

Guest expert
Julie Morgan, CAGS



How Mindfulness Is Supporting At-Risk Students During the Pandemic

School psychologist Julie Andra Morgan, CAGS, NCSP has spent her career in Brockton, MA evaluating the large subset of students deemed “at risk” due to classroom behavioral and focus issues. Her work focuses on developing action plans to help them succeed.

Morgan has lived and worked in Brockton - a large urban center just south of Boston with poverty and crime rates well above the national average - since 1992. Through this lens, she has seen firsthand how trauma and instability at home

during childhood can carry over into a school setting.

Now, she's seeking a way to support those students who will experience even more confusion and chaos this fall as they return to school systems that have been upended by COVID-19.

Morgan is pragmatic about the reality of the situation, stressing that the main focus needs to be maintaining the safety of students and staff as COVID infection rates rise.

However, she remains concerned about how a drastically different school environment will impact disadvantaged children in her district and nationwide – students affected by instability at home who are already struggling to stay afloat.

The Quantifiable Disadvantage of Poverty

Children growing up in poverty are far more likely than children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds to undergo traumatic experiences referred to as Adverse Childhood Events (ACEs.)

ACEs can include:

- Physical and emotional abuse.
- Observing maternal battery.
- Living with household members who abuse drugs.
- Incarceration of family members.

Complex trauma and ACEs have shown to be devastating to children, impacting them in emotional and physiological ways that extend throughout school years and beyond.

"A child's experience of a traumatic event can lead to ongoing feelings of confusion, anger, shame, or regret, in addition to physiologic states that persist well past the experience of a traumatic event or period of complex trauma."

Children growing up with a lack of structure in turbulent home environments are at greater risk for behavioral and focus issues in classrooms, as well as

difficulty dealing with life's challenges later in adulthood.

But when school environments become just as confusing as the outside world, students will need even more behavioral support than before.

Addressing the Impact of Poverty and Trauma on Behavior

Morgan began her career by providing psychological evaluations to determine qualifications for special education services. During this process, she realized how many at-risk students were slipping through the cracks.

Students with a history of complex trauma are often misidentified with learning or behavior concerns due to the effects of Adverse Childhood Events.

Because adrenaline is heightened under stress, children exposed to trauma and chaos often:

- Experience heightened sensitivity to sensory input including light, sound and touch.
- May appear to be inattentive, jumpy or irritable.
- May startle easily or overreact to slight sensory stimuli.

These reactions tend to escalate into classroom outbursts or the inability to properly regulate emotions in social situations or classroom settings.

Urban cities like Brockton are vastly underfunded and generally don't have the time or budget to identify and evaluate the cause of these behaviors – so students exhibiting these symptoms are often placed in special educations as a



nd-aid solution," not given the attention they need to address the real problem.

This fall, new safety rules and regulations will put greater pressure on teachers and administrators - meaning students who need support will receive even less of it.

While there's no perfect solution for trauma-based fears and behaviors, mindfulness exercises and the principles of Social Emotional Learning may very well be the key to helping students manage them.

Working in partnership with Lesley University's Institute for Trauma Sensitivity, Morgan has spent the last five years developing a school curriculum and various learning resources based on the science of Social Emotional Learning, defined as:

"The process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions,

set and achieve manageable goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions."

Collaborative for Social, Emotional and Academic Learning (CASEL)

Morgan hopes to convey how incorporating mindfulness techniques into classrooms and home environments can not only help children overcome the effects of complex trauma during the pandemic, but also teach positive thought patterns for long-term success.

"We put these programs into place and the positive results extend far beyond school."

Julie Morgan

New School Solutions

Using these principles, Morgan designed a program as an alternative to traditional out-of-school suspensions. It gives students who have been suspended for behavioral outbursts the stability of a classroom environment and introduces skills to help prevent them in the future.

A ten-day learning program is created with the help of educators, emotional wellness professionals, and the students





themselves. Scattered throughout the daily structured lessons are sensory grounding exercises, such as an area with headphones in which they can listen to short meditations and learn to control breathing if they become overwhelmed.

Scientifically Proven Results

After analyzing the results of her mindfulness and SEL programs in Brockton, Morgan noted significant

positive trends in student behavior, such as:

- Focus and goals.
- Personal responsibility.
- Self-awareness.
- Social awareness.
- Optimistic thinking.

These behaviors help students succeed in classrooms, but also in future careers, relationships and life experiences.

"As educators, we need to approach schooling with both authority and humility. We need to accept that we have something to learn, not just something to impart."

Creating New Behavior Patterns

Morgan stresses the importance of actively involving children in the process of learning mindfulness techniques as a way to build confidence. Self-regulation creates a sense of agency, which is important for at-risk students who may not have control over other stressful circumstances in their lives.

One of her classroom activities teaches

students to identify their own resting heart rates, followed by a brief cardio exercise to identify an elevated heart rate, and finally a focus breathing exercise to restore a normal heart rate.

"They learn that by sitting still and controlling their minds, they can reduce heart rate, maintain homeostatic balance and choose their own regulation," Morgan explains.



Julie Morgan
Psychologist, CAGS, NCSP

Changing the System for Long-Term Success

Morgan believes that over time, utilizing mindfulness techniques in a classroom setting will also reshape the relationships between at-risk students and teachers who may not know how to deal with those behavioral challenges. She refers to this as a "trauma-sensitive approach to education," defined as:

"A safe, supportive and respectful environment that enables students to build caring relationships with adults and peers, self-regulate their emotions and behaviors and succeed academically, while supporting their physical health and well-being."

Lesley University Institute for Trauma Sensitivity

Morgan's curriculum involves educating both students and teachers in mindfulness and Social Emotional Learning techniques. This ensures that teachers are prepared to address and solve trauma-based behavioral problems, therefore reducing the need for interventions.

"As educators, we need to approach schooling with both authority and humility," Morgan says. "We need to accept that we have something to learn, not just something to impart."

And, unsurprisingly, being better

equipped to handle these situations makes the teachers feel better, calmer and less stressed as well.

The changing face of education this fall will prove difficult to navigate for both students and educators. However, gaining a greater understanding of how instability affects students can help schools learn how to support them. Social Emotional Learning and mindfulness interventions can break the lifelong cycle of fear- and trauma-based behavior patterns.

For more information on Morgan's work and how to implement mindfulness programs, visit:

Lesley University Institute for Trauma Sensitivity

