



Mindfulness makes real difference in schoolchildren's lives

It's a rainy Thursday morning, and Room 4 at Te Papapa Primary School in Auckland are sitting on the mat listening to their teacher, Teck Wee. They turn as the door to their classroom opens, and Grant Rix, Mindfulness Promotion Project Manager for the Mental Health Foundation, walks in.

For a few moments, chaos reigns. Twenty or so little pairs of feet storm toward the entrance, eager hands reach out to be the first to hug him. Grant hugs each of them, and they quickly settle down again, patiently waiting to find out why he's come to visit.



Room 4 at Te Papapa Primary School pose for a photo with Grant Rix (at back).

Room 4 were one of 5 classes in New Zealand which participated in the Mental Health Foundation's Mindfulness in Schools pilot, an eight-week programme designed to teach mindfulness to children.

The programme, which developed by the Mental Health Foundation and designed by Grant, finished over a month ago, and Grant has popped in to find out how their practice has been going. Quickly, they rearrange the furniture so they can all sit in a circle, and start practicing.

Some of the students in this class are 'troubled,' says their teacher, Teck Wee.

Te Papapa Principal, Robyn Curry, agrees.

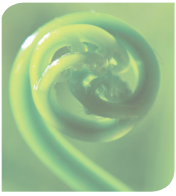
"It's a tough class," she says. "The children function at a really high level of arousal, they have to deal with a lot of quite difficult stuff in their lives."

Over the course of 8 weeks, Grant taught them how to let go of harmful thinking, practices for developing kindness, and ways to explore their connection to the natural world.

"So many of these children are hyper-vigilant, they never know what's happening in their lives, mindfulness helped them take a breath and calm down."

Robyn Curry, Te Papapa principal

"Sometimes, my brain is like a snow globe when you go like this," says ten year old Noah*, vigorously shaking an imaginary toy.



"It's stormy, and I can't see anything properly."

These days, when his brain feels 'stormy,' he does some of the mindfulness techniques Grant taught him.

"Now I know how to let it settle down, so I can see the different snow flakes, and understand what's happening in my mind." His face lights up as he lets his hands drift gently to his sides.

Noah isn't alone in the changes mindfulness has brought to his life. The impact practicing mindfulness has had on each student has impressed both their teacher and their principal.

"I noticed a gradual change in the kids as the programme went on," says Teck.

"Their interactions were changing. They were thinking more about how their own behaviour affected situations, rather than how other kids' behaviour was affecting them.

"By about the third week, their conflicts don't escalate, everything's diffused quickly. And it's continued since Grant's left. It's amazing."

For one student in particular, the Mindfulness in Schools programme has been transformational.

"Zachary* is one of my most troubled students," says Teck. "Last year, he'd spend hours outside of class, running around, swearing, fighting, attacking teachers. Academically, he was two years behind where he should be.

"Mindfulness has given him some anger management strategies, and cleared up his thought processes. Now, when he gets angry, he's not just sorry, but he talks about what he did wrong and what he'll do next time. It's just awesome."

Teck has also noticed that the way he acts – both at school and at home with his own three children – has been changed by mindfulness.

"At school, I'm more conscious of what I'm saying, how my body language and my words can escalate situations. I stop and think, 'hang on, what am I trying to do, what's the best way to do it?"

At home, I realised that I needed to stop, slow down, and just be with my family. I realised I was missing important moments in my kids' lives, and now I can appreciate them more."

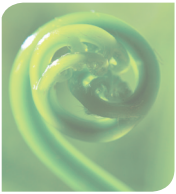
Both Teck and Robyn believe that all of Te Papapa's students would benefit from mindfulness.

The kids in Room 4 are also enthusiastic about other people learning mindfulness.

"Everyone should do it," said 9 year old Amy*, "and Grant should be the one to teach them!"

Mindfulness has been widely researched internationally and in New Zealand over recent years. By introducing mindfulness to children, we can work to prevent depression and anxiety for our young people, and invest in their potential for a future as healthy, happy adults.

**Childrens names have been changed*



Other stories

Gus is a 7 year old boy who attends a Decile 3 School in Auckland. In early 2013, Gus's only parent passed away, and Gus and his two siblings were placed in foster care. His teacher and principal hoped that the Mindfulness programme would help Gus to cope with the upheavals in his life.'

"Gus was a child who really needed this programme," says Lisa, his school's principal. "He was going through an almost unbearably hard time, and he was struggling to keep his head above water."

Maybe because he needed it so badly, Gus was one of the most eager mindfulness students in his class. He paid careful attention to each lesson, and whole-heartedly took part in the exercises.

Gus's ability to apply mindfulness skills to his life stunned the adults in his life.

"Since the conclusion of the programme, Gus and his family have been placed in several different homes. His older sister and younger brother have responded to this by acting out, but Gus has managed to use mindfulness to cope. We've all been blown away by how he's handled the difficulties life has thrown at him," reports Lisa.

10 year old **Archer** told his class one Monday morning that he had had a bad weekend, but didn't want to talk about it. He insisted throughout the week that he would not share what had happened to him, until Grant arrived for the weekly mindfulness lesson.

"During that week's lesson, he felt safe enough to open up and share with the class the changes that were occurring in his life," his teacher says. "He cried that day; he'd had enough calm and quiet that he was in a place to express what was really going on with his family."

"It's powerful to be able to teach children to be quiet and reflect on their feelings. At first we were thinking of referring him to counselling, but he's actually settled. The mindfulness sessions taught him that there will be ups and downs, and to accept what he was feeling and work through it."

The pilot classroom at **Westmere Primary School** has really taken mindfulness to heart. Teachers Nicola and Jane take their year 2 students through a mindfulness lesson every day, and have integrated mindfulness into weekly homework.

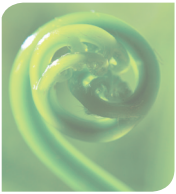
'If we don't do mindfulness, the day just doesn't go as well,' says Jane. 'The children ask for it if we forget!'

The effects of mindfulness extend beyond the walls of the classroom. 'The children tell us that they practice mindfulness before they go to sleep, when they're eating, and when they're brushing their teeth,' says Nicola.

As for the kids? They love mindfulness. "It helps me to calm down, turn my excited feelings into calm ones," says 6 year old Maeve.

"I look at my mind jar and I feel generous and calm, like I'm sitting on a cloud," reports 7 year old Annabel. "When I'm upset, I let myself feel sad, and then I can feel happy again."

Toby thinks it definitely helps with his schoolwork. "I don't feel so rushy when I'm trying to learn something. If I'm doing something hard, mindfulness helps me to calm down and work it out."



What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the practice of giving our full, open-hearted attentiveness to what is immediately occurring, physically and mentally, both within and around us.

Extensive research shows that mindfulness can relieve stress, anxiety, and depression, and contribute to positive wellbeing. It contributes to positive brain changes in areas associated with memory, attention, sensory processing, empathy, and reduced fear.

Mindfulness in Education

Mindfulness provides children with the opportunity to develop calm and build awareness, which in turn enhances their academic study by equipping students with:

- *an increased ability to transfer previously learned material to new situations*
- *increased creativity and independent thinking*
- *an improved ability to retain instructional knowledge*
- *an improved ability for selective attention*
- *and a decrease in levels of test anxiety.*

Studies also indicate that the frequency of healthy thoughts increases with mindfulness practice among children, while negative thoughts are viewed with less anxiety, and children benefit in similar ways to adults with decreases in stress, anxiety and symptoms of depression.

With an interest in replicating international findings within New Zealand, the Mental Health Foundation developed and delivered an eight-week mindfulness in schools pilot programme to five primary schools in New Zealand during 2013. 126 students ranging in age from 6-11 years old and six classroom teachers participated.

Preliminary findings from the evaluation support the international research, showing that the students and teachers of the pilot schools benefited from:

- *increased calmness*
- *improved focus and attention*
- *enhanced self-awareness*
- *effective conflict resolution and the development of positive relationships*
- *and reduced stress.*

The programme was developed to align with the New Zealand education curriculum and with a bi-cultural focus in mind. A Māori model of hauora, Te Whare Tapa Wha, was incorporated as a key element of the programme.

Based on the success of the 2013 pilot programme, the MHF has begun the development of a comprehensive initiative to support the integration of mindfulness in schools. This would add a component of professional development for school teachers and the development of web-based resources to the eight-week curriculum piloted in 2013, to help support sustainability of mindfulness practice in schools.

The vision of the New Zealand Curriculum is that young people will develop into 'confident, connected, actively involved, and lifelong learners' (p.8). The Mental Health Foundation asserts that teaching children and young people mindfulness will support this vision.