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Preschoolers and Mind Body Health

Kari A. Sassu

In a report published by the U.S. Department of Education, the former Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan is quoted as having said, “I believe that every single child deserves the opportunity for a strong start in life through high-quality preschool...” (U.S. Department of Education, April 2015). The report goes on to cite research in the fields of neuroscience and education that provide evidence for the critical gains that can be derived by those children who attend preschool programs of high quality. Research evidencing the resultant benefits of early childhood education has long existed and expanded over time, serving as the impetus for much of the legislation addressing the need for high quality early educational programs (see Bracken & Theodore, this issue, for an historical account of legislation related to this effort). Those of us who work in the interest of children recognize the impact of a “strong start,” the magnitude and breadth of which cannot be overstated. Children who are the beneficiaries of such develop stronger social-emotional, cognitive, and academic abilities, as well as superior physical health, as compared with those who do not have such opportunities.

When young children enter a preschool setting, they embark on a journey that presents them with opportunities to grow in a multitude of ways and offers promise for their future. As they venture out into a world that extends beyond their immediate families, they are confronted with challenges that, when appropriately structured, set the stage for them to gain a great number of skills across multiple domains. However, it is only through thoughtful, well-informed, multifaceted programming which considers the whole child that we can set children on a course toward their optimal achievement and overall wellbeing.

Early childhood education that addresses students’ comprehensive needs must encompass elements that foster healthy physical,

cognitive, behavioral, academic, linguistic, and social-emotional development. Articles within this issue have highlighted the connections between various elements of wellbeing, connecting the dots such that we are able to view an image in its entirety. If we can view the child as a whole, with each “dot” of her health as one constituent part of the overall picture, the interrelatedness of all elements of wellbeing and healthy development come clearly into focus.

The mind body health connection has been well established, as has the reciprocal nature of their influence. Mind body health interventions such as those included in this special issue (e.g., mindfulness, muscle relaxation, yoga, etc.) have proven effective in addressing a multitude of physical and mental health challenges in children and adults alike. Not only has scientific inquiry proven these strategies effective with school aged children, adolescents and adults, but there is high social validity for these activities as well (e.g., Keyworth et al., 2014; Luiselli, et al., 2017). Furthermore, we appear to be occupying a space in time wherein the techniques associated with mind body health are gaining momentum in popular culture, with new apps devoted to mindfulness and meditation for children and adults emerging regularly.

Though the research related to the efficacy of mind body health interventions with the preschool population remains limited, that which does exist offers great promise and warrants further exploration. Mind body health interventions for young children are appealing in that there is a relative simplicity of implementation, the required investment (time and/or money) is fairly limited, and the activities often are engaging. Outcomes associated with mind body health interventions such as yoga and progressive muscle relaxation for school-aged children include improvements in physical and mental health, as well as reductions in hyperactivity and inattention (Jarraya et al., 2019). Gains in executive functioning skills such as the ability to reflect on one’s behavior and self-monitor, have also been derived from mind body health interventions used with school-aged children (Semenov & Zelazo, 2019; Susman Gertz & Culbert, 2009).

The preschool period is unique in the opportunity it presents for children to reap the greatest benefit from intervention. Early intervention efforts targeting academic, social, behavioral, communication, and other areas of functioning have long been shown to yield the greatest results of any developmental period. If young children can be explicitly taught skills that allow them to self-soothe and relax when young, these skills may prime the way for them to develop more sophisticated strategies that have proven effective and have impacted overall health in older children and adults (e.g., mindfulness, guided relaxation, etc.).

If we are to capitalize on this critical window of opportunity presented in the preschool years, it will require that we effectively address the complex and intricately connected elements of children’s development during this stage. Housed in their small beings are many complex and interrelated changes occurring simultaneously. The best scenario for optimal outcomes when investing in a holistic approach, is that professionals representing various disciplines serve together, in a collaborative and multidisciplinary fashion, focused on the whole child. Our collaborative efforts should be focused on creating connections that allow for increased opportunities to maximize and sustain overall wellbeing, in all its faceted and nuanced ways, beginning in early childhood, and continuing throughout the lifespan. Though some factors related to a child’s development cannot be mediated by preschool education, there are many that can (e.g., nutrition, physical exercise, social skill building, cognitive flexibility, etc.). Mind body health interventions hold the promise of equipping young children with skills that will serve them well in the daily activities of their youth and allow them to build healthy habits that will remain with them throughout their lifetime.

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