



Sharing Stories: So Simple a Child Can Do It

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In some ways, learning to be mindful, to focus attention and to relieve stress, is so simple a child can do it. I was reminded of this last month in the course of doing an observation at a kindergarten. I'd watched the children begin the day in their home classroom, then followed the class as they lined up and headed down the hall to the gym. The gym teacher was a cheerful young woman who was nevertheless quite firm about helping the children focus. There were colored dots equidistant on the gym floor and each child found a dot and sat down, so they were suddenly cross-legged in orderly rows, each just a little too far from the next to poke one another. Clearly this young woman believed in creating an environment that fostered success.

"We're all going to do what we need to do to settle down," she said. "So I want each of you to take a deep breath, and let it out the whole time I'm counting to ten. Make that breath last!" She then instructed them to put one hand on the opposite shoulder, make sure they noticed the spot where their fingers touched, and remember that spot when they took their hand away. "Now take a deep breath like you did before, and I'll count again, but this time, pretend that the breath is coming from that spot on your shoulder. You can feel your shoulder relaxing as you breathe out."

I watched the children's faces. They were intent as they made believe they were breathing from their shoulder, their chest, their throat, their tummy. It was like magic. You could see that there was a lot less stirring and wriggling in the group as a whole. Their faces cleared. They really settled down.

What was most interesting though, is what happened next. The whole group of about twenty children went out on the playground with their fifth grade buddies. The group began running, sliding, climbing, whinnying like horses, playing games of tag and hop scotch. I heard a sudden, amazing barrage of shouts and shrill cries. "That mindfulness lesson didn't last long," I thought. But I was wrong.

Meanwhile, some of the fifth grade boys had gotten into shoving and tussling. There was name calling, and more, angrier shoving. In no time a fifth grade boy named Dalton, a short, stocky boy who was paired with a skinny little tow-headed kindergartner named Ralph, got seriously upset. Dalton grabbed one of the other boys by the shirt and started dragging him backwards and shouting. At this point the teacher on playground duty intervened, pried his fingers loose, and told him to sit down and get himself together.

Dalton jerked away, then slumped on a bench, red-faced and crying, turning away from everyone who tried to help him. Finally his kindergarten buddy Ralph went and stood in front of him, nodding sympathetically. "You could try what I do," he said. "You touch your chest here,"—he touched Dalton's chest, then picked up the older boy's hand and placed it there. "Now remember that spot," he said very seriously. "Take a deep breath and pretend it's coming right from that place when you breathe it out."

It was really beautiful. The kindergartner was completely serious and matter of fact. The fifth grade kid did exactly as his kindergarten buddy told him. He went through the whole exercise. And it helped. They sat together and things were better. In a little while they were both laughing.

There were two lessons. One, was that even the simplest mindfulness exercise can aid in stress reduction and self control. The other is that if we pay attention, everyone has something they can teach us.

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