

Mindfulness in ACT primary schools

Information sheet

Proposal: To introduce a daily short mindfulness meditation program in primary schools in the ACT.

The ACT has the opportunity to establish itself as a leader initiating generational change in the well-being and mental health of young Australians through the teaching of a basic self-management skill (mindfulness) to primary school children. By doing so, the ACT Government would be giving these children a skill with which they will be better equipped to handle the challenges of teenage years and secondary schooling, not to mention adulthood.

Background:

There is growing interest in the concept of mindfulness being taught in schools. Society is experiencing rapid and major changes including increased testing of young Australians and pressure to perform. Many children have become over-scheduled and parents are working longer hours. Children and teenagers are spending significant periods of time on computers, tablets and mobile phones which research shows leads to poorer well-being. Being busy and stressed appears to have become the new norm. This set of circumstances is creating significant mental health and educational challenges for young Australians.

Mental health statistics:

- 1 in 16 young Australians is currently experiencing depression
- 1 in 6 is currently experiencing anxiety
- 1 in 4 currently has a mental health condition
- Suicide is the biggest killer of young Australians
- Young people are most concerned about stress, school or study problems and body image in that order
- Concern about mental health among young people is growing
- A quarter of young Australians say they are unhappy with their lives
(source: Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre, Mission Australia Annual Youth Survey, Youth Beyond Blue)

As a consequence, schools are becoming increasingly focused on the well-being and social and emotional education of their students. One self-care practice is mindfulness, which in its various forms has been around for hundreds of years. This discipline of the mind and 'mindfulness', is now becoming popular in mainstream society as a mental health and self-care strategy.

Results of research on meditation in schools indicate it:

- reduces stress, anxiety and depression
- increases resilience
- assists in lowering the incidence of mental health problems
- increases positive emotion, vitality, life satisfaction, self esteem
- enhances more focused and clearer thinking, executive attention, memory and heightened performance and achievement
- enhances the ability to self regulate

(source: Harvard, Oxford, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Sydney University (12 month Grade 3 study), Melbourne University, and Monash University.)

Giralang Primary School meditation trial

Giralang Primary School undertook an 8-week mindfulness trial for Grade 3 students in 2015. The trial involved a short daily mindfulness meditation followed by debrief and journaling.

The trial arose from the need to produce some data in the ACT primary school system. A simple Mindfulness program developed by Melbourne-based not-for-profit organisation, Smiling Mind was chosen as it could be easily slotted into the daily school schedule.

The study was set up to look at the impact of a daily 5-10-minute Mindfulness session on the well-being and social skills of Grade 3 students over an eight-week period. The students were assessed using the SDQ (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire), a standardized and validated mental health risk scale (www.sdqinfo.com). As part of this process the class teacher filled out questionnaires for each student before and after the intervention.

The result was a significant drop in the total SDQ score (Mental Health Risk) after the program. The mean total SDQ dropped by 51% based on a t-test ($p < 0.02$). Other qualitative feedback was positive. The class teacher gave feedback that the class become a calmer and nice place to be and learn. She noticed positive changes in student behavior towards themselves and each other, and saw students who had been seldom heard, finding their voices. Some students commented that they were sleeping better, others said they felt calmer because of the program.

Call to Action:

Currently only three primary schools and one secondary school in the ACT public school system are teaching a Mindfulness program. However, the time is right for interested Parent committees to bring Mindfulness to the attention of their schools. The ACT Education Directorate's Wellbeing Unit is encouraging schools to introduce Mindfulness programs and is providing training and support. In addition, the Education Minister Yvette Berry is embarking on a 6-month period of consultation with the Canberra school community and stakeholders. The Minister wants a community driven education strategy and has said she wants to sit down with students, teachers, parents and carers to hear their views. This presents an opportunity to put a simple and inexpensive mental health and self-care initiative with proven benefits on the agenda.

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