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# Addressing Early Childhood Bullying by Supporting Social-Emotional Skills with Mindfulness

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Addressing Early Childhood Bullying by Supporting Social-Emotional Development with

Mindfulness

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## Abstract

This paper explores articles on early childhood bullying, the effects it can have on a child's well-being and possible interventions. Supporting the social emotional development of young children is offered as a solution to the issue of early childhood bullying by helping children to develop better self-regulation, as well as compassion and kindness. The research states some of the current data on the positive effects of using mindfulness to support social emotional development of young children. The mindfulness interventions mentioned include, Early Heart Smart Program (EHS), mindfulness-based yoga, mindfulness-based kindness curriculum (KC), social emotional learning (SEL) and mindfulness-based interventions (MBI). The studies on empathy and emotional competence propose that early childhood teacher's well-being should also be considered when determining how to best support the social emotional development of young children. Further studies explore the use of mindfulness techniques in supporting early childhood teachers through interventions such as MBSR (mindfulness-based stress reduction) and mindfulness-based training.

*Keywords:* early childhood bullying, social emotional development, mindfulness

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## Addressing Early Childhood Bullying by Supporting Social-Emotional Development with Mindfulness

One of the concerns children face while attending school today is bullying, which has a major effect on a child's overall wellbeing (Foody & Samara, 2018). Due to the recent highly publicized incidences of school violence, bullying is becoming an important topic for research and determining how to prevent it at an earlier age (Levine & Tamburrino, 2013). Bullying is now being observed in classrooms with children as young as 3-5 years old, which raises the question of whether there is enough focus on the social-emotional development of children (Levine & Tamburrino, 2013). The skills that children learn during this preoperational stage of development are necessary for them to develop appropriate empathy and compassion for others, as well as learn how to regulate their own emotions. Without support for developing these basic skills, children may be unable to regulate their emotions or understand the emotions of others which can lead to bullying. Beginning to study how children develop social-emotional skills in early childhood may be helpful to determine the components of childhood bullying and possible causes. Many researchers are also exploring programs and interventions that include mindfulness as a possible method of preventing or reducing bullying and supporting social-emotional development.

### **Literature Review**

A review of literature on social-emotional skills in early childhood presents bullying as an increasing concern in schools and childcare programs where the prevalence is rising (Levine & Tamburrino, 2013). Researchers have begun to explore what factors contribute to bullying, how we define it and where more research is needed. Different solutions to the problem of bullying are being explored, one of which includes the practice of mindfulness. In situations

addressing bullying, mindfulness serves as a tool for supporting skills in perspective taking, self-regulation and empathy. Mindfulness has also proven beneficial in supporting teachers to cope with challenging behaviors and suffer from less stress, which in return helps them role model better social-emotional skills for their students (Ulloa et al., 2016). By supporting social-emotional development in early childhood, teachers may be able to impact the rising number of children who are involved in bullying and those who are affected by it. The literature review will explore the current research on bullying in early childhood, the effects and interventions for it and where more research is needed. Next, it will review the importance of developing social-emotional skills in early childhood along with how mindfulness can be used to support these skills. Lastly, the literature will connect student's social-emotional skills with the well-being of their teachers, and how mindfulness can support early childhood teachers as well. It concludes with proposing mindfulness as a possible means of addressing the concern of bullying by offering greater support for the development of social-emotional skills in early childhood.

### **Bullying in Early Childhood**

While bullying has always been a concern, the increase in prevalence and the young age at which it is now starting, has raised even greater concern around the issue (Levine & Tamburrino, 2013). Researchers are beginning to collect more information to address why bullying seems to be getting worse and why it is beginning as young as 3-5 years old. This collection of literature explores how bullying is defined and characterized, possible prevention methods, as well as future research.

Research by Levine and Tamburrino (2013) suggest that bullying is becoming an international concern and it is more important than ever to address it at an early age. They describe how initial instances of aggression and bullying behavior can often predict future

problems, as aggression can become a pattern that follows children into adulthood. Levine and Tamburrino (2013) offer a definition of bullying and state that, “in order for a behavior to be considered bullying it must be repetitive, intended to cause harm, provide unwanted negative actions, and show an imbalance of power or strength between the bully and the victim” (p. 271). The authors break down early childhood bullying into physical aggression, which consists of biting, hitting, kicking and pushing and, “relational aggression which includes cyber, verbal and sexual bullying” (Levine & Tamburrino, 2013, p. 272). Levine and Tamburrino (2013) suggest different methods for how to address bullying in early childhood and provide different prevention techniques such as conflict resolution programs or peace journals, both of which offer methods of communicating about conflict.

Saracho (2016) agrees that bullying is becoming a serious problem that can drastically affect a young child’s well-being. The author states the most common forms of bullying in early childhood programs involve excluding children from groups and play, as well as name calling. Saracho (2016) believes that when bullying situations appear in a young children’s school setting, interventions that build on social and emotional skills can help them avoid these bullying behaviors and support them to build solid social relationships. The author also describes how the effects of being a preschool bully–victim are usually socially unpleasant which then places the bully victims at a greater risk of engaging in bullying behaviors later in life. Simply put, victims of bullying are more likely to eventually display bullying behaviors themselves. Current research on bullying suggests that the school environment can influence both the rates of bullying and peer victimization as well as the effectiveness of preventive interventions (Saracho, 2016).

### **Effects of Bullying & Interventions**

While there is great concern around how bullying can affect a child's wellbeing, there is little research on preventative methods and practices to address the problem. Foody and Samara (2018) agree that while bullying can have severe effects on an individual's mental health, input on this topic from psychologists and mental health professionals is very limited. The authors state that research has demonstrated a significant link between bullying experiences (traditional and/or cyber) and social, behavioral and psychological problems such as anxiety, depression and suicidal behavior, eating disorders, borderline personality disorder, lower self-esteem and psychosomatic problems (Foody & Samara, 2018). The authors state that these outcomes demonstrate the need for bullying and cyberbullying to be considered 'high risk' experiences for the immediate and later development of mental health problems in children and young people. The outcomes are evidence of the importance of early interventions which could reduce the number of individuals needing mental health services in the future.

While research proves that bullying interventions and prevention methods are necessary, there is still little data that suggests what these techniques might look like and how effective they are. Foody and Samara (2018) describe how the current anti-bullying programs offered by schools do not provide individualized psychological support to victims. The author states that many schools normally rely on standardized care that offers the same approach for every child throughout the whole school. They suggest that instead of standardized care, schools should consider other therapeutic interventions that have already been used in classroom settings, such as mindfulness. Mindfulness practices and techniques have attracted a lot of attention in educational and school-based research in recent years since they are relatively easy and quick to administer and can support increased well-being and resilience among students of all ages (Foody & Samara, 2018). The authors suggest that, if administered appropriately and regularly,



an intervention including mindfulness has the potential to increase perspective-taking and to increase positive bystander behavior which means students would be more likely to help other students who are victims of bullying. In addition, a variety of mindfulness techniques can be taught to teachers through appropriate workshops and integrated into the curriculum. Foody & Samara (2018) recommend that more research is needed in this area to determine the benefits of mindfulness techniques, if they can be incorporated into current anti-bullying strategies, or if they can be used to develop anti-bullying interventions.

### **More Research Needed**

Although it is clear that bullying has become a serious problem and concern, more research is needed to determine the best solution. Vlachou, Andreou, Botsoglou and Didaskalou (2011) claim that while bullying in schools has become a complex worldwide problem, most of the research focuses on middle childhood and adolescence, while there is limited information on the development of the problem in early childhood. The authors state that the few studies that have been conducted support the existence of the problem in an early developmental phase as well as address the negative effects on many aspects of children's later life including school avoidance, peer rejection, and emotional difficulties (Vlachou et al., 2011). The research reviewed suggests that, besides minor differences, preschoolers and school-age children share common characteristics in the roles of the bully, the victim, and the bully-victim. Those behavioral similarities across different ages demonstrates that prevention programs should be practiced as early as possible and that these programs must be unique to the age group they are intended to help. Vlachou et al. (2011) mentions that future research in this area requires a consensus around the term bullying and how it is defined. Moving forward, the authors suggest

that more reliable and valid data, both qualitative and quantitative, are required to design effective prevention programs.

Research from Butt and Khalid (2015) proposes that children need to become the focus of future research due to the alarming rise in behavioral problems among children under the age of 18. The authors state that in the U.S. the prevalence of children with behavioral problems has been reported to be 3.5 percent to 6.8 percent. However, studies in the developing countries have reported an even higher prevalence in the behavioral problems of children than in the U.S. While the term “behavior” could include many different characteristics, Butt and Khalid (2015) offer the definition used by the National Mental Health and Special Education Coalition; behavioral problems are defined as, “a disability characterized by emotional or behavioral responses in school programs that are inappropriate for child's age, culture or ethnic norms and adversely effects child's educational performance” (p. 146). After reviewing the literature, Butt and Khalid (2015) offer some different factors that may affect behavioral problems in children such as parental caregiving, teacher training, socioeconomic status, self-concept and home atmosphere. The authors suggest that more research is needed regarding the role of intrinsic factors (e.g., child's difficult temperament, negative perception of environment) in development of behavioral problems. Continuing research in this area is vital as it would help mental health professionals, teachers and caretakers to focus their efforts on creating strategies that support children's prosocial development. As research on bullying in early childhood continues to grow, many individuals are beginning to explore the development of social-emotional skills and whether these skills may be a factor in the rise of bullying among young children.

### **Supporting Social-Emotional Development in Early Childhood**

The growing field of research on social-emotional development in young children focuses on self-regulation, and the connection these skills may have with the bullying concern. The literature reveals that early childhood is a vital time for the development of social-emotional skills and that these skills are necessary for children to develop positive relationships and friendships as well as be successful in school.

Montroy, Bowles, Skibbe and Morrison (2016) state that there is growing evidence that early childhood is an important time for the development of self-regulation, but little is known about how each individual child's development might vary over time. To address this gap in research, they designed a study that focused on different factors including children's gender and language skills, which have shown to be consistently linked to self-regulation development. The study investigated the development of behavioral self-regulation in three samples of 1,386 children between the ages of 3 and 7 years old. Montroy et al. (2016) states that the results showed behavioral self-regulation across early childhood was best represented by an exponential function. This function showed that as the children got older, they had better self-regulation with the most rapid increases between 3-5 years. This was the case across all three samples and was consistent with previous findings suggesting that behavioral self-regulation (and the executive function skills that support behavioral self-regulation) develop in a nonlinear fashion with early, rapid gains during the preschool years. Results also showed that being a preschool girl was associated with earlier development of self-regulation skills which was also the case for those with higher levels of expressive language and mothers with higher levels of education (Montroy et al., 2016). The authors suggest that these findings demonstrate the need for teachers to consider how best to support children's development of behavioral self-regulation during early

childhood, especially those children who might be at risk for slower development, as this developmental period is when rapid gains in self-regulation tend to occur.

Bradley, Galvin, Atkinson and Tomasino (2012) reported further research on the social-emotional development of young children. The researchers conducted a study that assessed the effectiveness of the Early Heart Smarts (EHS) program in schools of the Salt Lake City, Utah, School District. The EHS program was created to guide teachers on methods that support young children (3-6 years old) in learning emotional self-regulation and important age-appropriate social-emotional skills, with the goal of promoting their emotional, social, and cognitive development (Bradley et al., 2012). The study used 19 children in preschool classrooms and divided them into intervention and control group samples. They assessed the children using The Creative Curriculum Assessment (TCCA), a teacher-scored, 50-item instrument measuring student's growth in 4 areas of development: social/emotional, physical, cognitive, and language development. Results showed evidence of the effectiveness of the EHS program in increasing total psychosocial development in each of the 4 development areas measured by the TCCA. Results from Bradley et al. (2012) also found a strong pattern of large, significant differences on the development measures favoring preschool children who received the EHS program over those in the control group. The authors of this study state that even though emotional self-regulation is at the core of social-emotional competencies, there is still a disturbing number of preschool children that lack the skills needed to learn and function effectively at school. Bradley et al. (2012) suggests that the integration of programs designed to support social-emotional development, beginning in preschool, could help prevent many of the psychosocial issues that individuals face later in life, such as depression, anxiety and substance abuse.

The importance of social-emotional development in early childhood was also researched by Russell, Lee, Spieker and Oxford (2016), who note that in the past, the study of school readiness has neglected children's emotional development. Rather, the focus has been on early cognitive and language performance or academic achievement as more significant. Recently, however, the field has shifted to incorporate other domains, including self-regulatory skills and subsequent social and emotional outcomes (Russell et al., 2016). The authors suggest that indicators of self-regulation are powerful predictors of children's academic and interpersonal success into early adolescence, which is why supporting social-emotional skills is so important. Russell et al. (2016) states that, "specifically, contextual influences, including the quality of early caregiving relationships and the presence of role models that scaffold self-regulation into social interactions, support adaptive social skills to further shape a child's skill in regulating emotion and cognition" (p. 154). The researchers conducted a study to determine the accuracy of this statement and explored the effect of early caregiving on a child's self-regulation skills. Self-regulation skills in this study were measured by a child's ability to cope with anger/frustration (Children's Behavior Questionnaire), language development (Preschool Language Scale) and inattention (Continuous Performance Test). Data was collected from teacher reports, parent reports, and observational sources collected either in the child's home, in a child care center, or in the laboratory setting. Quality of caregiving was measured by child attachment, which was assessed by the Strange Situation as well as the home environment measured by Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment (HOME). The researchers also determined maternal sensitivity, assessed by observing caregivers' parenting behaviors, including sensitivity to distress, intrusiveness, supportive presence, and respect for child (Russel et al., 2016). Data included in the analyses were drawn from four different collection time points: 15 months, 36

months, 54 months, and 1st grade. Results showed that the quality of emotional support provided by caregivers had significant relationships with preschool language (a skill set that serves as a control for self and social-regulation) (Russell et al., 2016). They also found that kindergartners' inattention was affected by the quality of early caregiving and the strength of attachment with their caregivers in infancy. The researchers suggest that an implication of these findings is encouraging families and teachers to pay attention to and support children's emotional intelligence, social awareness, empathy, and reflective functioning through their caregiving relationship, as early as infancy.

The studies and research presented support the importance of teachers focusing on social-emotional skills in early childhood, when these skills are developing the most. While the data advocates for this new focus, there is little guidance offered to teachers on how to support the social-emotional skills of young children and what techniques can be used. As the practice of mindfulness is more commonly introduced into school environments and classrooms for a variety of reasons, it is also being considered as a tool for supporting social-emotional development.

### **Using Mindfulness to Support Social-Emotional Development in Children**

While mindfulness is a relatively new term in the modern West society, the practice is thousands of years old and originates from Buddhist culture. Mindfulness is defined by Kabat-Zinn (2011) as, "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (p. 291). Mindfulness can be practiced through various methods such as meditation, yoga, and insight dialogue. As it gains popularity, the practice of mindfulness is becoming more well-known and research on its effects are growing rapidly. The literature

presented explores the benefits of using mindfulness practices in early childhood settings, specifically in terms of social-emotional development and self-regulation.

As the research on mindfulness continues to grow, Jones (2018) suggests that the practice of mindfulness meditation may be a beneficial tool to help individuals learn how to regulate their emotions. When using the phrase “mindfulness meditation”, Jones (2018) refers to the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programs originally created by Jon Kabat Zinn. These programs are commonly 8 weeks long and usually consist of a combination of meditation, body awareness, yoga and exploration of patterns of behavior, thinking, feeling and action. The practice can teach individuals how to take negative stimuli and view it objectively, in doing so the person can lessen their attachment to the negative feelings and reduce their overall unhappiness. Jones (2018) also describes how the ability and awareness of emotion-regulation are important factors for engaging in prosocial behavior. In order to communicate and form healthy bonds with others, people should “engage in such behavior that encourages genuine displays of affection and compassion; otherwise, the inconsistency will disrupt the relationship they are trying to sustain” (Jones, 2018, p. 23). The author suggests that the ability to accurately display your emotion, can only be achieved by awareness and acceptance of one’s emotions, which is a skill that is learned through emotion-regulation techniques such as mindfulness meditation. He concludes that the practice of mindful meditation supports an individual’s emotional awareness, which allows one to accurately gauge the emotions of others and react to them appropriately, thereby, supporting prosocial behavior (Jones, 2018).

Other researchers suggest that while the practice of mindfulness can support social-emotional development, offering children a peaceful and compassionate environment is just as important. Dachyshyn (2015) explored this idea and analyzed the environment of early childcare

as well as the theories, practices and policies that govern early childcare programs. He suggests that within these, it is time for a shift to mindful and heartfelt methods, rather than harsh and forceful. The author questioned how the practice of mindfulness can be implemented into early childhood care to create more compassionate, non-judgmental moments for children and families. Dachyshyn (2015) proposes that early childhood educators must bring more heartfulness to their encounters with young children. He describes that when more compassion is practiced in early childhood care and education, the relationship between children and teachers is one of reciprocity rather than power and control. Dachyshyn (2015) encourages teachers to stop guiding children through force, coercion and authority and to instead practice generosity, kindness, and methods that are rooted in values, beliefs, and practices relevant to their families.

Research on the benefits of mindfulness also include the mindful practice of yoga. Razza, Bergen and Raymond (2015) performed a study to determine the effectiveness of using mindfulness-based yoga to promote self-regulation among preschool children (3–5 years old). The authors used 29 children, 16 of which participated in the yoga while 13 did not (Razza et al., 2015). They used a modified version of the YogaKids curriculum that was implemented daily by the intervention preschool teacher. The daily practice included breathing and sun salutations during morning circle, yoga postures linked to literacy activities in the afternoon, and breathing exercises during transition periods. Breathing activities included “Take5,” in which the child inhaled for the count of 5 as he/she raised each finger and then exhaled for 5 as each finger is closed and “Peace Breath” in which children inhaled and whispered the word “peace” on the exhale (Razza et al., 2015). Some of the yoga postures practiced included animal poses like cat, cow, and downward dog, as well as nature poses like mountain, tree and moon. The researchers used evaluations to assess different factors of self-regulation for the treatment and control group.



Raza et al. (2015) reported that results showed the mindfulness-based yoga significantly affected the self-regulations reported by the evaluations of teachers and parents. Children in the intervention classroom showed advantages in both measures of effortful control and executive functioning at the end of the school year compared to their peers in the control classroom. This study suggests that the practice of mindful yoga can be beneficial to the self-regulation skills of young children, but it is important to consider other mindfulness practices as well.

Another aspect of mindfulness involves strengthening qualities of compassion and kindness, which are commonly developed in young children through social-emotional activities. Flook, Goldberg, Pinger and Davidson (2015) state that research demonstrates the importance of learning to regulate attention and emotion early in life as self-regulation in childhood can predict health, financial stability, and educational success into adulthood. The researchers sought to investigate a method of supporting young children to cultivate these positive qualities. In their study they explored the effects of a 12-week mindfulness-based Kindness Curriculum (KC) on executive function, self-regulation, and prosocial behavior (Flook et al., 2015). The curriculum was used in a public-school setting with a sample of 68 preschool children. The curriculum aimed at cultivating attention and emotion-regulation, with a focus on kindness practices (empathy, gratitude, sharing) and incorporated children's literature, music, and movement to teach and support ideas related to kindness and compassion. One week of this curriculum was titled I Feel Emotions on the Inside with a lesson called Different Emotions Feel Differently on the Inside. The title of the concepts offered were, I can tell someone how I feel on the inside and I like some feelings and don't like other feelings, but all feelings are helpful (Flook et al., 2015). A few activities included pretending to be animals that related to their emotions, a belly breathing song and reading *Quick as a Cricket*. The curriculum was taught by experienced

mindfulness instructors in a secular manner and was provided universally to children as part of their standard classroom instruction during regular school hours. Flook et al. (2015) state that the results from the study indicated that students who participated in the Kindness Curriculum (KC) training showed larger gains in teacher-reported social competence as compared to the control group. These students also earned higher report card grades in domains of learning, health, and social-emotional development, whereas the control group exhibited more selfish behavior over time (Flook et al., 2015). The authors conclude that the results of this study suggest that participating in a brief mindfulness-based kindness curriculum can enhance a range of academic and prosocial outcomes in young children.

Lemberger-Truelove, Carbonneau, Atencio, Zieher and Palacios (2018) also support the theory that a child's ability to focus attention and contribute to healthy peer relationships is associated with numerous positive outcomes in later schooling and life experiences. They suggest that for children coming from low-income environments, social and emotional development can be compromised, and it is important that personally and culturally appropriate intervention strategies are provided (Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2015). To further explore this concept, the authors conducted a study to investigate findings from a counselor-delivered social and emotional learning and mindfulness-based intervention. The study used 23 three and four-year-olds from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The authors combined two different intervention methods, social-emotional learning (SEL) and mindfulness-based intervention (MBI). Each session began with an SEL group kindness song and an MBI breathing and movement activity. The next portion included brief instructions pertaining to a variety of SEL and/or MBI skills or practices (for example, a nutrition theme that involved mindful planting, food preparation and eating) followed by a group activity to encourage application of the

previous instructions. The sessions ended with a discussion of how the children could apply the lesson throughout the day as well as a final MBI breathing and movement activity. Each session was 40-minutes, with observations 4 days a week for 8 consecutive weeks (Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2015). Lemberger-Truelove et al. (2015) found that the treatment group demonstrated more self-regulatory related behaviors on days when the intervention occurred, some of these behaviors included a child's engagement, self-reliance, and behavior control. However, Lemberger-Truelove et al. (2015) state that the results of the analyses did not prove statistically significant treatment effects for the measures of peer interaction and self-regulated attention, or teacher interaction. Although some of the results did not show significant change, the authors also noted that on days when students were exposed to the SEL and MBI activities, they exhibited more sustained use of kind language and behaviors. Lemberger-Truelove et al. (2015) state the results from this study support mindfulness as a method to support young children's self-regulatory growth and classroom behaviors and these findings were consistent with the small number of related early childhood intervention studies.

Mindfulness techniques have also been used to support children with behavioral problems. Harpin, Rossi, Kim and Swanson (2016) describe how elementary school students in today's urban classrooms deal with many different life circumstances that contribute to stress. These stressors can impact learning, behaviors, and overall academic performance (Harpin et al., 2016). The authors suggest mindfulness as a practice that has been used in classroom settings to help with behavioral and academic outcomes. To explore the effects of a mindfulness practice, Harpin et al. (2016) conducted a study to test a 10-week mindfulness program in a 4th grade classroom. The intervention classroom received 10 weeks of mindfulness training using a combination of the MindUp and Mindful Schools curriculums. The intervention was delivered

by a certified mindfulness instructor for 20-30 minutes, twice a week. The classes covered a variety of topics including the science of mindfulness and the brain, awareness, heartfulness, gratitude, compassion and empathy. By the end of the study, Harpin et al. (2016) concluded that both students and teachers in the treatment group reported increases in positive classroom behaviors, emotional-regulation, and academic achievement after receiving mindfulness instruction. The survey responses also found that teachers reported positive changes among children, and in themselves, when mindfulness was a part of the classroom. The researchers report that the results could be biased since the evaluation form was administered after the final class day by the mindfulness instructor herself. Harpin et al. (2015) suggest that schools and districts might consider mindfulness sessions for students, and trainings for teachers, as a possible social-emotional learning and positive behavior intervention for school environments.

The data and research on the effects of mindfulness as a practice for supporting social-emotional development in children is continually growing and increasingly becoming more common. While the studies provided all support the benefits of using such a practice, mindfulness is still a new intervention method for schools, and there is much research that needs to be done to explore the best techniques to use with young children. As research on this topic continues to grow, data is also being collected on the benefits mindfulness may have for teachers as well as students. Teaching young children can be a stressful and exhausting job, which can be observed in the way that teachers respond to children and handle highly emotional situations. In order to determine how to best support young children's social-emotional development, the well-being of their teachers must be taken into consideration as well.

### **The Connection Between Students Social-Emotional Skills and Teachers**

Especially in early childhood, children are learning the most from what they see. Their teachers are role models for them and are constantly reinforcing their behavior and the decisions they make (Roberts et al., 2016). This suggests that for an individual to properly teach children strong social-emotional skills, they must be able to understand their own emotions and role model how to cope with them (Ulloa et al., 2016). Research has shown that teachers cannot communicate effective social-emotional skills to children if their own emotional needs are not met (Ulloa et al., 2016). The reviewed literature suggests that the emotional status of teachers does, in fact, affect the social-emotional development of the young children around them, and that there should be greater importance placed on teachers learning emotional competence.

There is scientific evidence that suggests the emotions of one person can influence the emotions of another person. Praszkiec (2014) explored this idea by researching how humans understand the emotions of others and the sense of empathy. He states that empathy is an ancient trait and, "It all starts with emotional contagion, which is a primitive form of true empathy. In essence, we are simply infected with others' emotions or behavior" (Praszkiec, 2014, p. 3). He continues with a definition of empathy as, "An essential part of emotions and is itself a specific emotion involving a feeling element of familiarity or connection and a bodily reaction of verbal or nonverbal communication" (Praszkiec, 2014, p. 4). Empathy in general would mean feeling what the other person is feeling and "being in the shoes of the other" (Praszkiec, 2014, p. 4). The author then explains that there are aspects of empathy related to neural functioning through a part of the brain called mirror neurons. Mirror neurons underlie the empathizing processes, "triggering the same brain activation patterns when subjects observe emotions in others as when they feel their own emotions" (Praszkiec, 2014, p. 11). These mirror neurons explain how we feel the emotions of others as if they were our own. Praszkiec's research on empathy and mirror

neurons forms a scientific foundation for why it is important for teachers to role model strong social-emotional skills for their students. If teachers are stressed out and frustrated, their students will pick up on these emotions and demonstrate similar behaviors. The following study continues to explore the relationship between teachers' emotions in relation to their student's development.

Roberts, LoCasale-Crouch, Hamre, and DeCoster (2016) explain that preschool experiences defined by high-quality teacher-child interactions are increasingly considered critical for enhancing young children's development. The quality of teachers' interactions with children is influenced by a variety of teacher characteristics, including depression (Roberts et al., 2016). Teachers who report more depressive symptoms are less likely to effectively interact with children, which may have a negative impact on children's development. The researchers continued to further explore the links between teacher depression, teacher-child interactions, and children's social-emotional development using a large national survey of Head Start. The study sampled Head Start children, their families, classrooms, and programs to provide descriptive data on the children and families served by the program, as well as characteristics of the teachers and programs providing services. The measures utilized in this study were collected through a variety of teacher and parent interviews, as well as classroom observations. Teacher depression was measured using the short-form of the CES-D, in which they indicated how they felt about themselves and their lives in the past week using 12 items rated on a 4-point scale (1 = rarely or never, 5=most or all) (Roberts et al., 2016). Teachers reported on children's skills and behavior in both the fall and spring. Problem behaviors were reported using 14 items from an abbreviated version of the Personal Maturity Scale and the Behavior Problems Index. During observation periods, emotionally supportive interactions were assessed by trained coders using the Classroom

Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), an observational measure of teacher–child interaction quality. Results showed that teachers and parents reported increases in problem behaviors, and teachers reported decreases in children’s social skills, when children were in classrooms with more depressed teachers (Roberts et al., 2016). However, more depressed teachers were not observed to be less emotionally supportive than their less depressed peers. The authors state that this study supports the idea that teachers’ own social-emotional competence and well-being, namely, depression, relates to children’s social-emotional growth. These results suggest that there needs to be greater importance placed on the well-being of the teachers working with young children who are at the prime age for developing social-emotional skills and can be greatly affected by the emotional state of their teachers.

The first step to supporting teachers who may be depressed or stressed, is helping them to recognize or become aware of their current emotional state. Teachers must be able to understand their own emotions if they are going to teach children how to understand theirs. Ulloa, Evans and Jones (2016) state that, “One aspect of the adults’ role in successfully supporting young children’s emotional competence through relationships is the manner in which they can monitor and regulate their own internal processes and behavior during their interactions with the child” (p. 2). The researchers continue to describe how early childhood teachers’ emotional competence is considered essential in building successful and trusting emotional relationships, “genuinely based in the individual understanding of the children’s needs and feelings” (Ulloa et al., 2016, p. 2). To better understand teacher’s emotional competence, they conducted a study that addressed the effects of a reflective, emotionally focused training on 30 preschool teachers’ own emotional competence. The training consisted of three sessions that integrated theoretical, practical and personal aspects of the emotional competence of participating teachers (Ulloa et al., 2016). The

first session was designed to introduce the participants to the conceptual foundations of the training and on the concepts of emotional competence and emotion schemas. The second session aimed to consolidate some of the emotional theory concepts and integrate those ideas into a process of reflecting on emotions through an experiential exercise. Session three was designed to promote and sustain teachers' emotional communication with children. In this session, the concepts of synchronicity and attunement (the intentional focus on emotional attention) and mindfulness in early childhood education were introduced (Ulloa et al., 2016). The impact of the training on teachers was assessed by observing the child- teacher interactions during a pretend game that was designed to elicit some level of emotional arousal in children. Results suggested that the intervention did have an effect on the majority of the emotional skills tested during Phase 1 of the game, however, variables such as initiative and containment of emotions failed to reach statistical significance. The participants in the intervention group showed a clear enhancement on three components of emotional competence, in comparison with the participants in the control group who did not receive the same training. The findings of this study highlight the important role of early childhood teachers in supporting social-emotional skills and, more importantly, the role of teachers' own emotional competence and self-awareness of emotions in responding to children's emotional needs.

If data suggests that children benefit from having teachers who are emotionally competent and able to process and cope with their own emotions, then continued research should focus on how to best support these teacher's social-emotional skills and well-being. The previously mentioned practice of mindfulness proved to support the social-emotional development of young children and could be used similarly to support teachers in the same way.



Mindfulness is also commonly used to help individuals cope with stress which is a prevalent concern for many early childhood teachers (Kyte, 2016).

### **Using Mindfulness to Support Well-being of Teachers**

Although research shows it is important to support the well-being of teachers, there is still little data on how best to offer this support. Present studies suggest that mindfulness training may be an effective method in supporting teachers as it can help them to cope with challenging behaviors and suffer from less stress. Singh, Lancioni, Winton, Karazsia and Singh (2013) suggests that about 10 percent to 25 percent of preschool children engage in challenging behaviors which can include physical and verbal aggression, property destruction, major tantrums, self-injury, and noncompliance to requests. The authors state that many teachers do not have enough experience and expertise to prevent and resolve issues that lead to the challenging behaviors of these children, which often leads to teacher burnout and insufficient support for the children. It is evident that greater support needs to be offered to teachers to help them cope with the challenges of working with young children in order for teachers to successfully support and lead the classroom, as well as be role models.

Singh et al. (2013) explored mindfulness as a possible method for supporting early childhood teachers as well as their students. The researchers noted a recent shift to incorporate mindfulness-based training for teachers as a method to increase their personal well-being, reduce stress, and enhance their classroom management practices. Singh et al. (2013) also describes how “Over time, the children’s interactions with their teacher in preschool classrooms are often a mixture of positive and negative interactions, in which the behavior of one affects the behavior of the other” (p. 213). The author suggests that an intervention is needed early on to change any negative influence that teachers and preschool children have on each other. To explore the

benefits of a mindfulness-based training for both teachers and their students, the researchers measured the effects of preschool teachers that attended an 8-week mindfulness course on the behavior of the students in their classroom. The study focused on one preschool classroom as participants, which included 3 teachers and 18 children. The mindfulness training offered to teachers involved a weekly 2-hour session over 8 weeks, that involved one-on-one training by the therapist and was provided to each teacher separately (Singh et al., 2013). Some of the topics covered during this training involved, basic meditations, developing awareness, beginner's mind, and other Buddhist concepts. The purpose of offering these Buddhist teachings was based off the idea that, "According to Buddhist ontology, the arising of teacher and student behaviors is interdependent; thus, if the teacher changes his or her behavior through meditation with the intention of helping all sentient beings, the effects of these changes should be evident in the students' behavior" (Singh et al., 2013, p. 214). Teachers were also taught a new mindfulness meditation each week and were required to practice it at home. The teachers were asked to continue with all the mindfulness meditation and to utilize their mindfulness skills in their interactions with the children but weren't given any further mindfulness instructions. Singh et al. (2013) reports that results from the study showed decreases in the students' challenging behaviors and increases in their compliance with teacher requests. This behavioral change began while the teachers received mindfulness training and continued to change following the training. While the students did not show a change in positive social interactions with peers, they did show a decrease in negative social interactions. Singh et al. (2013) states that these results indicate that mindfulness training for teachers was effective in changing teacher-student interactions in desirable ways. Although the results proved mindfulness training as beneficial the

authors pose questions for future research, such as whether it is suitable for all classrooms and if teachers would continue the practice after the formal training was terminated.

Rupprecht, Paulus, and Walach (2017) conducted similar research on how teacher's well-being and performance are affected by their ability to cope with the demands of the profession. Their study investigated the impact of a mindfulness intervention (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction) on teachers' well-being, self-regulation ability and classroom performance. The sample was made up of 32 German school teachers (93 percent female) who were assigned to a control or an intervention group (Rupprecht et al., 2017). The MBSR program was strict, requiring participants to practice 40 minutes of formal meditation, six days per week, for three months. The researchers state that post intervention, teachers improved significantly on measures of stress and health, coping abilities, emotion-regulation, and self-efficacy from the intervention. Rupprecht et al. (2017) also reported that the satisfaction with the MBSR intervention was high; 82 percent of the teachers would recommend it to colleagues. Mindfulness proved to be a beneficial practice for teachers by not only reducing their stress but also supporting their coping mechanisms and self-regulation which made them better able to role model positive social-emotional skills.

As with many studies on mindfulness, the research is still very new and there is a lot more data to be collected. However, the current research suggests that mindfulness should be considered as a possible method for beginning to support early childhood teachers who often suffer from high levels of stress. A mindfulness practice would benefit the well-being of the teachers which would, in turn, make them better able to support the social-emotional development of their students.

## **Discussion**

As the instances of bullying in schools becomes increasingly more common, it is more important than ever to address this global issue and explore how to prevent it. Research shows that children are beginning to bully at younger ages, and it is being more commonly observed in early childhood programs and preschools (Levine & Tamburrino, 2013). For this reason, future research should focus on this younger age group of 3-5 year olds, and specific interventions that target this population of children where bullying is now starting. It is at this young age, that children are also developing their social emotional skills, a skill set that is proven necessary for children to be successful in school, with relationships and through adulthood (Russell et al., 2016). Research has found that young children who bully often choose to say hurtful words to one another or physically hurt someone else and, in doing so, are showing a lack of compassion and empathy for others. The development of compassion and empathy are supported while children learn social-emotional skills and it is important to address these basic skills when determining how to prevent early childhood bullying. While research on interventions for early childhood bullying is still very new, the studies that have been conducted show mindfulness to be a helpful tool in supporting social-emotional development in young children (Flook et al., 2015).

Although each study reported positive results for supporting the social-emotional development of children, they each used different mindfulness practices. One study showed that the practice of yoga can help support self-regulation (Razza et al., 2015) while another study used a kindness curriculum to enhance academic and prosocial outcomes (Flook et al., 2015). A different study found that an intervention including emotional learning and mindfulness could help support the use of kind language, self-regulatory growth and classroom behaviors

(Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2015). Although there are many different techniques to practice mindfulness, a variety of them have shown to benefit children's social-emotional development.

Research on the topic of social-emotional development in children states that not only is there not enough focus on this area of development in early childhood, but there is also not enough support for those who are expected to teach it (Singh et al., 2013). For many teachers, it can be hard to role model positive social-emotional skills when they are frustrated or stressed. Recent studies suggest that children's development can be affected by the well-being of their teachers and the quality of their interactions (Roberts et al., 2016). For this reason, it is important to ensure that teachers are emotionally competent and can properly cope with the stressful environment in order to be positive role models for their students. Mindfulness has proven to benefit teacher's emotional competence in a similar way that it supports their students.

Research on using mindfulness practices to help teachers cope with stress are becoming more popular and the findings suggest that it can be a tool for supporting their well-being (Rupprecht et al., 2017). The studies by Rupprecht et al. (2017) and Singh et al. (2013) used mindfulness-based programs for the teachers while the study by Ulloa et al. (2016) used a training on emotional competence. The mindfulness-based programs helped to reduce levels of stress, while supporting coping mechanisms and self-regulation, as well as improving teacher-student interactions. The emotional competence training reported an increase in teacher's social emotional skills and their ability to properly respond to student's emotional needs. These findings suggest that mindfulness techniques should be considered as possible interventions for supporting the well-being of early childhood teachers.

While there are many studies that state the importance of developing strong social-emotional skills in young children, as well as their teachers, the interventions used to support

these skills are not a common practice. For these interventions to become more common, the mindfulness techniques must be taught and shared with early childhood teachers. This could be done by offering workshops or trainings to early childhood teachers on how they can practice mindfulness techniques in their classroom, that would not only support the social-emotional development of their students, but also benefit their own well-being. The thesis project I created is a workshop for early childhood teachers to teach the importance of social-emotional skills, address the concern about early childhood bullying, and show how mindfulness can support social-emotional development with a few specific practices they could use in their classrooms.

The first half of my workshop aims to address the social-emotional development of young children and encourage the development of compassion and kindness as well as self-regulation and emotional competence. Through properly developing these skills, children will be more likely to understand and express their own emotions as well as care for the emotions and well-being of others. Both skill sets would support children in handling conflicts in group settings without having to turn to bullying. The activities offered involve aspects of the practice of mindfulness, which has been shown to benefit emotional awareness, self-regulation and pro-social behavior. I believe that some of these practices may prove to be possible interventions for schools hoping to address bullying and encourage students to be kinder to one another.

The second part of the workshop will address how to support the well-being of teachers by offering similar activities as offered to their students. These activities, too, involve aspects of mindfulness to help bring awareness to their emotional states, express their feelings, role model positive social-emotional skills for their students and practice coping mechanisms. Mindfulness has proven to benefit teachers by decreasing stress, increasing positive social interactions and supporting self-regulation. These benefits support why mindfulness is an important aspect to

incorporate into activities aimed at supporting teachers' overall well-being and social-emotional skills. A variety of techniques will be offered, some of which include how to mindfully express emotions with young children, and how to practice meditation and deep breathing. The types of meditation offered include a guided mindfulness meditation, a loving kindness meditation and a guided meditation on gratitude. By the end of the workshop I hope that participants will have a deeper understanding of the practice of mindfulness, a renewed conviction about the importance of focusing on social-emotional skills, as well as some ideas on how to bring the two together.

I hope that this workshop serves as a support for early childhood teachers to help their students develop compassion, empathy and kindness as well as self-regulation and prosocial behaviors. Early childhood teachers are guiding the future generation of people, and early childhood is the most important time, developmentally, for children to learn these necessary skills (Montroy et al., 2016).

### **Conclusion**

Bullying can have severe effects on a child's well-being and research indicates that these effects can follow them into adulthood. A growing field of research suggests that the social-emotional development of young children is vital to their self-regulation, behavior and overall mental health throughout life. These findings reveal the need for early childhood teachers to place greater importance on supporting children's social-emotional development, and to explore different methods of doing so. Mindfulness has proven to be a possible intervention that, not only supports social-emotional development in children, but could also be used in anti-bullying programs to help children develop greater empathy and kindness. Research in this area also shows the need for a greater focus on the well-being of the teachers in early childhood classrooms. Teachers could benefit from learning how to cope with their own emotions, which

would help them model positive social-emotional skills for their students. The practice of mindfulness can support teachers in learning coping mechanisms and self-regulation as well as reduce their levels of stress. Future research should continue to explore how mindfulness can support social-emotional development in early childhood and any subsequent effects it may have on the prevalence of bullying. If a mindful practice proves capable of reducing the frequency of bullying and violence in schools, it could have a great impact on the well-being of children all over the world and prevent future generations of adults being negatively affected from childhood bullying.



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