

Preschool Children and Mindfulness

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will represent my Master's thesis topic. My aim is to represent the Affects of Mindfulness Practice on Preschool Children, with special focus on the ability to replace the dominant with subdominant response. The so called main component of self-regulation.

Keywords

Children, Preschool, Mindfulness

Mindfulness or mindfulness meditation means being here and now, fully present and aware of this moment. It is one of the contemplative practices which from an individual requires a willing control of physical and mental activity with the preservation of focused attention on mental contents such as breath, sound, visual perception or on certain objects. The main goal or purpose of practicing mindfulness is not only to be attentive to certain fluctuations in the stream of consciousness, but also to be open and accepting to all kinds of states or experiences. With that we strengthen our concentration, attention and emotional regulation. These features help us find ourselves and fight stress.

Self-regulation is a critical component of a child's readiness for school. It is a capability which relieves a child's acceptance by peers, social and academic success, higher self-confidence, professional achievements and better health (Moffitt et al. 2011, Shoda et al. 1990).

In this master's thesis I will try to establish whether preschool children become more focused on events around them and are more focused on feelings they experience while practicing mindfulness. I will especially focus on the ability to replace the dominant with subdominant reaction, which is one of the main components of self-regulation. With the questionnaire I will try to establish whether parents see the difference in their child's behaviour in their home environment after finishing the eight-week mindfulness practice.

Based on the previous results which show a lot of benefits of practicing mindfulness with preschool and school-age children, not only because of better study habits, the effect on the general well-being and lower mood swings, it is of particular importance that we carry out research which would affirm the positive effects and help include the mindfulness practice to public education (Moffitt et al. 2011, Shoda et al. 1990, Flook et al. 2010).

Induction of practicing mindfulness into kindergartens and primary schools as a part of a curriculum or as a part of a learning programme is, besides the findings that it brings positive effects on children, crucial for each individual which starts his or her path of public and private educational establishments. One of the positive effects is shown in a higher level of self-regulation. Self-regulation is a capability which should relieve children from

acceptance of their peers and affect a child's social and academic success (Moffitt et al. 2011, Shoda et al. 1990). On the other hand, low level of self-regulation can lead to a lack of attention, activity and attention disorder, school failure and also to addiction, anxiety and depression (Moffitt et al. 2011).

Most of recent research is based on the effects of practicing mindfulness as a promotion of mental health and well-being, mostly with grown-ups. Practicing mindfulness has been more and more initiated with children and adolescents. By the overview of the existing literature the majority of research reports of success, especially of strengthening children's attention and behavioural competencies (Razza et al. 2013, McCafferty 2018, Flook 2010, Flook 2015).

There is a lack of research on the topic of mindfulness practice with preschool children, and that is why I am going to focus on them in my master's thesis. Preschool years are the window of opportunities to shape positive habits and movements. Due to fast brain development and brain plasticity children are able to learn and understand things very fast.

Mindfulness should help with the rise of self-awareness and self-understanding of the mental states and experiences. It is focused on the ability of self-restraint and techniques of larger presence at the given moment, which enables flexible reaction instead of automatic. It is practicing your mind to see the reality as it is. Mindfulness is a perception which is conscious from one moment to another. The purpose of practicing mindfulness is a personal transformation based on the awareness of our thoughts and words; reduction of tension, fear and worries; better readiness for ups and downs; strengthening the concentration and power of thinking; strengthening intuition etc. With the help of a mindfulness practice we should establish that changes, which are continuous and a regular feature in our life, are the essence of our experience. It is important to know when it is necessary to react and when you cannot change the situation and therefore not act. Buddhism teaches that to differ between these two poles is a wisdom which should be reached by practicing mindfulness (Lama 1999, 2001, Milenković 2002, Tang et al. 2007).

Hanson (2009) underlines that already a few minutes long daily routine can change our brain and help us overcome stress easily and strengthen emotional immunity. Things we pay attention to, what we think, feel and want, and our reactions to things, transform our brain in different ways. The most operative brain parts increase its blood flow because the need for glucose and oxygen increases. The non-active neuron connections die down. Hebb's rule is also important since it is based on a finding that the active synapses are more sensitive and they stimulate the emergence of new synapses. For that reason they all together form a thicker neural layer. It is proven that people who are practicing mindfulness develop thicker layers of neurons in insula and prefrontal cortex (Lazar et al. 2005).

Recent pilot research on practicing mindfulness by kids has shown a positive effect on the general well-being, behaviour,

improving mood swings, and help with learning problems, fear of failure and on strengthening executive functions (Nanninga and Sizoo 2012, Cillessen 2016). Two researches which also support mindfulness techniques are based on the practice of executing mindfulness by children with autistic spectrum disorder (Nanninga and Sizoo 2012) and by children with attention and hyperactivity disorder (Lo et al. 2016).

A research on the effect of mindfulness practice by preschool children with the emphasis on the promotion of self-regularity has not been carried out yet.

In my master's thesis I will try to establish whether preschool children are capable to substitute their dominant reaction with the subdominant and whether they can react differently in their home environment by practicing mindfulness. I will be interested in teachers' opinions on mindfulness and their observation of change in children.

Teachers from individual departments will participate in this research. For the teachers in the interventional group I will prepare an eight-week mindfulness programme, based on books on practicing mindfulness for preschool children which they will perform in their time of rest. The programme will be verified by a teacher of mindfulness for the youngest children and adolescents, Vesna Laković, the cofounder of the project in Serbia, entitled *Shift Mindful, dare to be human*, a mindfulness programme for adolescents aged from 18 to 25 years.

Teachers in the control group will follow the regular curriculum and will read a story to children when they rest or let them play quietly. Female teachers in the interventional group do not need previous knowledge on how to practice mindfulness. Children in the interventional group will practice mindfulness approximately for 400 minutes inside the eight-week research, approximately ten minutes per day, from Monday to Friday while in kindergarten.

The research will be composed of three parts. The first part of the research will present a test named *Toy wrap, Toy wait* (Razza et al. 2013) with which I will try to establish and compare the level of self-regulation in the interventional and control group. A pre-test will be carried out before the beginning of the research and an after-test after the end of the research in the kindergarten where children spend the majority of their day. They will be carried out by teachers based on given instructions. We will need approximately five minutes for each child. At the end of the test each child will get a sticker. The test named *Toy wrap, Toy wait* is carried out in a way that the teacher tells the child that she has a surprise for him or her but first she has to wrap it. She sits the child down so that he s/he is turned away from her by the angle of ninety degrees. The female teacher starts to wrap the gift so that the crunching of the paper can be heard. After one minute the teacher shows the wrapped gift to the child and that is when the second part of the test begins. I will mark the latency of "peeping": seconds that pass before the child peeps and looks at the object the female teacher is wrapping. When the female teacher puts the wrapped gift in front of the child, she tells him or her that s/he has to wait before he s/he touches the gift and meanwhile she pretends that she has another task to do; she is tidying the paper from the previous task. I will mark the latency of touching the gift: how many seconds pass before the child touches the gift. This research is described in detail in the article of Murray and Kochanska, titled *Effortful Control: Factor Structure and Relation to Externalizing and Internalizing Behaviour* from 2002 (Murray and Kochanska, 2002).

The second part of the research will present the *Children's Behaviour Questionnaire* for children aged from three to seven which the parents will get in the mail and they will fill it out before and at the end of the research. The questionnaire is a shorter version of the longer *Children's Behaviour Questionnaire*

developed by Putnam and Rothbar in 2006 and it is presented in detail in the article *Development mechanism of short forms of the children's behaviour Questionnaire*. I got the approval for the use of the questionnaire by the author Sam Putnam, professor of psychology at Bowdoin College in America. I will have the questionnaire translated twice and I will check the understanding of it by three different parents. In the questionnaire, parents have to mark their child's behaviour in the five-level Likert's scale, from extremely untrue of your child (1) to extremely true of your child (5). In the questionnaire three different subscales are used; liveliness (example: "is slow and unhurried in deciding what to do next"), negative emotion ("gets quite frustrated when prevented from doing something s/he wants to do") and effortful control ("notices it when parents are wearing new clothing" (Putnam and Rothbart, 2006).

The third part of the research will present the teachers' answers who will carry out the exercises of mindfulness. I will be interested in what teachers think about practicing mindfulness and whether they noticed any change in children, if yes, also what kind of a change.

The exercises of mindfulness practice will be carried out after lunch when children have time to rest. I will choose one or two departments where they will practice mindfulness five times per week from five to fifteen minutes, eight weeks in a row. The control group will present the other one or two departments of preschool children where they will spend their rest time as the usual curriculum of the kindergarten while reading stories or playing quietly from five to fifteen minutes, five times per week, eight weeks in a row.

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