



Connecting Academic Success, Yoga, and Mindfulness

by Madeline Harmon, Yoga Instructor

Where do you picture your child 10 years from now? I'm sure that if you're like most parents, you might imagine your child to be moving forward in their pursuit of a good education.

Well-intentioned parents advocate for their child's academic success because they know the value of a "good education." We are a country that honors and values the benchmarks of academic achievement—test performance, forward motion through the educational system, and subject matter proficiency. But where does our society praise, or even leave room for, the development of the skills needed to become a well-rounded person? Most parents I know tell me that the one thing they desire for their child, above success, is happiness. And yet, it can seem so elusive, especially in the context of teaching kids in a K-12 setting.

Unprecedented Stressors

I, along with other educators and personnel who work with kids on a day-to-day basis, see the triumphs and tribulations of our kids. We know that in the pursuit of academic success they are experiencing more stress, anxiety, depression, and emotional dysregulation than ever before.

More and more parents and teachers alike are becoming aware of the very real mental and physical tolls toxic stress are having on their kids. The 2010 national representative sample of over ten thousand U.S. adolescents, the NCS-A, revealed that approximately half of adolescents sampled (49.5 percent) met lifetime criteria

for at least one diagnosed (DSM-IV) mental disorder, and 40 percent of these individuals met criteria for at least one additional mental disorder. Of this affected group, about one in four or five experienced symptoms so severe as to significantly impair their functioning across the life span.

The stark reality of these findings do, thankfully, lend way to more uplifting outcomes. There is now ample research confirming the benefits of pursuing social and emotional well-being for adults as well as children. Neuroscience research supports the message that cognitive, social, and emotional development is needed to facilitate a true picture of health, happiness, and success in any person. Evidence shows that the prefrontal cortex, the center of higher cognitive functioning in the brain, plays an important role in emotion processing and regulation.



More than Academics

Educators and administrators are beginning to recognize the value that traditionally “non-academic” subjects play in tandem to a traditionally academic environment. Developing the skills to navigate the frustrations of learning, identify internal needs, communicate with peers, and refocus attention on tasks when they get challenged are just a few of the things that can contribute to greater happiness in the long term. An essential part of developing those skills depends on a student’s ability to understand, communicate, and utilize the tools needed to help manage their emotions. This is where the current trend of mindfulness comes in.



Mindfulness is the process of paying attention on purpose to what you are doing and what you are feeling during a single moment of time. As put even more simply by mindfulness meditation pioneer **Jon Kabat Zinn**, “It is moment to moment awareness.” Although mindfulness has its roots in Zen, Mahayana, and Theravada Buddhism, much of the modern secular practice we know today comes from Zinn’s work. In 1979, Zinn recruited chronically ill patients who were not responding to traditional Western medical treatments to participate in an eight-week mindfulness-based stress reduction program based off of the Buddhist teachings he learned abroad. The results of his trials were astounding, and became the impetus that led Zinn to bring this practice from the East into the Western world.

Science Concurs

Mindfulness has become so popular because it is a low-cost intervention that has powerful effects and can largely be customized to meet the needs of individuals. According to research done by **D.S. Black** and **R. Fernando** published in the *Journal of Child and Family Studies* in 2013, mindfulness practices in schools have been shown to benefit students in the areas of:

- Paying attention
- Self-control
- Classroom participation
- Respect for others

In addition, the *British Journal of Psychiatry* published a study by **W. Kuyken**, who found that a mindfulness-based program integrated into six British public schools largely lowered student depression and stress and provided a greater sense of well-being after just nine weeks. They even found that children obtained better test scores the more they practiced the techniques taught in the program. Giving students the tools to experience their emotions as they happen is the key to powerfully transforming challenging emotions as they arise.

Yin, Yang, and Yoga

At this point, if you're on the Mindfulness bandwagon, you may still be wondering how Yoga plays into this big picture. Well, Yoga and Mindfulness are like the Batman and Robin of conscious awareness.

Yoga is a 3000+ year old practice of physical postures that prepare the body to more effectively practice mindfulness while seated. Additionally, it is used as a way to reconstruct habitual mental patterns by working with them on a physical level. Mindful awareness is greatly needed when practicing the postures associated with Yoga. The benefit comes in the fine detail of focusing on certain physical cues, like your breath, as well as bodily sensations, while aiming to move the body with ease into shapes that are intentionally challenging.

Yoga, for me, has always provided a space to practice becoming aware of my responses to situations that are challenging. Yoga has also been heavily studied and shown to produce a myriad of long lasting health benefits. A new report presented at the Anxiety and Depression Association of America Conference in April 2015 linked yoga to lowering levels of the stress hormone cortisol, the same that is present during times of anxiety and stress. It has also been cited by the National Institute of Health as a way to lower blood pressure, reduce depression, and boost mood.

A Personal Note

I have been a Youth Mindfulness Advocate for 10+ years now, and just as I've been witness to the paralyzing effect stress can have, I have seen firsthand how students can bloom and flourish with the regular utilization of yoga postures and mindful breathing. Despite the many challenges modern youth face, they are incredibly bright and resilient and work their hardest to prosper. Wellness tools like mindfulness and yoga empower students to love, take care of, and advocate for themselves. They teach that our happiness and whole-person well-being

(well-being of relationships and emotional health) are equally as important as achieving academic or career success. Above all, teaching wellness sends a message to students that they matter—in a world where a lot of forces are already making them feel like they don't.