

How to Bring SEL to Students with Disabilities

Social-emotional learning programs have not traditionally targeted students with psychiatric or developmental disabilities. Here's why they should.

BY **DAVID LICHTENSTEIN** | AUGUST 31, 2016

... As Virginia Tech professor and noted author Ross Greene and others have argued, disabilities like AD/HD or anxiety disorders, and the behaviors associated with them, are better thought of as deficits in certain key skills—deficits that may in part be remediated by intensive focus on SEL skill development rather than by trying to stop negative behavior through a regimen of rewards and consequences or even medication. For instance, students struggling in school might particularly benefit from help learning how to inhibit impulses to lash out and to practice calming techniques instead (like mindful breathing), or how to develop a realistic sense of what their strengths are and when they need to ask for help (and from whom).

See page two for How to do “Mindful Breathing”

A way to build resilience to stress, anxiety, and anger.

Time Required

15 minutes daily for at least a week
(though evidence suggests that mindfulness increases the more you practice it)

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How to Do It

The most basic way to do mindful breathing is simply to focus your attention on your breath, the inhale and exhale. You can do this while standing, but ideally, you'll be sitting or even lying in a comfortable position. Your eyes may be open or closed, but you may find it easier to maintain your focus if you close your eyes. It can help to set aside a designated time for this exercise, but it can also help to practice it when you're feeling particularly stressed or anxious. Experts believe a regular practice of mindful breathing can make it easier to do it in difficult situations.

Sometimes, especially when trying to calm yourself in a stressful moment, it might help to start by taking an exaggerated breath: a deep inhale through your nostrils (3 seconds), hold your breath (2 seconds), and a long exhale through your mouth (4 seconds). Otherwise, simply observe each breath without trying to adjust it; it may help to focus on the rise and fall of your chest or the sensation through your nostrils. As you do so, you may find that your mind wanders, distracted by thoughts or bodily sensations. That's OK. Just notice that this is happening and gently bring your attention back to your breath.

1. Find a relaxed, comfortable position. You could be seated on a chair or on the floor on a cushion. Keep your back upright, but not too tight. Hands resting wherever they're comfortable. Tongue on the roof of your mouth or wherever it's comfortable.
2. Notice and relax your body. Try to notice the shape of your body, its weight. Let yourself relax and become curious about your body seated here—the sensations it experiences, the touch, the connection with the floor or the chair. Relax any areas of tightness or tension. Just breathe.
3. Tune into your breath. Feel the natural flow of breath—in, out. You don't need to do anything to your breath. Not long, not short, just natural. Notice where you feel your breath in your body. It might be in your abdomen. It may be in your chest or throat or in your nostrils. See if you can feel the sensations of breath, one breath at a time. When one breath ends, the next breath begins.
4. Now as you do this, you might notice that your mind may start to wander. You may start thinking about other things. If this happens, it is not a problem. It's very natural. Just notice that your mind has wandered. You can say "thinking" or "wandering" in your head softly. And then gently redirect your attention right back to the breathing.
5. Stay here for five to seven minutes. Notice your breath, in silence. From time to time, you'll get lost in thought, then return to your breath.
6. After a few minutes, once again notice your body, your whole body, seated here. Let yourself relax even more deeply and then offer yourself some appreciation for doing this practice today.

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