

Evidence based guidelines for mindfulness in schools

—
A guide for teachers and school leaders





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1 – Executive summary

Mindfulness is the practice of focusing attention on the experience of the current moment, with an attitude of non-judgemental acceptance and curiosity¹.

The modern world is becoming faster, more stressful and distracted and children are particularly susceptible to these influences. It is growing more and more evident that the modern child and teacher needs new skills and awareness to deal with such an environment.

Mindfulness in schools is an excellent way to help teachers and students learn these new skills and manage the rising mental health and disengagement issues students face today. Furthermore, the gains from mindfulness are in addition to current wellbeing programs, so mindfulness is effective when added to these programs (rather than being replaced by or replacing wellbeing programs). The improvements from mindfulness last even after a mindfulness program has ended².

This document summarises an extensive review exploring the impact of mindfulness in the school learning environment and an analysis of the contextual school use of mindfulness. The information has been synthesised and integrated to provide you with an evidence based and best practice approach to bringing mindfulness into your education setting.

Summary of the evidence

The research evidence suggests that practicing mindfulness strengthens brain areas related to attention³. This leads to improved emotional regulation, mental health, and cognition^{4,5}. These improvements are found both in adults (including teachers) and in school students^{2,6}. Students who participate in mindfulness programs also show improved academic performance². Investing only 6% of the school day in mindfulness practice is associated with an increase of approximately 16% relative to peers in mental health and academic performance⁶.

“Mindfulness has been found to improve emotion regulation, mental health, attention, memory and learning”

Key recommendations

Based on the current best evidence, outlined in this document, we make the following recommendations.

→ Getting started

Students should be introduced to mindfulness as early in their school years as possible (in an age appropriate manner).

However, the final three years of high school is a time when students are most vulnerable to the onset of mental illness, so these years are also very important years to have mindfulness programs.

→ Mindfulness for educators

Because teachers also benefit from mindfulness, and can more effectively teach mindfulness with their own practice, we suggest teachers practice alongside students. However, to reduce teacher burden, mindfulness apps can also be used to deliver the practice.

→ Ongoing whole school approach

Mindfulness programs achieve the largest benefit if they are ongoing throughout the year, rather than limited to specific periods. They are also most effective when a whole school approach is taken, so the mindfulness practice is implicitly supported throughout the school system. However, a whole school approach needs to be implemented in a staged and supported manner so that students and teachers do not feel forced to participate and to ensure that there is broad understanding and engagement in the program.

→ Consistency

We suggest that mindfulness practices take place at a consistent time and place to minimise confusion, during a time that suits teachers best to ensure minimal teacher burden. Mindfulness practice should take place in a quiet location with distractions minimised, and during a time that does not compete with preferred activities.

→ Mindfulness myths

It should be noted that mindfulness is not a spiritual or religious practice, so neither requires nor competes with these practices.

Mindfulness is also not about clearing the mind of thoughts, having to relax, nor only feeling positive emotions (and suppressing negative thoughts or feelings). It is simply practicing directing attention to the current experience with an attitude of self-kindness and acceptance. With repeated practice, students become more attentive, make better decisions about what to give their attention to, and improve their mental health and engagement with learning.

→ Primary students

We recommend one 30-45 minute mindfulness teaching session that includes educational material, class discussion and active learning about the concepts of mindfulness per week and 5-10 minute meditation practice sessions on 4-5 days per week.

→ Secondary students

We recommend one 45-60 minute teaching session that includes educational material, class discussion and active learning about the concepts of mindfulness per week and 10-20 minute meditation practice sessions 4-5 days per week.

“Mindfulness is not about clearing the mind of thoughts”

2 – Who is this for?

This document aims to provide school leaders, teachers and other stakeholders who wish to implement mindfulness programs into their school learning environment with a clear and concise review of the evidence and existing best practice within education.

A number of recommendations and suggestions are also included within this document to support and guide those who are looking to introduce a mindfulness program into their school.

Mindfulness is like gym for the mind

A good way to explain mindfulness to those unfamiliar with the practice is to align mindfulness with physical activity.

In this way practising mindfulness is mental exercise that literally strengthens the brain's grey matter in the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus, two key learning areas, supporting the mind's ability to focus, pay attention and reduce worry – the more we practise the stronger the mind becomes. Therefore, mindfulness is like gym for the mind. We don't just go to the gym to enjoy the benefits of fitness for the half hour we're there, we go to the gym in order to enjoy the benefits of fitness for 24 hours of the day, and that's the same approach we need to be taking for our mind.

3 – What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the practice of focusing awareness by paying attention to the present moment with openness, curiosity and without judgement¹.

When we talk about being 'non-judgemental' in mindfulness, we mean that we acknowledge thoughts and emotions without labelling them as 'positive', 'negative' or otherwise.

Is mindfulness a state or a practice?

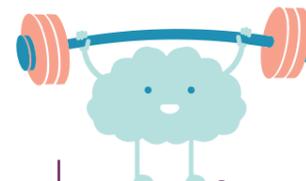
Mindfulness is a state – an awareness and a mindset that we carry through life. But this state can be developed, or enhanced through activities. These activities are often also referred to as "meditation" or as "mindfulness practice".

Mindfulness practice can be divided into formal and informal practice.

Formal and informal mindfulness

Formal practice is mindfulness meditation where you sit, usually with the eyes closed, and focus attention on one thing, usually either your breathing or the sensations experienced within your body.

With **informal practice** you bring the same kind of improved attention that you might get from formal practice to everyday situations. This involves directing your full and non-judgemental attention to the activity you're undertaking at a particular moment – it might be washing the dishes, brushing your teeth, chatting with a friend or studying. Reading is a great example of how we can benefit from informal mindfulness practice – where we need our full attention to really comprehend the words on the page, rather than being distracted or lost in other thoughts and not actually aware of what we are reading.



“Mindfulness is like gym for the mind”

4 — Mindfulness mythbusting

There are many myths and misconceptions about mindfulness.

We thought this list might be helpful to understand what mindfulness is, and what it's not:



→ **Myth 1:**
Mindfulness is based on religion

Mindfulness is not a spiritual or religious practice.



→ **Myth 2:**
Mindfulness is just about being kind

Mindfulness is not social support, friendship or relationship enhancement. It is not kindness, generosity or advice (although practising mindfulness can make students better at these social behaviours).



→ **Myth 3:**
Mindfulness is just about relaxing

Mindfulness is not simply peace, relaxation, tranquillity or bliss (although relaxation is a commonly experienced by-product).



→ **Myth 4:**
Mindfulness is about clearing the mind and not thinking

Mindfulness isn't about not thinking at all – it's about learning to pay attention to what thoughts arise and trying not to react to them. In this way, mindfulness is about being aware of thoughts, not getting rid of them.



→ **Myth 5:**
Mindfulness suppresses emotions

Mindfulness is not emotional suppression or dissociation. It does not involve suppressing one's thoughts or clearing one's mind.

Mindfulness practice is the technique of directing one's attention to the current experience with an attitude of non-judgemental acceptance. Emotions and thoughts are part of that experience, and so are neither suppressed nor cleared, and viewed as neither negative nor positive.



→ **Myth 6:**
Mindfulness only focuses on positivity

Mindfulness is not only feeling positive emotions. Mindfulness is not focused on positive experiences, nor avoidance of negative feelings. Even labelling emotions as positive and negative can have an unhelpful effect. This is what we mean when we talk about "non-judgemental awareness".

Mindfulness practice is the technique of directing one's attention to the current experience with an attitude of non-judgemental acceptance.

Emotions and thoughts are part of that experience, and so are neither suppressed nor cleared, and viewed as neither negative nor positive.



5 – Mindfulness, the brain and mental health

Research has shown us that practising mindfulness strengthens areas of the brain that control ‘executive function’ such as the prefrontal cortex, hippocampus and amygdala.

For this reason, mindfulness leads to better attention, memory, regulation of emotions and self awareness^{2,4,5}. In turn, improvements in these areas can lead to reduced stress, anxiety and depression, and better academic skills, social skills and self esteem^{2,7}.

Deep and lasting changes in areas of the brain related to learning

Mindfulness causes changes in brain structure and activity.

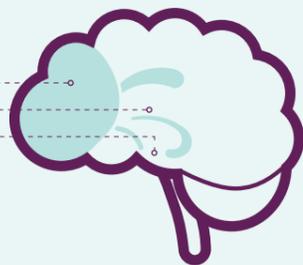
Studies tell us that people who have practised mindfulness show thickening of the grey matter in their frontal cortex³. This is the area of the brain responsible for attention, self regulation, executive function, and planning. They also show thickening of the hippocampus (responsible for memory function), the insula and precuneus (responsible for self awareness and emotional processing)².

Those who practise mindfulness also show reduced activity in the amygdala (associated with distraction, anxiety, fear, depression and stress) and the default mode network (associated with worry and rumination, depression, and schizophrenia)^{8,9,10}.

Because brain changes are considered more permanent than behavioural changes alone, improvements that come from mindfulness are thought to be lasting.

Executive functions in the brain

Prefrontal Cortex
Hippocampus
Amygdala



Mindfulness and mental health

The World Health Organization has projected that depression will become one of the leading health problems worldwide¹¹.

Around 1 in 7 primary school aged children and 1 in 4 secondary school aged children have mental health problems¹². More than 75% of mental illnesses emerge during teenage and young adult years, and earlier onsets are associated with worse outcomes¹³. Taking preventive action will provide large benefits for the rest of their lives.

Because of these statistics, and the clear benefits offered by mindfulness, the practice is becoming more and more popular as a method to improve wellbeing, and is being increasingly used in schools¹⁴.

School aged children with mental health problems



Primary School

1 in 7 experience mental health problems



Secondary School

1 in 4 experience mental health problems



6 — Where does mindfulness fit in schools?

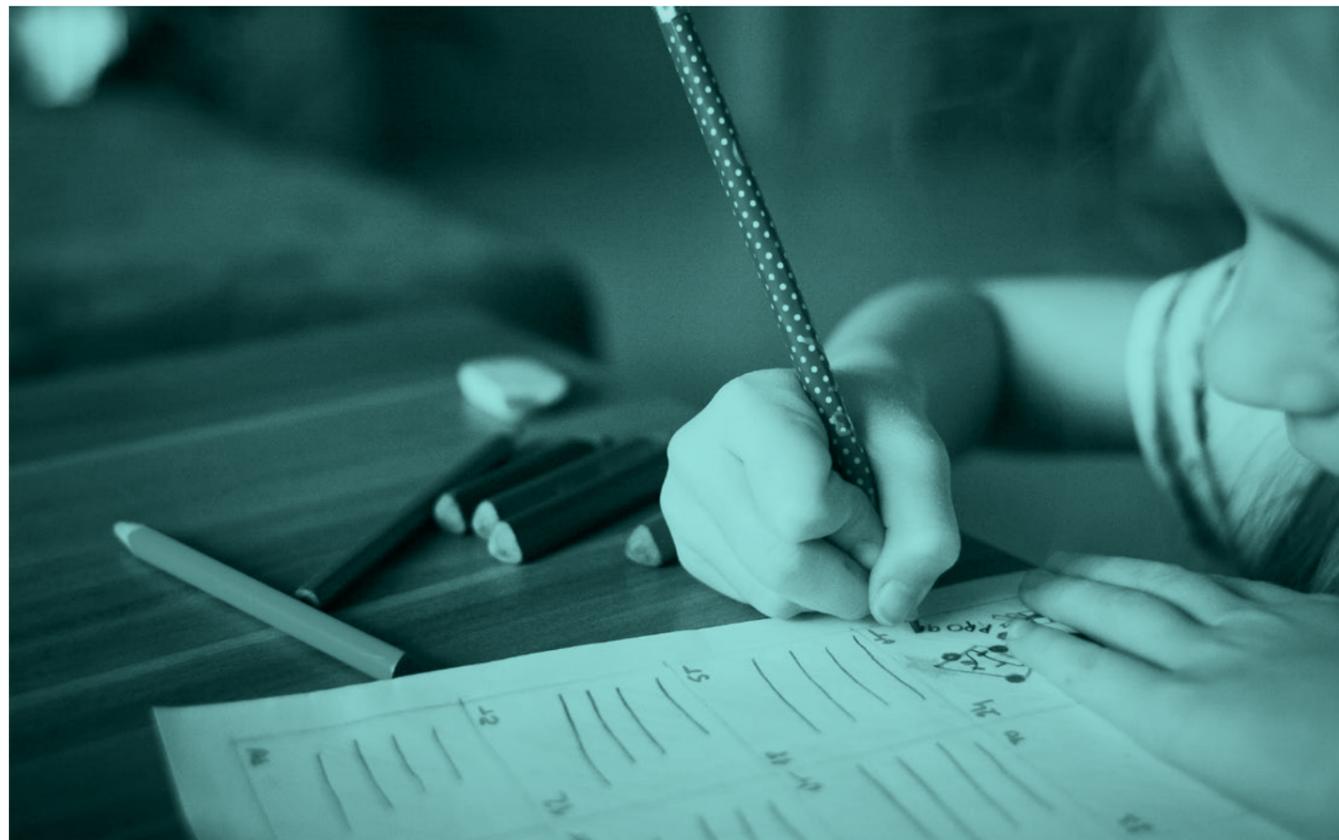
Mindfulness can support student learning and wellbeing in two important, and interconnected, ways.

1

As a program to support readiness for learning across all curriculum areas.

2

As an important component of a social and emotional learning curriculum.



Mindfulness to support readiness for learning

Mindfulness offers a range of benefits to support student readiness and engagement with learning. It is an effective tool for settling and focusing students at the beginning of any classroom activity, and is also a practice that strengthens and develops important cognitive skills related to learning, such as attention, concentration and memory³.

Mindfulness, wellbeing and social and emotional learning curriculum

Mindfulness can facilitate the development of important social and emotional skills through each developmental stage of a student's life. Mindfulness provides a foundational awareness and understanding of thoughts, emotions and behaviours and how to self regulate. These are essential skills to support students to fully engage in further social and emotional learning.

A comprehensive mindfulness program can be implemented as part of the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum to support the development of self awareness, self management, social awareness, relationships, communication and decision making.

It also maps directly to the personal and social capabilities in the Australian Curriculum.

“It is an effective tool for settling and focusing students at the beginning of any classroom activity”



7 – Mindfulness and learning

Students today are facing serious mental health, engagement and academic challenges.

1 in 5 students are meeting these pressures by disengaging from school¹⁵. It goes without saying that reduced engagement is related to reduced academic performance and career achievement later in life^{16,17}.

School engagement

This should be concerning, although not necessarily surprising. Young people are vulnerable to mental illness and academic problems because they don't possess the full range of emotional, behavioural and attention regulation skills which help to overcome

the many personal, social and academic challenges they'll confront over more than a decade of education^{18,19}. These are skills that mindfulness helps to develop,

Disengagement in school

1 in 5 students are

disengaged 

from school.

Disengaged students are on average

1-2 years behind

their peers.

Mindfulness improves students' ability to learn

How? In three main ways:

1

It improves attention, and improved attention means students are more able to focus on learning²⁰. They are more capable of taking in new information without being distracted by internal reactions or preconceived perspectives²¹.

2

It improves working memory, cognitive flexibility, reasoning, planning, goal directed behaviour and self regulation²². These skills are essential when it comes to learning new information.

3

It reduces emotional reactivity, behavioural issues, anxiety and depression². This means students have fewer potential obstacles standing in the way of their learning.

Some research suggests that a well implemented program of 90 minutes of mindfulness meditation per week is enough to move a student up the academic bell curve by 16% compared to their non mindful peers. 90 mins is only 6% of the school day (18 minutes) assuming no home practice². So even when only considering academic performance, the benefits of mindfulness practice more than repay their time cost, especially if this time can be integrated into the start of a lesson or throughout the school day.

“Benefits of mindfulness practice more than repay their time cost”

Mindfulness develops important meta cognitive skills

Metacognition approaches, those approaches that help students become aware of their own thinking style, help students think about their own learning more explicitly and have been shown to improve

learning across domains and are not limited to just one or a few subjects^{23,24}. Mindfulness provides this meta cognitive skills development opportunity across all ages.

Skills that mindfulness helps develop

Research² shows that mindfulness practice can help young people to develop emotion, behaviour and attention regulation skills.

According to a meta-analysis of more than 70 studies comparing more than 6,000 school aged young people, those who practised mindfulness showed:



Better emotion and behaviour regulation than 62% of those who didn't practice mindfulness.



Better academic performance than 66% of those who didn't practice mindfulness.

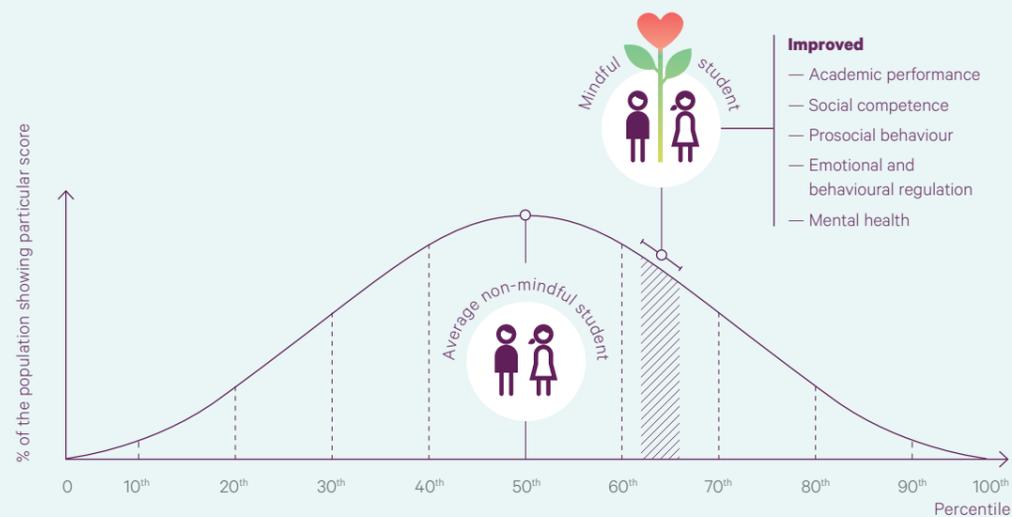


Lower depression and anxiety scores than 66% of those who didn't practice mindfulness.



Better social skills than 64% of those who didn't practice mindfulness.

Average mental health, social and academic function of young person after a mindfulness intervention compared to young people who have not practiced mindfulness



Mindfulness and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

Schools are already taking an active role in addressing mental health issues through wellbeing programs, sometimes referred to as a social and emotional learning (SEL) curriculum²⁵. Mindfulness shouldn't replace or be seen as 'doubling up' on the many benefits such programs achieve, but as complementary to them¹⁴.

Mindfulness provides the foundations needed to develop essential personal and social capabilities, general capabilities highlighted in the Australian Curriculum.

Greater benefits from mindfulness

Research shows mindfulness may lead to greater improvements for positive social behaviour, emotional distress and academic performance than general wellbeing programs^{2,25,26,27,28}.

School wellbeing programs are extremely important. However, it may be useful to augment existing programs with mindfulness to enhance their effectiveness.



How is it complementary?

Wellbeing programs and mindfulness help students make important positive emotional and behavioural changes, but in quite different ways.

Wellbeing programs are educational in nature, teaching students about their emotions and behaviours¹⁴. These are lessons which students can apply in their daily interactions. In addition to this, mindfulness develops the ability to attend

and self regulate, altering the brain functions, leading to observable improvements in wellbeing and academic functioning^{2,3}.

The goal of widely used school based wellbeing programs is to improve students in five main areas, and in each of these areas research has shown that mindfulness can make a significant positive difference:



→ Self awareness

Mindfulness practice trains people to focus their attention on the current subjective experience. In other words, mindfulness trains self awareness, and studies have shown that it improves self awareness in young people²⁹.



→ Self management

Emotions influence our behaviour, and this is particularly the case in children and adolescents³⁰. Mindfulness trains non-judgemental acceptance of emotions, which allows students to feel emotions without then acting on them inappropriately. Studies show that mindfulness training for youth improves self regulation and impulse control, vital for self management².



→ Social awareness

Because paying attention to others is important for social awareness, the attention improvements from mindfulness practice allow for improved social awareness. Unsurprisingly, research has shown that mindfulness improves social skills in youth^{2, 29, 31}.



→ Relationship skills

Through mindfulness, as students become better able to listen to their peers, teachers and parents, and less emotionally reactive, they naturally develop better relationships^{29, 31}.



→ Decision making

Improved mindfulness results in better, more responsible decision making as students are more easily able to attend to relevant facts, be aware of bias, and control impulsive behaviour. The need for immediate gratification is reduced, and the ability to consider long term goals is increased³².

8 — Mindful Schools — Mindfulness practice as a collective endeavour

A whole school approach to mindfulness encompasses the integration of mindfulness through the curriculum, professional development, leadership practice and across the learning environment.

This approach can impact positively on collective beliefs, values and practices across the whole school community³³.

School culture

Mindfulness practices in and by themselves will not drive increased whole school performance. School leaders play an important role in ensuring that the whole school community is engaged and motivated to participate in mindfulness programs if the school is to succeed in a whole school approach. This will support the necessary environmental conditions for enhanced student engagement and overall success. Teacher wellbeing and teacher resilience is also strongly linked with enhanced teacher and school function, and therefore this should also be an important focus when taking a whole school approach³⁴.

Moreover, teachers' self efficacy is positively related to aspects of organisational context such as positive school climate, lack of impediments to effective instruction, and teacher empowerment³⁵ as well as principal influence with superiors and the academic press of a school³⁴.

Mindful teachers are more aware of themselves, others and their community. They are more well placed to understand the environmental influences effecting student achievement and wellbeing.

Benefits for teachers and educators

Teacher engagement in mindfulness

In order to make the most out of mindfulness programs it helps if teachers are engaged and committed to the program and mindfulness overall.

Mindfulness can be just as beneficial for teachers as it is for students.

Teachers who practise mindfulness and who employ mindfulness in their classrooms are less stressed, sleep better, report fewer bad moods and report more workplace satisfaction than those who don't^{36,37}. They're also more caring and effective in the classroom, experiencing improved relationships with students^{37,38}.

Experience within schools that have implemented a mindfulness program suggest that teacher engagement with mindfulness is a strong predictor of the success of the program with their classroom students. Furthermore, mindfulness programs in schools are often even more successful if a principal and the leadership group is engaged and supportive. If the teacher participates with the program with the students there may be greater engagement from students. Teachers may also find that they can take this time for personal practice and see similar benefits as the students. Modelling is an important part of teaching mindfulness to young people and therefore teacher engagement with mindfulness is an important part of modelling this behaviour in the classroom and throughout the school community.



9 — Parents, families and the broader communities

Schools, leaders and education systems that promote and encourage positive family-school relationships and communicate effectively about a child's development, significantly enhance both the learning and wellbeing of their students.

Parents and families are the first and most important educators in a child's life. Learning does not begin when a child commences school, nor does it stop when the child goes home from school.

Mindfulness for the whole family

Parent engagement in education is about parents, carers, schools and communities more broadly, working together to ensure that every parent can play a positive role in their child's learning, school community, and life. We know that parents play a critical role in shaping the behaviour and mindsets of their children while at school³⁹. Therefore, by supporting families understanding and influence on mindful practice in their children, schools can further consolidate the effect on young peoples learning and wellbeing. Furthermore, there is emerging evidence around the positive impact of the provision of training and workshops around specific aspects of learning to families⁴⁰.

Mindfulness practices are a valuable set of skills for all members of the family. When parents and care givers are able to encourage and reinforce the skills in the home, schools create an enhanced learning environment at school. Social and emotional wellbeing, including children's behaviour, peer relationships and relationships with teachers is strongly influenced by parental attitudes and involvement in the school⁴¹.

“By supporting families understanding and influence on mindful practice in their children, schools can further consolidate the effect on young peoples learning and wellbeing”

10 — How to implement mindfulness in schools

We now have a growing evidence base of information and expert opinion on the ways to put mindfulness programs into effect in schools.

The following information answers some of the most important questions about mindfulness in schools using research, expert opinion and data collected from schools that are experienced in implementing mindfulness interventions.



The Role of School Leadership

Although individual teachers are able to influence and have an impact on the implementation of mindfulness in their own classroom, school principals are able to improve the sustainability and long term outcomes of mindfulness programs across the whole school^{42,43}. In order for students and teachers to be able to access and use mindfulness programs in schools effectively principals as leaders of the school need to be promoting and accepting of the program for it be sustainable and used throughout a school environment.



Take a whole school approach

Principals, as leaders of the school, need to understand and promote the program and its use throughout the community.

In order to maximise the benefits of mindfulness programs a whole school approach to embedding mindfulness practices is recommended for sustainable impact.

Many schools have found that engaging the whole school community in implementing and maintaining their mindfulness program results in the biggest impact. This involves school leaders, educators, support staff, students, parents and the wider community.



Engaged educators

In order to successfully implement mindfulness in the classroom educators should be engaged and committed to the program and mindfulness overall. This doesn't mean that all educators need to be the mindfulness champion, or even deliver mindfulness with their classes, but it does mean that the school staff as a whole need to understand and believe in the reasons for implementing such a program and take a positive approach to the program.

Educators should be encouraged, but not forced, to trial their own mindfulness practice.



The role of a mindfulness champion or wellbeing committee

Implementing any new program can be a challenge. Experience from many schools suggest that having a 'mindfulness champion', or program leader, or wellbeing committee that is able to motivate the school community, mobilise the necessary resources and support other teachers is an important component of success of the program.

Also schools working in networks that are willing and able to learn from and with each other in their mindfulness practices, can also significantly enhance the strength of the program in the network or region.



At what age should children begin learning mindfulness?

The short answer is the earlier the better⁴⁴, but benefits can be obtained when mindfulness is commenced at any age^{45,46}.

With these facts in mind, we recommend that the earlier mindfulness teaching begins, the larger the cumulative effects across the school years will be. A student who begins in the first year of primary school will establish mindful habits that will persist in later school years. It should be noted that younger children may need shorter mindfulness sessions when beginning to learn the practice.

Experience within schools indicates that it is easier to teach younger students the concepts and practises of mindfulness when a whole of school approach is taken. Benefits are also seen when there is a consistency of practice across each year level. Students understanding and engagement with mindfulness can be strengthened as they grow and develop across each year.

The final three years of school

Years 10, 11 and 12 (or equivalent) are often the most stressful for students. It's during this time that they're most vulnerable to disengagement and development of mental illness^{12,13,47}. Even if a student hasn't practised mindfulness from an early age, we recommend that they begin mindfulness practice during these vital three years.

However, experience from schools who have implemented a mindfulness program admit that these final years of schooling are the hardest to find time within the crowded curriculum.

It is during this stage of education, however, that students become much more self directed and some schools have experienced that their senior year levels have sought out mindfulness individually. It is during these years that students should be introduced to the concepts of mindfulness and inspired to develop an individual practice. Mentors and role models may also be very useful for these year levels.

How much meditation should students practise?

The school curriculum is already crowded and, obviously, time in the school day is limited. Having said that, too little meditation may be ineffective.

We've made recommendations that strike a balance between enough time to have a positive effect and not so much that it will negatively influence the school curriculum.

Primary school aged students

-  One **30- to 45-minute** teaching session per week* that includes educational material, class discussion and active learning about the concepts of mindfulness.
-  Mindfulness meditation practices of between **5 and 10 minutes** on at least four days per week

“These recommendations try to strike a balance for busy educators”

Secondary school aged students

-  One **45- to 60-minute** teaching session per week* that includes educational material, class discussion and active learning about the concepts of mindfulness.
-  Mindfulness meditation practices of between **10 and 20 minutes** on at least four days per week

* If you intend to make mindfulness a continuous part of your curriculum (as opposed to a one-off program), the teaching sessions will, naturally, become less necessary than the practice sessions, as students develop a stronger understanding of how to practise mindfulness, however this might take some time to develop.

It won't happen over night

It's important to note that you're unlikely to see immediate improvements from mindfulness practice. Gains are obtained from practising a skill that is slowly developed.

Studies generally examine outcomes after six weeks or longer, because the effect of mindfulness practice are only noticeable after that amount of time. While there are reports of classes settling more quickly and learning better after a brief mindfulness practice before class²¹, the aim is for long-term improvements, and you shouldn't be disappointed if you don't see effects after just a few weeks.

The effect of mindfulness practice increases over time



Practice makes perfect

Cognitive and neuroscientific studies indicate that regular practice is vital for developing any skill, and mindfulness is no different⁴⁸. **More practice leads to better outcomes**^{49,50}.

Although most evidence suggests students will benefit from mindfulness if they practice at least three times per week⁵⁰, some research has

indicated positive gains in specific domains are only made if students practice four or more times per week⁵¹.

We recommend students have 4 to 5 days per week that include mindfulness sessions. Many educators find that first thing in the morning, after lunch break or before exams or tests can be good times to integrate a mindfulness practice.

The longer the session, the better

Our recommendations above are a pragmatic guide, taking into consideration the busy school schedules. However, studies show the more time and more sessions students spend practising mindfulness, the more benefits they gain on wellbeing and academic performance^{49,50,52}.

How long in total?

As with any other skill, practice of mindfulness over years is likely to lead to accumulation of skills and improvements in outcomes^{53,54,55}. Additionally, length of participation in a mindfulness program is associated with stronger follow up effects⁵⁶.

Mindfulness programs lasting across the years of primary and secondary school are more likely to set students up with skills that will have a lifelong impact on their wellbeing. So, while short term programs can achieve good outcomes, we recommend that mindfulness programs run across the year.

How much is enough?

Research shows that for a student to benefit academically from mindfulness they need to practise on average for just 90 minutes per week for nine weeks².

That works out to 18 minutes per day when split across the school week, assuming they have a mindfulness-free weekend (although being mindful at home is something we highly recommend). That's 6% of the school day.



Mindfulness practice to benefit academically

90 minutes
mindfulness practice per week

18
minutes
per day

6%
of a school day

Where and when



Avoid conflict with other activities

It's important to schedule mindfulness sessions at times during the day when they don't conflict with other activities that students either really enjoy or tend not to like all that much. Try not to let mindfulness be used as a way of "getting out of" another activity, or be seen as an inconvenience⁵⁷.



A quiet location with few distractions

The best location for mindfulness sessions is a quiet classroom with relatively few distractions. It's best if other students can't see into the room⁵⁷. It is worth noting that some noise outside or nearby won't matter – mindfulness can involve noticing distracting noise and returning attention to the practice.



In the morning and after lunch

First thing in the morning and immediately after lunch are good options for mindfulness sessions. Whatever time you choose, consistency of time and place is important to avoid confusion.

School experience suggests that students benefit from practising a mindfulness exercise when they return from a busy and often overstimulating lunch break. A brief meditation at this time can help develop a sense of calm, focus and letting go of any negative experiences they may have had during the break.



At home before homework

We've talked a lot in this document about mindfulness at school, but practice at home before homework is an excellent way of improving study. It shouldn't, however, be a substitute for school practice⁵⁸.

Who should deliver the program?

Although some experts recommend that teachers of mindfulness should be highly experienced in the area, research suggests that there is little to no relationship between teacher experience and program outcomes^{45,59}.

It's often unrealistic in a school to employ a mindfulness expert or for teachers to become specialists⁶⁰, and we don't see this as being necessary.

Teachers who practise mindfulness themselves are more effective at teaching mindfulness (as well as benefitting themselves). For that reason, we suggest that mindfulness programs in teacher education and teacher training would improve future implementation of mindfulness in schools. Mindfulness apps are good support for the teaching and guided practices if sourced from a quality provider.

Apps

There are a number of apps that are available which provide guided mindfulness practices, including Smiling Mind's own.

Research has shown that mindfulness delivered with the aid of an app leads to positive outcomes like those shown with in person mindfulness teaching^{61,62}. Teenagers have also been reported to prefer online mindfulness interventions to group sessions⁶³. As such, we recommend that teachers use mindfulness apps and other accessible resources to deliver programs, to maximise fidelity of mindfulness program implementation, and minimise teacher burden.

Training and professional development

We recommend that schools wishing to implement a mindfulness program undertake at least introductory training to ensure that teachers understand the concepts and the approach and have experienced some mindfulness practise themselves before teaching their students. School experience also suggests that it is important to inspire and motivate teachers as there is still some stigma around the concepts of meditation, despite the large evidence base that now exists.

Teachers who practise mindfulness themselves are more effective at teaching mindfulness



Delivering the mindfulness material

A working definition for students

As we've shown in this document, there's strong scientific evidence to support mindfulness as a method for improving student behaviour, academic performance, attention and even mental health. The vast majority of the studies that demonstrate its effectiveness have used the following definition:

“Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally¹.”

Because this definition is almost a constant feature of mindfulness studies, we can assume it's the “active ingredient” in mindfulness interventions. For that reason, we recommend using this definition in teaching sessions.

Of course, simpler language – as well as more games, sensory activities and stories – are ideal for younger children⁶⁴.

What's the point?

When introducing mindfulness to students, it's important to provide the reasons for practising, making sure they see the relevance of the sessions. This increases student engagement, which is important for successful interventions⁶⁵.

Teachers should remind students of these reasons throughout teaching periods. However, once students understand the reasons for the practice, they should be taught not to necessarily expect or strive for those benefits while practicing. Practicing mindfulness involves the practice of non-judgemental acceptance of all experiences.



Negative experiences

Although there is good evidence to suggest that mindfulness can improve mental health and wellbeing, the practice does not involve striving for “good mental health” or striving for any benefits or goals for that matter.

Teachers should take care to avoid “pathologising” normal experiences such as sadness, as students may then suppress negative experiences, and develop an attitude that they are the student's fault^{66,67}.

Instead, teachers should emphasise that mindfulness is an exercise in self compassion and acceptance of an experience. Both positive and negative experiences fit into this description. “Negative” outcomes are not the result of a student's practice or lack of practice, just an experience to be accepted without judgement^{68,69}. Similarly, expectations of positive outcomes should not be focused upon, to avoid disappointment if improvements are not experienced. The important factors are practicing focused attention, with acceptance and without judgement of experience.

School experience suggests that spending some time at the end of the mindfulness sessions to discuss student experiences and to debrief on any emotions that may have been experienced is important to normalise this.

A secular technique

Mindfulness is not a religious or spiritual practice. When teaching mindfulness sessions, it's important to avoid using terms, using materials or developing rituals that might have spiritual connotations. None of these are relevant to the practice of mindfulness and may present an obstacle to students from certain groups.

Because mindfulness is an evidence based attention training and awareness technique that is not intended to explore religious beliefs or attitudes, it neither conflicts nor overlaps with any spiritual practice or religion⁷⁰.

Non-compulsory, non-punitive

We recommend mindfulness as a core element of the curriculum but it should never be made compulsory or imposed upon students or teachers who don't want to practice it. Students who do not wish to engage with the practice can opt-out by simply sitting quietly during the practice, and as with all classes, students should be discouraged from distracting others.

It should also never become or be seen as a punishment. This unsurprisingly leads to worse outcomes⁶⁵.

Formal and informal practice?

Formal mindfulness practice is generally thought to be the most important part of the practice, strengthening habits of attention and acceptance. Like all skill development, the largest gains in mindfulness skills are made from the most effortful and focused practice, which is formal mindfulness practice. Indeed, research has shown that formal practice is most related to improved outcomes⁷⁰.

Common concerns

Non-adherence

In some cases, teenagers may not engage with mindfulness⁷¹. In these cases, naturally, they don't gain any of the associated benefits of the practice^{71,72}.

It may be useful to explore reasons with your class and seek to understand what motivates them, or prevents them from participating. Sometimes framing it as an experiment with a discreet trial time can be useful to set boundaries.⁵⁰

Student safety

One concern raised by some teachers is that mindfulness may do harm to students.

Review of the literature show no cases of harm have been reported from mindfulness in schools⁷³. Most reports of adverse events are from intensive and extended practice, which is very different to the programs delivered in schools (such as lengthy multiple day silent retreats).

Mindfulness is simply attention and acceptance training. As such, if a difficult issue arises for a student, the issue will have been there already. The act of training attention may highlight that issue, but the mindfulness practice is not the cause of it.

If students have experienced trauma, mindfulness practise may reduce the distractions that they usually employ to avoid or manage their symptoms. As such, it is important to monitor students who are known to have a trauma history. If you do notice a student is experiencing heightened emotional distress following mindfulness practise it's important to:

1. Try and find a private opportunity to discuss what's occurred with the student
2. Allow the student to express their feelings with an attitude of non-judgemental acceptance, so they are able to communicate their needs as openly as possible.
3. Debrief with the student and explain that sometimes practicing paying attention to the way we feel can cause us to become more aware of uncomfortable feelings, and this is a normal experience.
4. Make sure your school has an appropriate referral pathway for managing emotional difficulties – i.e. a school counsellor, pastoral care professional or psychologist

Crisis support



Crisis support is always available with the assistance of the following services:

LifeLine

13 11 14

Kids Helpline

1800 55 1800

A/Prof Craig Hassed

The world needs mindfulness; and in this fast paced, stressed and distracted world, the children of today probably need it more than any previous generation.

Mindfulness in schools should not be seen as an optional add-on, but it should be seen as the most important life-skill children can develop.



11 — Contributors



Neil Bailey

Dr Neil Bailey is a post-doctoral researcher at the Monash Alfred Psychiatry Research Centre, with a research focus on mindfulness. His research aims to explain the mechanisms of action behind mindfulness meditation, and why these mechanisms lead to improved mental health. In particular, his research examines how brain activity differs between meditators and non meditators, and how this brain activity relates to improved attention function.

His research also looks at how mindfulness meditation can be implemented and practiced in ways that optimise the effects of the practice. He has published over 25 peer reviewed articles spanning a broad range of neuroscientific and psychological fields. In addition to his research, he has a strong personal interest in and experience of mindfulness meditation, having attended five 10-day silent meditation retreats, and practicing up to 2 hours of meditation per day. As such, he has first hand experience of the benefits of practicing mindfulness meditation, as well as knowledge of the scientific evidence.



Richard Chambers

Dr Richard Chambers is a clinical psychologist and internationally recognised expert in mindfulness. He is leading a university wide mindfulness initiative at Monash University and consults to a growing number of businesses, educational institutions and sporting organisations. Dr Chambers is an advocate of Smiling Mind and has contributed to the development of mindfulness content for the app. Dr Chambers is a published author and regularly features in the mainstream media.



John Owen

John Owen is interested in providing useful research and evaluation based knowledge to policy and program decision makers. He has led more than 40 evaluative projects over the past two decades. His book: Program Evaluation: Forms and Approaches provides an integrated framework to evaluation theory and practice that has had favourable reviews worldwide.

In addition to traditional evaluation approaches designed to determine impact, this framework includes evaluative thinking approaches that locate evaluative action more towards the front end of policy and program interventions. He is Principal Fellow, Centre for Program Evaluation, The University of Melbourne.



Craig Hassed

Associate Professor Craig Hassed works at the Department of General Practice and is coordinator of mindfulness programs at Monash University. His teaching, research and clinical interests include mindfulness based stress management, mind-body medicine, meditation, health promotion, integrative medicine and medical ethics. Craig is regularly invited to speak and run courses in Australia and overseas in health, professional and educational contexts and has collaborated with a number of national and international universities helping them to integrate similar content. He was the founding president of the Australian Teachers of Meditation Association, is an ambassador and supporter of Smiling Mind, and is a regular media commentator. He writes regularly for medical journals and has published thirteen books.

Craig also featured in the documentary, The Connection and wrote the companion e-book, "The Mindfulness Manual" and co-authored with Richard Chambers the free online Mindfulness course in collaboration with Monash University and FutureLearn.



Andrew Jones

Andrew is the Principal of Broadmeadows Valley Primary School in Melbourne's north, and a PhD research student at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education (University of Melbourne).

Andrew has worked in Victorian schools as a teacher and a school leader for more than 20 years. He led the closure and regeneration of four failing schools in the northern suburbs of Melbourne and is currently conducting research into teacher professional learning with Professor John Hattie. He also holds a Masters in International Education Policy.



Addie Wootten

Dr Addie Wootten is the CEO of Smiling Mind and a Clinical Psychologist by background. Addie joined Smiling Mind 2.5 years ago and has led the release of a new brand, a new technology platform and new research evaluating the impact of the Smiling Mind programs.

Addie brings her extensive background in clinical psychology, research and e-health to her position of CEO of Smiling Mind. Addie is a well-known leader in her field. Prior to joining Smiling Mind Addie delivered and researched innovative programs to enhance the wellbeing of people with cancer. She has developed and evaluated a range of online wellbeing tools, and has published widely.

Smiling Mind has seen significant growth, reaching over 2.7 million downloads of the much loved mindfulness app. Our focus area is supporting schools to implement pre-emptive mindfulness programs across all ages and we now support more than 40,000 educators to bring mindfulness into their classrooms in schools across Australia. We're also working with hundreds of businesses to bring mindfulness into their workplaces including a global partnership with IBM in the US.



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More information
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Smiling Mind

✉ info@smilingmind.com.au

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