

Teen brain benefits from mindfulness training

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Sarah Weredynski, 16, shown doing yoga at her Toronto home, uses yoga to relax and unwind. "I try to fit it in first thing in the morning on weekends."

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Special to the Star

Here's some good news about that much talked about teenage brain. Teenagers who practice mindfulness — a technique that involves focusing on what is happening in the moment and being aware of and accepting of emotions — benefit from increased self-control, healthier relationships, and improved overall well-being.

Psychologists at Australia's [University of Wollongong](#) and [George Mason University](#) in Washington, DC, studied mindfulness in 776 Grade 10 students over a one-year period. The results of their research were published in the August 2011 issue of [the Journal of Adolescence](#).

Mindfulness is a useful strategy for teenagers because it allows them to think through their emotions as opposed to reacting impulsively — something their brains are primed to do during the teen years.

"The teen brain is still undergoing a period of active construction," explains Dr. Jean Clinton, an associate clinical professor in the [Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Neuroscience](#) at [McMaster University](#), division of Child Psychiatry. "And, during this time, teenagers are more reactive. Mindfulness allows them to pay attention to their feelings rather than being their feelings."

Mindfulness also involves accepting what you are feeling and understanding that an emotion is just an emotion: it doesn't control you, explains Shelley Hermer, a social worker based in Peterborough, Ontario. "Feelings come and feelings go. And there's no such thing as a bad feeling. Being angry is just as valid as being excited."

So how can you apply this new research about mindfulness to your life as a parent the next time your teenager storms through the front door, livid about something that happened at school?

“Focus on responding with empathy,” says Clinton. “Say, ‘Tell me what happened.’” It’s important to resist the temptation to try to fix the problem or to allow your own emotions to take over. “It’s not about you. It’s about your teenager.”

Then, once your teenager has had a chance to tell his story, encourage him to reflect on his feelings, says Clinton. “Ask questions like, ‘What about it really upsets you? Why are you so angry?’ In asking these types of questions, you are being your teen’s mindful brain. You are helping him to figure out that it is helpful to take a step back and ask these types of questions when he is feeling really angry or upset.”

Then, once your teenager has had a chance to acknowledge what he is feeling and to reflect on those feelings, suggest some self-soothing strategies that he can use to bring his emotions under control, says Clinton. Talking a shower, going for a walk or a run, or talking to a friend are strategies that many teens find helpful.

The mindfulness research about teenagers makes a lot of sense to Mississauga mother and early childhood consultant Cathy Kerr. Kerr has been taking a mindful approach to raising her two daughters, Sarah, 16, and Larissa, 12. She feels that it is important that her daughters grow up understanding that there needs to be a balance between caring for yourself and caring for other people. “Having empathy is a really big part of problem-solving in general — knowing how you affect other people,” she explains.

She also wants her daughters to grow up knowing how to take good care of themselves. That’s why Kerr and her daughters make weekly treks to a Yoga studio together. “Yoga really teaches you how to relax, tune in and let go. I like knowing that they’re learning the same things that I am about relaxing.”

Clearly, Kerr’s 16-year-old daughter, Sarah Weredynski, has taken these lessons to heart. She practices yoga on an almost daily basis at home. “Yoga exercises your mind, body, and spirit,” Weredynski explains. “After yoga, I feel fresh. I try to fit it in first thing in the morning on weekends. That way, I can go into my day knowing I’ve done something good for myself.”

Yoga seems to be working for Weredynski. She doesn’t get stressed easily or often. A sticky note on her dresser helps her to keep track of upcoming deadlines for assignments. And when friends start to obsess about the little things, she reminds them to “calm the heck down” and to keep things in perspective. “Not everything is the end of the world,” she explains.