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Enhancing Childrens Social-Emotional Learning Skills Through Mindfulness Practices

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Enhancing children's social-emotional learning skills through mindfulness practices

Jordan Fenlon, Stephanie Chang, Shun Yi (Felix) Wan, Amrith Shettigar

Background:

- The Kalamazoo Eastside neighborhood has been subject to a great deal of economic and functional instability, particularly impacting the youth.
 - 90% of children are eligible for free or reduced lunch due to low income
 - 58% of households are single-female households
 - 29% of parents do not have a high school diploma.
- Eastside Youth Strong (EYS) is a local organization focused on improving the lives of these children. This study will be investigating the EYS afterschool program's mindfulness initiative.

Materials and Methods:

- Retrospective study explores the benefits of mindfulness techniques conducted on EYS children as measured through the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA).
 - The DESSA is a standardized measurement of competencies and social-emotional needs of each participating child compared to similarly aged children nationally.
 - EYS staff were trained by a mindfulness expert to administer 10-minute mindful immersion, breathing exercises, body scanning, and mindful listening sessions Monday-Wednesday during the afterschool program.
 - The DESSA is administered at the beginning (September), middle (March), and end (May) of the school year. We will analyze the data with the help of the WMed Biostats team.

Mindfulness Techniques:

- Breathing exercises - to increase alertness and to raise vital energy.
 - Deep inhale through your nostrils (3 seconds).
 - Hold your breath (2 seconds).
 - Long exhale through your mouth (4 seconds).
 - Observe each breath.
 - Focus on the rise and fall of your chest.
 - If your mind wanders, gently bring your attention back to your breath.
- Body scanning - to train attention and to release repressed emotion.
 - Focus your attention at the top of your head.
 - Then gradually move your focus down the body.
 - Learn to shift your attention up or down the body.
- Mindful listening - to silence your own thoughts and to let go of distractions, such as physical and emotional reactions.
 - Invite participants to follow a story in their minds.
 - Once the story is finished, participants takes turn to share what they imagined.
 - Encourage participants to describe their own thoughts, feelings and body sensations when listening and talking.

Results and Discussion:

- In the first DESSA administration, 20 children were evaluated, and their ratings of the social-emotional composite were 0 Strength (0%), 7 Typical (35%), and 13 Need (65%).

- Anecdotal observation by Eastside Youth Strong staff has demonstrated student improvement in
 - Overall attention span
 - Patience
- Results, and therefore conclusions, for this project are still in progress
 - Upcoming DESSA results will be collected in
 - March (in process) and May of 2016/2017 school year
- We will compare our initial time point after implementation of mindfulness to subsequent time points to look for a statistically significant improvement in DESSA performance.



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