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Stilling the Mind: An Interview with Linda Lantieri

Teachers can create moments of calm in the midst of classroom bustle -- and help students learn better.

by [Sharon Brock](#)
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Do your students have difficulty focusing, remaining calm, or managing their emotions? Do many of them seem chronically stressed? A new book offers hope, bolstered by practical tips, for helping them overcome these problems.

Being calm and paying attention are actual skills you can teach in the classroom, says [Linda Lantieri](#) [1], a twenty-three-year veteran of bringing social and emotional learning to New York City schools and a teacher for forty years.

In her new book, *Building Emotional Intelligence: Techniques to Cultivate Inner Strength in Children*, Lantieri, also a founding board member of the [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning](#) [2] (CASEL) and a cofounder of the [Resolving Conflict Creatively Program](#) [3], offers practical advice to do just that. An accompanying CD, narrated by emotional-intelligence pioneer Daniel Goleman, guides students through two relaxation and mindfulness activities aimed at helping them calm down and focus.

We caught up with Lantieri for her thoughts on how teachers can work with students to develop their emotional intelligence and how better stress management helps kids learn.

What can teachers do to help children with chronic stress?

Teachers can have regular routines and practices that still the mind and calm the body to release accumulated stress. With our New York City program, many classrooms have peace corners, where students can choose for themselves a time-in, as opposed to a teacher sending them to a time-out.

We also have daily quiet time, when we pause, honor silence, and go to a deeper place of wisdom that is within us. When we started, we weren't sure if the children would be responsive, but we are finding that they are hungering for it. As long as we keep nurturing that part of ourselves, it becomes stronger.

It's important that this quiet time is not fragmented. It needs to be built into the classroom ethos as a way of being. It's not just about taking ten minutes of quiet time, then having a frenzied experience the rest of the day. It's about focusing young people, as well as the teacher, in a more

reflective way throughout the day.

How does stress affect learning?

The interesting part of the connection between stress and learning is that the prefrontal cortex of the brain is the area for paying attention, calming, and focusing as well as the area for short- and long-term memory.

So you need to focus in order to connect with your memory. And connecting with memory enables children to take in new knowledge, because they need to attach it to something they already know. When a child doesn't have strategies to decrease anxiety, there is less attention available to grasp new ideas, think creatively, solve problems, and make good decisions.

Also, when children are upset, nervous, or angry and cannot manage their distressing emotions, they are not in an optimal zone for learning and retrieving information. They may know something for the test, but they are not able to access it.

What is resilience, and why do some people have it, while others don't?

Resilience is the ability to successfully manage life and adapt to stressful events. Resilience is developed in childhood, when there are loving people available to help during difficult times, but if a child feels alone, resilience is not developed just because challenging things are happening.

Building resilience is about integrating what's happening by having support, safety, and love around the child. With our program, we hope children will become stronger than they were before because they will develop greater control of their thoughts and emotions and will be able to deal with future stressful situations in a more relaxed way.

What is mindfulness, why is it important, and how can we cultivate it in children?

We define *mindfulness* as being aware of what you're feeling, thinking, and experiencing when it's happening, without judgment. Mindfulness activities quiet the mind and develop self-awareness and the ability to pay attention.

The book has age-appropriate scripts to guide students in mindfulness activities. For the younger kids, we start with play adventures and use concrete props, such as a soft toy or a "breathing buddy" to help them watch their stomachs go up and down. Other examples include listening to a chime and having children raise their hands when they no longer hear the chime, or eating a raisin or an orange very slowly. These activities calm and focus students and prepare them to listen to the CD.

Why are these skills important outside of the classroom?

We first started this work after 9/11, and we have worked with hundreds of kids who ran for their lives that day. Some said that these children would be traumatized for the rest of their lives, but instead we asked, "What can we do to help these children heal and recover in a way that is real and truly builds the resilience back into them?" So we started researching and developing these

programs.

We don't know when the next tragic event will happen. We don't have control over that, but we can teach children these skills of inner preparedness. We are living in such uncertain and challenging times that young people need to have this inner strength, this inner reservoir they can depend on and go to when difficulties arise, so that they are able to manage their stress, rather than seeing all things as a state of emergency where the fight-or-flight response goes off.

We aren't aspiring to make young people great meditators. We are helping them to become more loving, caring human beings and to develop inner resilience and competencies they can access for the rest of their lives.

How is this book different from other books on emotional intelligence?

Due to recent brain research on neuroplasticity, we know that brains are growing and creating neural pathways during childhood and through adolescence. What's new in this book is the focus on a repetitive practice that strengthens these neural pathways and teaches young people concrete skills to calm themselves and focus their attention.

This book also puts emphasis on self-awareness. One thing we hope both adults and young people realize is that they may be in a state of chronic stress and not be aware of it. In the book, there is a list of signs that teachers can look out for that indicate students are handling stress poorly, such as having a quick temper or a constant upset stomach.

I suggest showing students this list directly so they can be aware of and manage their stress themselves. We also know that chronic stress results in poor health outcomes, both mentally and physically.

Sharon Brock is a former high school science and leadership teacher now dedicated to supporting teachers and celebrating inspiring educators through journalism.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.lindalantieri.org>

[2] <http://www.casel.org>

[3] <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/envrnmnt/drugfree/sa2lk16.htm>

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