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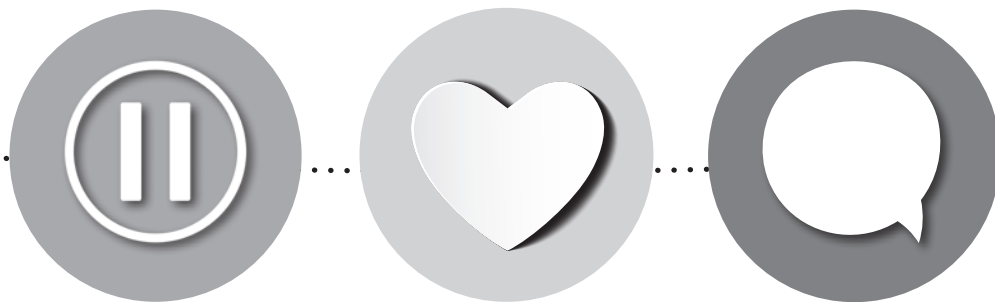


AND CONNECT

LESSONS FOR SOCIAL EMOTIONAL
LEARNING AND MINDFULNESS

MARK PURCELL, PSY.D. • KELLEN GLINDER, M.D.

TEACHING KIDS TO
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AND **CONNECT**

LESSONS FOR SOCIAL EMOTIONAL
LEARNING AND MINDFULNESS

MARK PURCELL, PSY.D. • KELLEN GLINDER, M.D.

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PUBLISHING®



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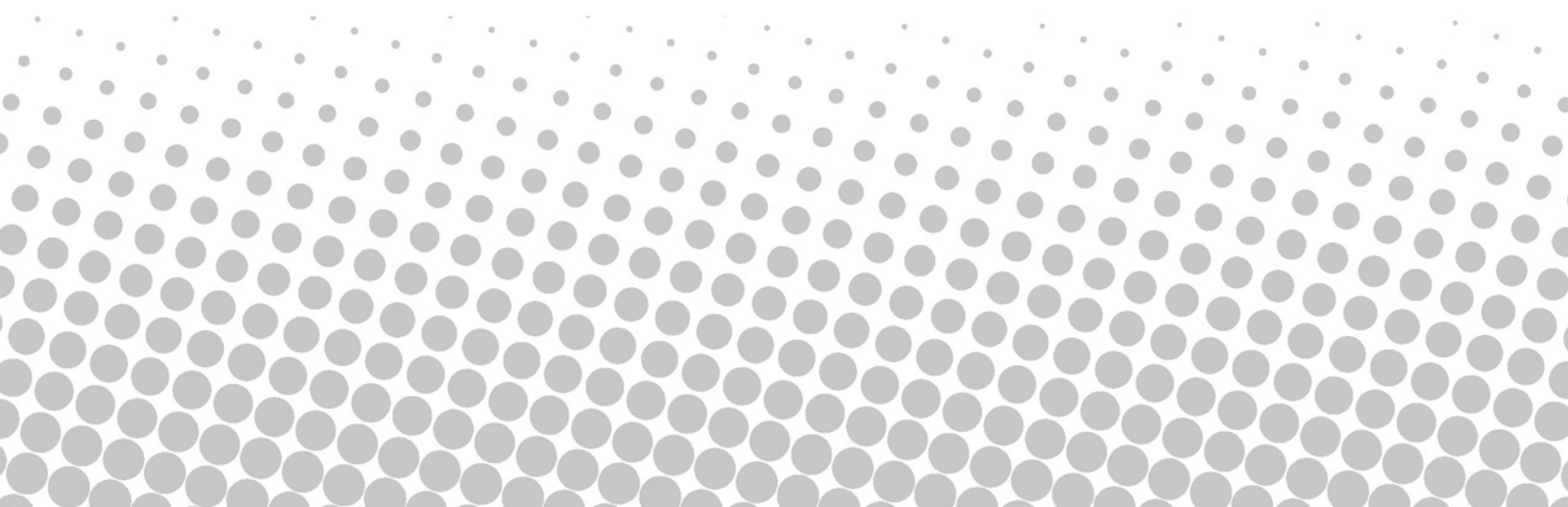
Dedication

For Veronica, who is a perpetual champion for the social and emotional health of children, especially our own. —M. P.

For Judy, Sophie, and Beckett, who have shown me the power of being present. —K. G.

Acknowledgments

This project saw many forms before materializing as a book. It certainly took a village—and a community—to get here. We would like to thank the folks at Free Spirit Publishing who believed that this was a much-needed project. Along the way we found inspiration from the late monk Thich Nhat Hahn, who tirelessly advocated for the mindfulness and playful spirit of children throughout the world, as well as from our own walking meditations through the caverns of Kepler's Books, a mindful sanctuary in the heart of Silicon Valley. Thank you to Linda Creighton, principal of Laurel Elementary School, and Gatee Esmat, principal of Arroyo Seco Elementary, who invited us in and welcomed our efforts. Teachers Ms. Mazzoncini, Ms. Reagan, Ms. Scher, and Ms. Baker helped guide our early efforts, and Sarah Newman at themindfulkids.com kept us on the right path. Lastly, we would like to thank you for your interest in the mental health of our next generation. We can make no investment too large for their future, and staying attuned to the needs of our children is a great way to build the community they need.



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ADDITIONAL MATERIAL IN DIGITAL FORMAT

Bonus Life Skill: Feel Safe

Lesson: I Am Safe (Pause)

Lesson: Stay Grounded (Cope)

Lesson: Hawks and Lizards (Connect)

Bonus Life Skill: Seek Joy

Lesson: Happy Place (Pause)

Lesson: Play Hard (Cope)

Lesson: Silly Skits (Connect)

Bonus Reproducibles

Stay Grounded

My Happy Place

All the Things I Can Do

Making Time for Fun

See page 186 for instructions on how to download the reproducible forms and other digital content for this book.

INTRODUCTION

Mindfulness is ultimately about empathy. Through pausing to listen intently to how we feel, what thoughts we have, and what others are telling us, we develop compassion for ourselves and others. This is a biochemical process: mindfulness has been found to reduce stress hormone levels, blood pressure, and heart rate. It also raises oxytocin, the hormone of compassion. The compassion built through mindfulness practice helps teach us empathy for each other and spread that empathy.

The ability to observe what we are feeling without reacting is a foundational aspect of mindfulness. In social-emotional learning (SEL), this skill is known as emotional regulation. You can teach mindfulness to your students and, in doing so, give them a skill that can support them throughout their lives at school and beyond. Once kids know how to stop, breathe, and observe their feelings and surroundings in lessons and practice sessions, they are ready to apply these skills to their own tumultuous emotional worlds. This book provides a series of lessons designed to introduce elementary school students to mindfulness practice and help them build social-emotional awareness.

When your students can calmly observe their own intense emotions without automatically reacting, they are ready to try mindful observation of their social situations. Some of the lesson plans in this book can help students navigate social situations mindfully and develop compassion and understanding for themselves and those around them. Cultivating that compassion will help you build a culture of empathy in your classroom.

Of course, it takes practice to build such a community. The lessons in this book can help make the practice easy to do within already-full classroom days. Simply repeating small mindfulness practices daily goes a long way in building the habits that contribute to an empathetic community.

Challenges for Today's Children

Children today face many challenges that did not exist a generation or two ago. Children and adolescents are experiencing stress at unprecedented levels. As a result, students are at increased risk for anger, anxiety, and depression, as well as lower self-esteem and self-confidence (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2021; Mendelson et al. 2010).

Among five-to-fifteen-year-olds, rates of emotional disorders (including anxiety and depression) have increased steadily over the years, from 3.9 percent in 2004 to 5.8 percent in 2017 (CDC 2021). In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020 resulted in epidemic physical and mental health challenges for children. During the pandemic, rates of elevated depression and anxiety symptoms among children worldwide nearly doubled

pre-pandemic rates, from 12.9 percent to 25.2 percent for depression symptoms and from 11.6 percent to 20.5 percent for anxiety symptoms (Racine et al. 2021). Distance learning and social distancing led to increased isolation and social anxiety. More than ever, children need support to manage their emotions and form healthy connections.

Today's students also have more resources at their fingertips than any previous generation: smartphones, tablets, social media, and the internet. Yet as anyone who teaches or cares for children well knows, with all these technological resources, many students struggle with regulating their emotions, sustaining attention, and maintaining healthy social connections. The constant availability of electronic distractions creates an easy escape from difficult feelings and interactions and allows children to avoid uncomfortable situations. As they indulge in distractions and avoidance, challenging emotions fester and cause more stress—further preventing children from dealing with them. Elementary-age children who habitually rely on distractions during this critical period of early development can get really good at reflexively avoiding difficult emotions, and doing so often becomes so automatic that they never learn to confront these feelings. Daily, we see stressed-out, distracted children who struggle with simply tolerating uncomfortable feelings or direct social interactions.

As educators and parents, we often fall into similar patterns. When we see that a child is upset, we immediately jump to fix it. We want to help them avoid pain. But sometimes we prevent them from learning to live life fully and cope with its highs *and* lows. What frustrated teacher hasn't sent two students to the office because of a conflict rather than sit through the tedious task of having them talk it out? And what parent hasn't fixed a painful and embarrassing store meltdown over an item they've denied their child by succumbing and indulging the tantrum? Of course, children then learn to tantrum and get their way instead of learning to cope with disappointment and discomfort. Situations like

these happen in many different contexts. These dynamics may prevent some children from learning to tolerate distress or work through disappointment and conflict. When this pattern is repeated over time, or reinforced in society, it can lead to more serious social-emotional issues, such as anxiety and depression, as well as risk for future substance abuse.

The physical consequences of this inability to cope with difficult emotions can also be serious. Biological stress responses are automatic reactions to fear, and they are healthy in small and infrequent doses. But when continued avoidance causes constant, pervasive stress, the body starts to break down. Chronic stress causes high blood pressure, faster heart rates, over- or undereating, sleeplessness, restlessness, and secondary emotions of anger, aggression, isolation, and loneliness. Of course, these symptoms don't appear all at once—chronic stress changes our minds and bodies slowly—and they aren't identical in everyone, so we may have difficulty seeing these signs right away. Solutions take time too. Mindfulness can be an important remedy because it involves approaching our experiences with curiosity and acceptance

A NOTE ABOUT LANGUAGE

Throughout this book, we use the term *parents* to mean a student's primary caregiver(s) or legal guardian(s), while realizing that many children have a single parent and/or may not use the term *parent*.

rather than turning away from them. But like any other skill, it takes consistent practice to combat the distracted avoidance many of us experience daily.

To prevent these physical consequences of avoidance, it's important to teach children that disappointment and discomfort are part of life. As with the weather, there are sunny days and stormy days. The way to heal from pain and discomfort is to learn how to acknowledge it and work through it. Mindfulness is the first step in this process.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, known as the founding father of mindfulness-based stress reduction, defines mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” ([1994] 2014). Another definition of mindfulness is simply “focused observation without judgment” (Bishop et al. 2004). Mindfulness expert Tara Brach describes mindfulness as recognizing what we are experiencing (on the inside) and sticking with it (2018). Taken together, these definitions of mindfulness mean developing self-awareness to (1) notice what you are experiencing *right now*, without judgment, and (2) *not* do something to fix it, avoid it, or make it go away.

This simple, unwavering awareness is the first step toward working through a difficult experience or unpleasant feeling. Too often we blame the outside world (people and circumstances) for our discomfort, or we seek something external to fix our tumultuous internal state. Mindfulness also paves the path for deeper social-emotional awareness.

In *Teaching Kids to Pause, Cope, and Connect*, you will find tools to help students develop this fundamental life skill of looking inward for the cause of and solutions for their own social-emotional challenges. Mindfulness and SEL are complementary approaches that increase self-awareness and social competence. As children develop the capacity to observe their own thoughts, emotions, and bodily experiences, they can develop the capacity to *respond* to situations rather than simply *react*. As self-acceptance grows, so does the capacity to accept others.

The Benefits of Mindfulness and Social-Emotional Learning

Integrating mindfulness-based programs with SEL in schools and other youth organizations has a broad range of positive outcomes. Mindfulness-based interventions have been shown to improve self-regulation, mood, and social-emotional development (Mendelson et al. 2010).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) describes SEL as the process through which we all acquire and apply the skills necessary to “develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.”

Many of the concepts and approaches presented in this book parallel those taught as part of SEL. We highlight outcomes that both practices have in common: observing emotions in order to manage them better, fostering empathy, creating healthy relationships, and responding thoughtfully instead of impulsively.



4 TEACHING KIDS TO PAUSE, COPE, AND CONNECT

Mindfulness research indicates improved social-emotional functioning with continued practice. This book provides the practice, and teachers can implement it by using brief, regular activities that are engaging for students and easy to implement. Numerous studies show improved focus and performance for students who practice mindfulness regularly (Chiesa and Serretti 2009; Jha, Krompinger, and Baime 2007). Other studies show that mindfulness improves emotional regulation (Roemer, Williston, and Rollins 2015), diminishes reactivity, and improves focus (Goldin and Gross 2010; Ortner, Kilner, and Zelazo 2007). Students participating in mindfulness programs have also been found to develop more compassion and empathy for others (Condon et al. 2013).

In various studies, a broad range of mindfulness interventions with children have demonstrated significant positive outcomes:

- School-based mindfulness intervention can reduce perceived stress and modulate activity in a brain region associated with responses to fear and stress (Bauer et al. 2020).
- Exercise-based mindfulness practices, such as yoga and tai chi, have demonstrated a reduction in stress levels and an increase in resilience to stressful events in school-age children (Mendelson et al. 2010).
- Body-oriented mindfulness practices, such as breath work, body scanning, and walking meditation, help children focus. This type of mindfulness also helps kids self-soothe, sleep better, and be less distractible (Napoli et al. 2005; Abrams 2008; Singh et al. 2007).
- Children with learning disabilities who practiced mindful meditation experienced decreased anxiety, increased social skills, and improved academic performance (Beauchemin et al. 2008).
- A child-friendly variation of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program—an evidence-based, eight-week mindfulness training program designed to assist people with stress, anxiety, depression, and pain—improved students’ attention, self-regulation, social skills, and general well-being. Several studies support the use of mindfulness to address anxiety and depression (Baer 2014; Semple and Lee 2011).
- A separate child-specific program called Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Children (MBCT-C) shows promise in treating childhood anxiety, enhancing emotional regulation, and developing social-emotional resiliency (Semple and Lee 2011; Baer 2014).

The large, and ever-growing, body of research in mindfulness interventions for children and adolescents shows that mindfulness improves student attention and self-esteem across a broad range of ages, learning styles, and behavioral challenges. What’s more, mindfulness-based practices naturally appeal to children because they teach self-management and empower students to play a key role in their own growth and development (Semple, Reid, and Miller 2005). Teaching mindfulness to students creates the potential for greater self-awareness, improved impulse control, and decreased emotional reactivity to challenging events (Oberle et al. 2012; Thompson and Gauntlett-Gilbert 2008).

The Mind-Body Connection

Today, it is common knowledge that the mind and body are connected when it comes to health and well-being. This connection is especially important for children and adolescents in the process of growing and developing. The mind affects the body in a number of significant ways. For example, anxiety and stress cause increased muscle tension, blood pressure, and heart rate and increase risk of other physical issues, such as headaches, insomnia, and more. Chronic stress can also lead to lower levels of the neurotransmitters in the brain that stabilize mood and bring feelings of happiness and well-being, physically contributing to depression and anxiety. Remaining calm and content when possible is an important factor in keeping our bodies healthy.

Meanwhile, the body affects the mind. Physical health affects our mental and emotional well-being. Exercise has been shown to relieve stress and improve depression as effectively as some medications (Kvam et al. 2016; Netz 2017) and helps us better cope with stress and anxiety. Unhealthy habits also impact our mental health and emotional well-being. Poor sleep hygiene and nutrition contribute to depression and anxiety. The overuse of video games, cell phones, and social media have been linked to depression, anxiety, and aggression (Männikkö et al. 2020). Taking care of our bodies keeps our minds in balance.

Mindfulness provides one of the best methods for addressing this mind-body dynamic. Practices like body scans can effectively reduce insomnia. Many of the world's best athletes use mindfulness techniques to improve performance. Soldiers use similar breathing techniques to maintain mental and physical stability under stress.

In a true emergency, our bodies automatically tense up even *before* our brains recognize fear. It is not always true that fear generates the tension. Often, the body provides the first indicator that we are becoming upset before our mind recognizes the emotion. Certain mindfulness practices teach us to focus on how our bodies feel and identify early indicators of our own emotional escalations. In the same way, negative thoughts (such as “No one likes me!”) can be so scary they can trigger a “fight, flight, or freeze” response in our bodies when we are not actually in any immediate danger.

Throughout *Teaching Kids to Pause, Cope, and Connect*, we weave the mind-body connection into our mindfulness lessons, and we provide strategies for using each of these two channels to regulate the other. A psychologist and a pediatrician, we've drawn on our expertise in our respective fields to create effective strategies for teaching mindfulness to kids for their improved health and well-being of body and mind. We've worked closely with teachers to hone these approaches for effective use in a classroom setting.

Creating a Culture of Mindfulness and Social-Emotional Awareness

We wrote this book with the ambitious goal of reaching beyond coping skills to plant the seeds for nurturing communities. The book is designed to be a comprehensive resource for teaching mindfulness and social-emotional awareness to elementary school children. We have tried to make our advice flexible so that you can teach lessons in whatever way

serves your group. You do not need to have any previous experience in mindfulness or SEL to teach these lessons effectively. However, knowledge of core aspects of these areas will support your teaching, so we've created lists of these aspects, along with tips to keep in mind while teaching the skills and implementing the curriculum. We recommend taking the time to review the following before teaching the lessons in your classroom.

Teaching Core Aspects of Mindfulness

Learning mindfulness is like learning to ride a bike. We learn it best by simply doing it. Just like riding a bike, mindfulness may feel awkward and frustrating at first. But with practice, mindfulness can become a skill you use with ease that brings you joy and satisfaction.

The lessons in this book dive into each of the following characteristics of mindfulness. Having an awareness of these characteristics and using the techniques described here to encourage mindful behaviors outside of planned activities can reinforce the lessons in the book.

CHARACTERISTICS OF MINDFULNESS

Present Moment Awareness: When conducting activities that focus on being aware in the present moment, bring attention to what students are experiencing *right now*. Most of the thoughts triggering difficult emotions relate to dwelling on a past hurt or regret or on a future fear. Prompt students with questions like: **What are you feeling right now in your body? What are you feeling right now in your heart (in your emotions)? What are you thinking right now?** This present-moment attention can help them focus on what *is* rather than on anxious what-ifs.

Curiosity: Mindfulness is very much about curiosity. But it is a curiosity that's focused inward, on the experiences of the heart, mind, and body. Encourage students to "play detective" with their own feelings and thoughts. Awareness and observation are key skills for developing mindfulness.

Describing Instead of Judging or Labeling: Judgments and labels tend to take us away from our direct experience. When we judge, we typically label each experience (or person) as good or bad. As often as possible, encourage students to use descriptive words rather than judgmental labels. (For example, judging/labeling might be "He's mean—I hate him." Describing instead might be "He did a mean thing, and I didn't like that.") This can help students develop a more flexible growth mindset about their experiences.

Acceptance: The term *acceptance*, from a mindfulness perspective, means accepting life on life's terms. It does not always mean loving it or even liking it. Sometimes we need to accept some tough realities in our lives. The opposite of acceptance, in this context, is avoidance. Avoidance can cause a great deal of suffering, from emotional struggles like anxiety and depression to social problems like conflict and isolation. To help students practice acceptance, encourage them to work through difficult feelings rather than avoid dealing with them. Encourage them to practice self-acceptance of who they are and what they are feeling. With this practice, students gradually learn to accept others too.

A Sense of Wonder: Mindfulness can instill a sense of wonder in children and adults. By discarding our habitual ways of dealing with the world, we open ourselves up to experiencing the world in a new, fresh way. Encourage students to be creative, think outside the box, and absorb new experiences with the wonder of a small child.

Genuine Connection and Understanding: The attitudes and habits developed through mindfulness practice begin to extend outward toward others. As a result, mindfulness ultimately leads to more authentic and empathic connections. Encourage students to genuinely share their feelings with each other and listen carefully to what their classmates express. As a result, students and teachers can build a classroom community that is more open, welcoming, and kind.

Teaching Core Aspects of Social-Emotional Awareness

Learning to understand our emotions and the social context that we live in is a fundamental part of child development. However, for a multitude of reasons, many children struggle with developing some of the critical skills related to social-emotional awareness. A growing body of research has demonstrated the need to integrate social-emotional learning into our educational system (Durlak et al. 2011).

CASEL divides SEL into five key components: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. The lessons in this book are designed to enhance students' understandings of these core areas. Structured activities provide opportunities to practice and begin mastering these essential skills for healthy social-emotional development.




KEY COMPONENTS OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING (AS OUTLINED BY CASEL)

Self-Awareness: Through SEL, students strengthen their abilities to recognize and name personal emotions. Remind students that all feelings are acceptable and that they all communicate something to us. Self-awareness also includes the ability to understand our own needs, as well as our strengths and limitations. With self-awareness comes self-acceptance.

Self-Management: Self-management is the ability to regulate our emotions and behaviors so that they don't interfere with our goals. The coping skills taught in this book can help students manage their feelings and behaviors more effectively. Encourage every effort students make to manage their own emotions and behaviors, as this can be very difficult to do, especially at first.

Social Awareness: This is the ability to understand what others are feeling and to try to see their perspective. It allows us to relate to others, empathize with them, and see things from their points of view. Exercises aimed at improving social skills and awareness are included throughout this book. Encourage social curiosity, understanding, and respect.

Relationship Skills: Children need to be able to form positive social relationships, work together, and deal effectively with conflict. When children are intentionally taught social skills, given opportunities to practice, and provided guidance in teachable moments, they develop positive peer relationships, acceptance, and friendships.



Responsible Decision-Making: When young children learn to make positive choices about their personal and social behavior, they make responsible decisions. Many of the skills and activities in this book focus on problem-solving and making “wise decisions.” Encourage students to *pause*, notice what is happening inside and around them, and then make a wise decision about what to do next.

About This Book

This book was developed so you can easily and effectively integrate mindfulness and SEL into your classroom experience. We designed each lesson to be completed within about fifteen minutes with very little preparation. The intent of this book is to teach mindfulness and social-emotional awareness in a way that is accessible, practical, and realistic for you and your students. Our hope is that as you move through these lessons, your students will develop greater awareness, self-acceptance, empathy, and compassion. By the end, we hope that you will discover you have nurtured a kinder, more tolerant community.

How This Book Is Organized

This book includes thirty lessons aimed at teaching mindfulness and social-emotional awareness. The lessons are organized around ten specific life skills, the core skills we believe are essential for developing mindfulness and social-emotional growth in the five areas of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Each life skill section is divided into three lessons: Pause, Cope, and Connect. Here, we’ve outlined what you can expect from each of the life skill sections and their three related Pause, Cope, and Connect lessons.

Life Skills

Each life skill is a particular theme supported by current research in SEL, mindfulness, and/or the development of a growth mindset. At the start of each life skill section is a brief explanation of the skill and its benefits for children. We then offer a few recommendations for ways to introduce the life skill to students, devoting as much or as little time as you wish. Picture books make a good entry point, even with older students.

Lesson Types

All the lessons utilize mindfulness, but each Pause lesson is specifically focused on teaching students essential/core/foundational mindfulness skills. The Cope lessons focus on giving students strategies for dealing with difficult emotions. Lastly, the Connect lessons build on the foundation of the previous two lessons to teach interpersonal and social skills.

MINDFULNESS ACTIVITY (PAUSE)

Each Pause lesson is a mindfulness activity specifically related to the section’s life skill. These lessons also teach the basic skills for practicing mindfulness. The Pause lessons are

designed to work for a variety of learning styles, ranging from activities that are quieter and inwardly focused to ones that are expressive and interactive. The mindfulness practices in each Pause lesson might seem very simple, or they may seem less effective than expected or desired at first. Remember that mindfulness is best learned through repetition and will prove effective in dealing with life issues outside of the time students are practicing it in your classroom. In other words, you may not see immediate effects, but if you and your students continue to use the activities over time, you may see significant impact on students' self-regulation.

COPING SKILLS (COPE)

Applying the mindfulness skills they learn during the Pause lessons, students will learn to use coping skills to deal with common everyday challenges. The coping skills taught throughout this book are based on proven strategies for dealing with the issues addressed or similar scenarios.

INTERPERSONAL AND SOCIAL SKILLS (CONNECT)

The Connect lessons focus on developing positive social skills and fostering healthy relationships with peers within the context of the section's life skill. Some of the Connect lessons teach interpersonal skills, such as using "I" statements. Other activities and skills in these lessons are meant to foster a sense of social support and community, such as the Three Cs of Community or Kind Community lessons. The Connect lessons in this book should improve social skills and promote a positive classroom community.

Lesson Structure

Each lesson is organized in this way:

Lesson Summary. A brief description of what the lesson involves and intends to teach.

Keywords. Key terms that students should know and understand by the end of the lesson.

Students Will. Learning objectives for the lesson.

Materials. A list of materials you will need to conduct the lesson, if any, including the reproducible handouts.

Preparation. Instructions on preparing materials or the classroom before the lesson, if applicable.

Mindful Check-In. A brief mindfulness practice that can be done before the main lesson. See a more detailed description in the "Conducting the Lessons and Working with Students" section of this introduction (page 11) and in "Mindful Pauses to Begin and End Lessons," which follows this introduction (page 17).

Activity. This includes an introduction or brief discussion followed by the learning activity itself, which may include step-by-step instructions or a suggested script.

Wrap-Up. A brief summary of the key learning points of the activity.