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## Kids find inner calm through mindful breathing



Westwood Primary pupils practising "mindful breathing" at the end of recess. ST PHOTO: ASHLEIGH SIM

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More than 10 schools here have introduced this practice and say children are more focused, calm and alert



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It was five minutes before the end of recess at Westwood Primary School on Thursday.

A hush descended over the canteen as pupils seated on benches began a "mindful breathing" session.

"Sit quietly, close your eyes... Keep breathing in and out, slowly," said a woman's voice on the speaker system, guiding them through the two-minute exercise.

Some children were fidgety, their eyes darting around as they tried to grab the attention of their friends.

Others, however, took the activity more seriously, closing their eyes and sitting up straight while being aware of their thoughts, and then letting go of them.



Primary 4 pupil Solomon Lim, 10, was a picture of calm. He later told The Straits Times: "It helps me when I'm stressed. I take deep breaths and cool down."

**Mindfulness is a state of being aware of one's thoughts, sensations and surroundings in the present, and accepting them without judging them.**

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Following a trial last year, Westwood Primary has since January introduced "mindful breathing" sessions at the end of recess daily for all pupils as part of a broader "positive education" framework.

Mindfulness is a state of being aware of one's thoughts, sensations and surroundings in the present, and accepting them without judging them. Mindfulness, which can be achieved by taking deep breaths and focusing on them, has been known to calm people down and reduce stress in their daily lives.

Ms Sophia Tan, the teacher in charge at Westwood, said this was to help pupils re-focus before returning to lessons. "Mindfulness helps children regulate their emotions and thoughts. As it becomes a routine and habit, they can use it in other aspects of their lives," she said.

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Over the past two years, more than 10 primary and secondary schools here have introduced mindfulness practices, something which has already caught on in schools in countries such as Britain.

Recent studies suggest that mindfulness can have a positive effect on the mental, emotional, social and physical health of young people.

### **MORE SCHOOLS SIGNING UP FOR PROGRAMME**

A study examining the effectiveness of the Mindfulness in Schools Programme in several British secondary schools showed that the more often students used mindfulness practices, the higher their levels of well-being. Students involved in it also reported significantly less stress and fewer depressive symptoms than those not involved. The findings were published in The British Journal Of Psychiatry in 2013.

### *Simple activities at home to keep kids focused*

Parents can help children with cultivating mindfulness by doing simple everyday things.

Ms Dawn Sim, director, counsellor and psychotherapist at The Open Centre, urges parents to practise deep breathing exercises with their children.

Parents can get their children to count how many breaths they take in a minute, and try this together during different times of the day, for instance, before bedtime or before doing homework.

Ms Sim also said parents can begin mealtimes with three minutes of silent eating, asking their child to be more aware of the sensation of chewing and taste.

"Mindful walks", even around a familiar estate, can also encourage children to be more observant of their surroundings. Parents can ask their child to spot five objects that are of a specific colour and share what they see.

Ms Angie Chew, executive director at Brahm Centre, said parents should not rush or distract their children when they are focusing on a task. They should also let older kids learn to take charge of their own timetable. If they have too much on their plate, parents can offer to help them prioritise and reduce their to-do list.

### **Toh Wen Li**

The five schools which agreed to speak to ST cited benefits such as increased focus, better mood regulation and greater self-awareness as reasons for introducing their students to mindfulness.

At Damai Primary, pupils have been doing three-minute deep breathing sessions since January. They have also been encouraged to spend more time reflecting on class work.

International school UWCSEA East introduced its students to mindfulness three years ago, teaching them breathing techniques and encouraging them to notice and accept their thoughts and emotions.

Three mindfulness centres told ST they are seeing a growing number of school clients in recent years. In almost all the cases, the cost is covered by the school.

Ms Angie Chew, 53, the executive director and principal mindfulness trainer at Brahm Centre, said the centre sees at least one new request from a school a month, mostly for an eight-week programme.

Ms Dawn Sim, 43, the director of The Open Centre, which runs mindfulness programmes in schools as part of The Mindfulness Collective, said that over the past three years, the number of schools approaching her has gone up by about 20 per cent.

Ms Chew said that mindfulness is a secular practice. She added: "People of different faiths are embracing it. Yesterday, we had a (sign-up) who turned out to be the pastor of a Baptist church."

Parent Jane Divakar, 48, said that after the mindful breathing routine was introduced at Westwood Primary, her children are "now more calm and relaxed, more aware and alert".

She added that this encouraged her to practise mindfulness at home with them and become more aware of her own behaviour.

#### **VIDEO**

Pupils find calm with "mindful breathing" <http://str.sg/4h8B>