfulness while sitting on a cushion in a quiet room with sounds of bells ringing. Teachers are doing it in very ordinary classrooms — at the beginning of the day and at other transition points during the school-day, such as before or after break and before key events — class tests or sporting contests.

Children's first introduction to learning mindfulness involves training their attention not to wander off — to stay in the present moment. A simple exercise, done standing up, has them focusing on their breathing, shifting attention to the lower half of their body, exploring

physical sensations in ankles, feet and knees and realising how they're centred and can do whatever lies ahead.

“If a child's feeling upset, shifting attention to the lower half of the body helps their sympathetic nervous system calm them down emotionally,” explains Kelly.

Children are also asked to practice mindfulness at home. One exercise — mindful mouthful — has them really paying attention to what a mouthful of food tastes and feels like, in their mouth, as well as to notice any thoughts, urges or memories that come up during this process.

Research backs up mindfulness teaching for children. A US-based study of six to eight-year-old children, who took a 12-week programme of breath awareness and yoga, showed their attention and social skills improved, while test anxiety decreased. In another six-week study with anxious children, teachers reported an improvement in academic function and decrease in anxiety symptoms. And two pilot studies by UCLA's Mindfulness Awareness Research Centre showed improvement in self-regulatory abilities among preschoolers and elementary schoolchildren after they'd done eight weeks of mindfulness training.

“Mindfulness enables children to know they feel out of kilter emotionally and to find a way to respond to difficult emotions,” says Ann Caulfield.

Children may be small but the chaos and busyness of their lives is big — it's good to know we can do something to help them find their inner oasis of calm.

THE CASE STUDY

ENA MORLEY, principal of St Ultan's Primary School, Dublin, trained earlier this year with British-based MISP. She immediately introduced mindfulness to fourth class pupils and is now doing it with fifth class.

“As a teacher calling the roll in the morning, children would answer ‘anseo’ — ‘here’ — and I'd wonder with some of them if they were present in spirit.

“In the school environment you can easily get sucked into ‘let's get onto the next thing’.

“I felt it would be good if there was a time in the week when children could stop, breathe and be, when they could be present for themselves. It would be a check-in for their body — how am I in my body today? Are my mind, emotions and heart in tune or are they all disconnected?

“I was really delighted with how receptive the children were to the paws.b programme. It easily links into the SPHE (Social, Personal & Health Education) weekly lesson. I do 12 half-hour mindfulness sessions with 25 children in one of the fifth class groups.

“I introduce them to the idea of training their ‘puppy’ mind — that their mind is like a puppy, jumping all over the place.

“Another exercise I do is to ask them to stand up. They shift their weight from heel to toe until their heel lifts up. They come back onto their heels and then slowly shift their weight

from the right foot to the left. I then ask them to take their weight completely on one foot and see if they wobble.

“This helps them explore the idea of grounding ourselves when we wobble. Sometimes our bodies wobble and so our minds wobble too with thoughts and anxieties. It could be worries about tests or losing a match.

“Doing this helps them become more alert to the signs in their body that they’re anxious.

“I’ve seen children able to use mindfulness in the playground. When they see a child annoyed, they tell them to stop and take deep breaths. When you ask how they reacted to a disagreement in the playground, they say ‘I took my deep breaths’. It becomes their default mechanism to take deep breaths and calm themselves.”