

How Preschool Teachers Can Consciously Shift Their Students' Brains to Mindfulness, Love and Compassion

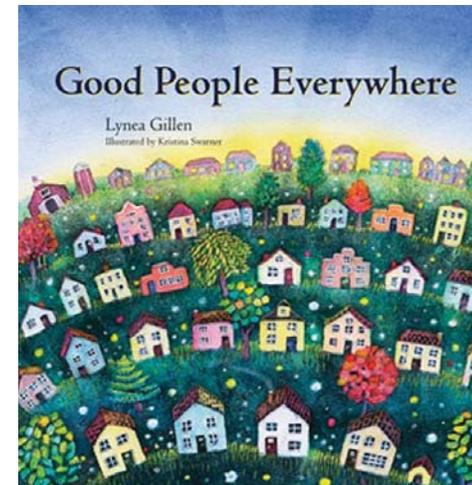
By Lynn Mendelsohn

Imagine waking up to this breaking news in the morning: "The day is sunny and there are millions of good people everywhere doing very good things." This news would make us giddy and might even catapult us out of bed and certainly, our attitudes would be positive and our dispositions sunny! While we are not likely to wake up to this kind of breaking news in the morning or even conclude our days on such an upbeat note, we can begin to become "mindful" and program ourselves and our children with positive daily internal messages which might, after time, alter our brain waves, our gamma waves, in a positive direction. Instead of reacting, we can maintain an even keel and just "be" with no judgement. How nice if we could be exposed to these positive messages daily and impart them to our preschoolers! Research indicates we can and several mindful people have begun to write books for children to help them tap into their inherent goodness and compassion. In our romantic imaginings, mindfulness is something brought back from afar decades ago by roving "flower children" or practiced in certain eastern religions. However, 40 years of concrete research on the subject of mindfulness in the United States has yielded some startling results among large groups of consistent practitioners. Two neuroscientists, who were friends and graduate students together at Harvard University in the 1970's, began to consider the increased mind-brain-body health benefits of long-term mindfulness practitioners. Their academic advisors discouraged their research, but Drs. Richie Davidson and Daniel Goleman have now amassed proof positive—mindfulness has brain benefits if we practice it regularly. We can develop mindfulness skills the way we develop other skills and from an early age. Daily practice keeps mindfulness skills sharp and shifts our brain waves, specifically gamma waves, integrating the different parts of our brains—creating brain "harmony" and what has most recently become labeled as emotional intelligence. We might not have believed this

except that now, we have instruments with which to record electrical activity in the brain while we meditate and reach a mindful state. Thanks to Davidson and Goleman, we can "define and measure" what is happening. Just like other aspects of human development, there are measurable stages of developing mindfulness. The ultimate goal is for us to consciously move our brain patterns from mindful states (periodically harmonious) to mindful traits (permanent, harmonious ways of being). Brain harmony is described as that place where you are not reactive and not overwhelmed—purposely and non-judgmentally paying attention in the present moment. The most fascinating research question for Davidson and Goleman was what lasting traits does meditation produce? They were most intrigued and pleased to discover that long-term meditation produces selflessness, equanimity (composure, calm and level-headedness) and impartial compassion (an ability to have compassion for friend and foe alike). These are some traits we could all stand to acquire! To some, this idea in and of itself might seem overwhelming! But maybe there are baby steps we can take toward achieving this goal in our society. The concept of helping ourselves and our students reach mindful meditation is a particularly important goal in early childhood today. Without control over their emotions and an ability to have compassion for and empathy toward others, early learners will struggle to learn and perform academically; they will have to play "catch-up" for the rest of their lives.



So how do we begin the process of aligning and integrating our body's mental, emotional and physical processes? Where do we begin? Certainly, we can practice mindful meditation ourselves, introduce, and model core strategies in our classrooms, which will begin to shift our early learners from states of mindfulness to traits of mindfulness. Additionally, we can help our students put mindfulness into practice all day and every day. A CALM (Conscious Awareness Learning Model) classroom, based on Conscious Discipline®, will give children the daily skill practice they need to master mindful states which can be shifted to brain-integrated, life-long traits. Since the research of Davidson and Goleman has indicated a link between long-time practitioners of mindful meditation and the development of the traits of selflessness, composure and compassion, it stands to reason, that whatever tools we have as teachers to promote student mindfulness, should be readily available to us. Literature, with positive and hopeful messages to young children, should also be readily available and part of the curriculum all year long and attached to every theme in the early childhood classroom. One timely book, published in 2012, called *Good People Everywhere*, taps into these mindful traits of selflessness and compassion. The author, Lynea Gillen, is a teacher and counselor. *Good People Everywhere* is an engaging read for three and four-year-olds, highlighting all the positive, innovative and compassionate things millions of people are doing for each other all over the world.



Beautiful, simple illustrations depict the world's diversity and capacity for kindness and good deeds. The author writes that whether you are the carpenters repairing damaged homes after a storm, parents cooking dinner for their children, chefs preparing meals for the homeless, farmers planting and harvesting food, family members taking care of one another, or a small child on the playground soothing his friend's skinned knee, people's acts of kindness and compassion are important and fuel what is good and positive about mankind. The author ends this uplifting story as she begins it, saying, "Today, millions and millions of people will do very good things. And so will you. I wonder what you will do?" With this, she plants the kernel of an idea for the reader, waters this kernel and watches it germinate and grow—perhaps into mindful behavior. If only the morning and evening newscasts could inspire us to simple greatness and positive outcomes, the way everyday people in Gillen's book do. Perhaps it's those of us who care the most about early learners reaching their potential who must help them develop mindfulness and help them make the switch from mindful states to mindful traits. We can adjust our own internal messages and project positive daily attitudes through our uplifting morning messages, positive discipline approach and thoughtful curriculum approach. Add to this the support of great literature on mindfulness written specifically for children, including Gillen's *Good People Everywhere*, and we can make a big difference—more like a monumental brain shift—in children's lives.

Reference:

Delehanty, Hugh (2017, December 13). The Science of Meditation. *Mindful*. Retrieved from <http://www.mindful.org/meditators-under-the-microscope/>.



Funded by The Children's Board of Hillsborough County, in partnership with ELM, HCC, Child Care Licensing & QEES

