



Podcast 24: Cultivating Mindfulness: Brain Reasons and Mind Methods for Early Educators

Episode notes: prektechandplay.com/podcast24

Kristie: Hi, fellow early childhood solutionaries! This is Kristie, and in today's episode, I'm excited to welcome back [Laura Fish](#). Laura is a therapist with extensive counseling experience for people of all ages. In particular, she has unique expertise in helping families, children, and teachers learn strategies to promote social and emotional development, and prevent challenging behaviors. Some of you may remember Laura from a few episodes ago when we were talking about teaching with the brain in mind. If you missed that episode, go to prektechandplay.com/podcast21, that's Podcast 21, and have a listen. While you're there, be sure to download our free framework for guiding self-reflection.

In today's episode, Laura and I continue the conversation by going deeper into mindfulness, a word we hear tossed around with a great deal of regularity these days. It is our hope that through this conversation, early educators will see the complexity and the simplicity of mindfulness concepts and practices. Meaning, we hope to help show how mindfulness in early childhood isn't a fad, it isn't something we just add on as part of our routine, and we hope to show how mindfulness is more than a spiritual practice. It is, in truth, a set of practices, which closely align to many of the quality care and educational practices that have a rich tradition in our own field. We also dig into how mindfulness is a key part of building children's brains and how we can create many, many opportunities throughout a daily routine. This is, for sure, an episode you aren't going to want to miss.

All right, well, hey Laura. It's fabulous to have you back on the Pre K Teach and Play podcast and today we're talking about something that many of us have heard with increasing frequency it seems, sort of like the flavor of the month, and that is mindfulness, but it has a huge tradition. Before we get into what is mindfulness, what does it mean to you in your own work, I thought it would be helpful just to tell people what they might expect from today's podcast. Not by way of downloads and all of that, we'll take care of that later, but just sort of like why you and I are doing this and what we hope they walk away with.

Laura: Sure. It's fun to be back and especially talking about this subject. Today, I thought, we thought, we're hoping that people will walk away with an understanding that mindfulness isn't a whole new set of practices they have to go and learn and study. That they're already doing mindfulness practices in the everyday classroom, if you're working in a classroom environment that's high quality. We'll highlight the practices, how they already are mindfulness strategies, and then hopefully understand how those strategies promote the development of the brain and the mind in the context of relationships.

Kristie: Yeah. I hope people heard that last part, in the context of relationships. Here's already our first connecting the dots. Right? If you are emphasizing relationships as the active ingredient, you're already practicing what we're going to unpack, and it is called mindfulness.

Laura: Absolutely.

Kristie: All right. I alluded to this, sort of the flavor of the month for some of us that are just coming around, but for others, this has been part of wisdom, traditions, part of centuries old studies, practices. Just talk a little bit about your own journey around mindfulness and how you see it as so critical to promoting the whole child's social, emotional, health, and well-being, as well as, academics, right, because we're going to get into the prefrontal cortex. Just kind of talk to us a little bit about where your self is in terms of how you conceptualize it, think it, practice it. What is mindfulness to you?

Laura: Sure. Oh, my goodness. Okay.

Kristie: Huge, right? That's all.

Laura: That's all, just do that. The journey is fun and in a nutshell, it started with my switching from being a marathon runner to saying I want my body to be preserved, and so I switched to yoga. In the yoga practice, I found mindfulness. That was 17 years ago, and then about six years ago, I happened upon [Daniel Siegel's](#) work with interpersonal neurobiology and as a therapist, this interests me because it was talking about the connection between mind, brain, and relationships. I used that in my therapy practice, but then I also brought that to the early childhood education work that I was doing, in particular, this practice of mindfulness. I didn't even call it mindfulness. I just started working with teachers, training them and coaching them on promoting social and emotional academic development. With that lens, that interpersonal neurobiology lens, and in order to avoid any sort of pushback or hesitancy because mindfulness might not be palatable to everybody, I just started

talking about the strategies in the context of how they might promote the development of the brain, mind, and relationship.

My goal was to help teachers and parents understand the brain reasons for behavior and the mind methods to change that behavior to hopefully help teachers soften their gaze towards children so I would hear less, "This child is challenging", and more of, "This child's brain isn't fully developed yet". What can I teach them? How might my relationship with that child help that child's brain development? The brain reasons for behavior and the mind methods to help train the brain to promote the behavior, we hope. I talk about brain reasons and mind method, because the brain and the mind are separate and you never have to understand the reason why, you don't even have to go in great detail, not necessary, and everything teachers are doing is working to help the mind change the brain, and the brain change the mind.

Kristie: That sort of brings us back to mindfulness as well because one of the key parts, key aspects... I don't know if you call it an aspect, a practice, a component of mindfulness, is this idea of attention. Let's talk a little bit about that, because we talk about doing things mindfully, being mindful about it. Before we even think about this in terms of this trendy way that people have been talking about mindfulness, we have those phrases in our work to be mindful about something, or to mindfully do something. What does that start to look like to you? As you said, your journey began to, as you work with early childhood classrooms, and about the connection to the brain, but still, what does that mean to you, this mindfulness?

Laura: It's a great question. What I try to do is to help teachers and parents, again, understand that mindfulness is just a strategy to train the mind to help wire the brain. It's what teachers already do when they help children learn letters and numbers and colors and sequences, and later, algebra and chemistry. They are training, the helping teachers use the mind to train the brain to learn those things. Mindfulness is just an approach to harnessing the power of attention, which is a brain aspect, using the mind to be able to promote learning. From there I try to help people come up with a way to define mindfulness that resonates with them.

We start by talking about the two components of mindfulness. The two components are the quality of attention and the state of mind with which one is attending. Those are two separate things, but they work together when you're mindful of anything. When you're mindfully learning letters, you're using focal attention, that's one part. That's the quality of attention, and then your state of mind is you're being open and receptive and hopefully, this is the part of mindfulness that might be different for people, is you're in a state of non-judgment, compassion, and loving kindness. In this open receptive state, we're more able to learn. It's more of a mindful approach, rather than this more traditional, self-criticizing, judging ourselves as we're doing

something. What's been shown through research for neuroscience is when we shift away from that judgment, that criticism, and the harshness, that we're able to soften in and really learn better. The definition I use for myself is paying attention on purpose, with compassion, loving, kindness, and non-judgment. That's how I define mindfulness.

Kristie: When you think of it from the developmental perspective, we often talk about the sequence in which something develops, or are things developing concurrently? Even when we talk about multi-language learners, are they sequential language learners or simultaneous language learners and knowing the difference has implications for how we teach and how development is going to unfold. When you think of these two components, especially as you think about it in very young children whose brains are still, of course, totally underdeveloped, do you see them as happening hand-in-hand, simultaneously, concurrently, building on each other, or does one kind of come before the other?

Laura: That's really interesting. I haven't read any research to support that great question. I think you have a new PhD in the works there for you, Kristie. Here's my educated guess about that. If we're talking about focal attention, the belief is that that's largely housed in the prefrontal cortex area of the brain. The ability to pay attention.

Kristie: Right. Especially consciously, right?

Laura: Consciously, focal attention, and we'll talk about the difference between focal and non-focal. Focal attention, this part for mindfulness, and that's in, what Daniel Siegel calls the upstairs brain or the cortex. That's the last part of the brain to fully develop.

Kristie: Right.

Laura: Then, if we're talking about more the state of mind in regards to the attention, the openness, the receptivity, but also, the emotional components of non-judgment compassion, we might be talking more about the downstairs brain even though emotions happen throughout the brain, but the downstairs brain where we're more in a state of non-arousal, non-over alert, we're not fight or freeze, so we're more emotionally stable. However, our emotions and our attention are developing concurrently the whole entire time the brain is developing. That's my best guess about that. It's a great question.

Kristie: Yeah, I love two things about that. A, it's always both-and, as [Parker Palmer](#) would tell us, not either-or. It's this idea that if we haven't calmed that basement brain or the body, and removed some of those stressors, we can't just ask you to attend harder. Like, sometimes, I was telling my colleague the other day, Ashley, I said, "Sometimes I

just say to myself, pay attention, Kristie, pay attention," but yelling at myself louder isn't going to help me pay attention better, right?

Laura: Absolutely.

Kristie: If something is definitely agitating you, I'm not taking the time to take a breath and calm my nervous system or soothe or whatever I might need to do, to then be ready for the focal attention.

Laura: That's our hope with introducing the idea of mindfulness early on to children, these humans that are growing into adults, is that they won't get to our age and be harsh on ourselves like you just described. Come on, Kristie, get in the game. Right?

Kristie: Right.

Laura: That inside voice is not super sustainable and loving over time. Many of us have learned that's the voice we use to get us to be successful, but there's a softer route. It doesn't have to be that harsh. Then, when you are noticing I'm off, you just notice and you consider. You say, "Oh, my attention has wandered. Let me bring it back. Let me bring it back," so it's more of a gentle, loving kindness so that we don't have the fallout of all this harsh shaming and blaming ourselves, which then translates into shaming and blaming others. That's why I like the idea about mindfulness is it's not just paying attention on purpose. It is, but then it's also that sense of softness and openness, receptivity. It's beautiful.

Kristie: Yeah. I have eight directions we can go. What makes sense from here? Speaking of soft, others might say this whole idea of mindfulness is soft. There's not an evidence base, so we can go that a little bit. You also said you're going to talk about the two types of attention or focus, focus and non-focus. Then, we still need to make connections between current practices and how those line up with these two big components of mindfulness. What makes sense next?

Laura: Let's talk about the evidence and then we'll move on to the different types and then, what it exactly looks like if that works for you.

Kristie: Okay, let's do it.

Laura: In regard to the evidence base for the effectiveness of mindfulness, I try to streamline the research for teachers by speaking to what really matters most to them. Translating it into what does this mean in my classroom? One of the important findings from neuroscience is the power to direct our attention has within it the power to shape our brain's firing patterns, as well as, the impact to promote brain



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development, brain growth, with the architecture of the brain. I'll even, here, let me be clear. We go through much of our day in this state of diffuse or open attention, not focal attention, as adults, or what is often called default mode or autopilot. For instance, think about how many times you drive your car from one place to another and you forget how you got there. As adults, we are engaged in this incredibly difficult task that requires all parts of our brain, attention, being able to be regulated, being able to monitor and modify how the car's going, navigate all these things, but we often do so not in focal attention mode, we'll dip in and out of focal attention. We're mostly on diffuse or open attention. We're thinking about our groceries, we're listening to the music, we're talking to somebody else. That's how, as adults, we operate much of our day.

What I've noticed, in preschool it's the same thing. Infant, toddler, and preschool classrooms, it's the same thing oftentimes that children are going through their day almost on autopilot a lot of times and my evidence for this is I'll watch kids playing at, say, like, a Play-Doh table where there's four kids and they're sharing the scissors, they're sharing the Play-Doh, they're taking turns with different materials. They're talking about what they're doing. Then, they walk away and I ask them questions about what happened. They have no idea. Part of that could be a little bit of memory, but if I ask right after, they should have enough short-term memory that they'd be able to hold onto that, that stage of development. In the preschool, not so much the toddler classroom, but what I'm really aware of is that they're not using focal attention. That usually kicks in when the task gets difficult or it's new, it's novel and then they zip to that mode. Focal attention is different than non-focal.

Kristie: One way, when people say that mindfulness is kind of soft, what I hear you saying is you come right back to development and brain research to show how a component of mindfulness, which is attention, how we use it to then complete tasks, perform in interactions with other humans, to get our wants and needs met, to get neurons to fire. Right?

Laura: Absolutely. If we want to go deeper in the research, just one fun fact, fun for me anyway, is that it's believed that focal attention actually helps the brain release a neuromodulator called [acetylcholine](#), which is believed to help strengthen the connection between neurons. When neurons are connected, we are learning. When neurons are connected, we tend to be more in a state of well-being. It helps with well-being. When people say it's soft, the answer to that is oh, goodness, no. Focal attention is super powerful in terms of helping us be integrated, be in a state of well-being, to be learning. Actually, one piece of evidence for that, and there's way more, but that acetylcholine is always my go to, it's actually like glue to help those neurons stay together and helps transmit the signal down the axon so that our speed, everything we're operating is done more effectively.

- Kristie: As a brain architect then, let's say the kids are at the Play-Doh table and if we know they're kind of going to be in autopilot because we've done this a million times before, one of the strategies we talk about often is [novelty](#). If a teacher introduces something novel, they're actually prompting, triggering focal attention because the kids will need to get out of autopilot. Right?
- Laura: Absolutely. Novelty is definitely one of the components that can help engage the focal attention, but also, though, the last podcast we did when we talked about the four conditions for learning, one was focal attention, novelty, repetition, and emotional arousal. Again, we go back to those conditions for learning and focal attention's really at the fulcrum of that. Right? It's useless to have repetition or to really work for novelty if you're also not tracking that focal attention. Just because something is novel, it isn't a slam dunk that we'll attend to it, but it definitely increases the chances.
- Kristie: Right.
- Laura: It's all how the teacher nuances it, though.
- Kristie: Right, and we talked about, too, that sometimes novelty can be too much and now we've got the opposite happening because the kid's hyper aroused or so stressed out because of the novelty, even if that means the complexity. There's that balance between challenge and sort of just feeling defeated or frustrated.
- Laura: Absolutely. Yep. There's a window of tolerance that children have and that develops. It changes through different stages of development and then, of course, it's different for typical versus neuro atypical. Then, within neuro atypical, it's different. Listen, we're working with humans, not Hondas. It's not going to be easy.
- Kristie: That's right. That's right. Yeah, because out of all the sensory issues and how we all perceive things differently, I always tell people that taste is developmental and so how something tastes and feels in your mouth is not the same as how it tastes and feels in another person's, especially of different ages. This idea that kids are picky eaters or that they just have to trudge through it is really not, in my mind, accepting that all things in our bodies are developmental.
- Laura: Absolutely, and so is this ability for focal attention and the other component of non-judgment, compassion and loving kindness.
- Kristie: Right. Does that mean we go now to the two types of focus?



Laura: The two types of focus are the, you can call it, focal attention and then diffuse or open attention.

Kristie: Okay.

Laura: That would be the example I gave about the driving or it is more the diffuse or open attention, or you can call it non-focal attention. It's called many different things. Then, the focal attention is when you are actually engaged in something even if it's a task, or even if it's focusing on an emotional state or on a conflict and you're harnessing all your attention to that moment.

Kristie: From a teacher's perspective, because we talk a lot about generalization of skills and automaticity. We're actually trying to teach kids to get to that ...

Laura: Absolutely.

Kristie: ... open one, right?

Laura: Yes.

Kristie: You also want the focused one.

Laura: Yes.

Kristie: Where do you balance that?

Laura: The focused one helps us to get to the diffuse one. It's like that continuum where you start with focus, until you get focal attention, until you get to have expertise with it, and then you release. Listen, if we had to pay focal attention all day long, our brains would just be exhausted. It's actually an evolutionary adaptation to allow us to use the limited amount of energy, I mean, our brain only has so much energy, and so some of it, like, okay good, you can just go on to automaticity and then this part we'll use for focal. We go in and out of focal and that's good. We want that. You don't have to be sustained in attention for every single moment. It's picking and choosing the things that call you to be mindful and then having an opportunity throughout the day to just practice that. To step in, to step out. I'm not mindfully doing everything, every moment of the day for sure.

Kristie: Let's just hit that one more time because one of the things that I hear from members of the revolution all the time is "Kristie, I only have two and a half hours. I've got to use our time 'wisely'," which arguably becomes focal attention non-stop.

Laura: Yeah, that would be too tiring.

Kristie: Right?

Laura: That would be too tiring, yeah. It's too much. The idea, and there's no perfect recipe and it has to be individuated for what the child is, but this is what is important about teachers having a reflection time in planning so they understand each child in context to where they are in the developmental continuum. For maybe one group of children or one child even, that you know that you want to encourage that focal attention in regard to learning their letters and numbers. Then, they're more in there learning about sharing and taking turns. They may be in more non-focal attention because they've come farther along in terms of that development so that they're stepping in and out based on where they are on the developmental continuum for their learning socially, emotionally, and academically.

Kristie: Yeah, while everything can be a teachable moment, everything doesn't need to be a teachable moment.

Laura: I love it and it's too overwhelming, too.

Kristie: Yeah.

Laura: That right there, speaks to the second wing of mindfulness, which is the openness, receptivity, compassion, and non-judgment because we don't want to power through things by going, okay, now I have this tool, focal attention, we have to use it, we have to use it. Don't stop using it. No, soften, it's there, it's in your toolbox, but also, non-focal attention is good, too. It serves us. It allows us to be in flow and be in expertise about something and just to be doing it for doing its sake, it's not muscling through or powering through.

Kristie: Yeah. Just covering the content. When we opened up our podcast, we said that we wanted to talk to providers and teams and brain architects about how so many of the things they're already doing would fall into this category of mindfulness practices. Things that are actually building the brain. Let's walk through, if that makes sense at this juncture, how we can draw attention to some of those things that we are already doing, maybe with intention, maybe on autopilot, but just so we can begin to be very overt and recognize that some of our traditions (speaking of wisdom, traditions), some of our traditions in early childhood have their underpinnings in these two components of mindfulness.



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Laura: Great, for sure. To start then, I'm going to absolutely get to here are the specific strategies, but I want to pull back a little and talk about the foundation that we have to set first.

Kristie: Okay.

Laura: I'm really interested in teachers understanding that mindfulness isn't something we do one time a day with kids or something like we add to the lesson plan, like a cooking activity.

Kristie: Right, everybody's going to breathe, so now we've done mindfulness.

Laura: Done, check, boom. It's not like that, even though breathing's great. I love it, but instead of ...

Kristie: It's a good thing.

Laura: I'm a real big fan. Big fan of breathing. Instead, children are encouraged to be mindful throughout the day in all of their routines or activities or interactions. We encourage the state of mindfulness as part of the climate of the classroom in order to eventually create a trait of mindfulness in children. I like to think of it, and a lot of the classrooms I work with because I do something called a [Teaching Pyramid](#), the evidence-based framework, and it includes something about connecting the rules with the expectations. We have our rules, we used our walking feet, and we connect it to an expectation, because we want to be safe or we share our toys because we want to be friendly. We connect the rules with some sort of character trait the child may eventually develop, but to develop a trait, we have to be in the state of practicing that character and over time it will become a trait.

The same thing with mindfulness. If you're practicing mindfulness throughout the day, eventually you may become a mindful person. Just like if you're being responsible throughout the day, you may become a responsible person eventually. I want to really ground it in, this idea of infusing the classroom with this climate of mindfulness just as we infuse the classroom as a supportive, nurturing, responsive, attuned place for children. This attunement is a really important foundation of how mindfulness can grow.

Kristie: I know we said we were going to stay focused, I'm going to keep emphasizing that word, but I do think that attunement might be a new word for some folks. Some of them may have heard a podcast you did with Liz, [Early Childhood Research podcast](#), something like that. Right?

- Laura: Yeah. Early Childhood Research project, yep. Mm-hmm.
- Kristie: Yeah, project. Maybe just for a minute, let's pause and just tell them what attunement is and how it fits in here and how they're probably already doing this in some way, but it's just a new way to conceptualize.
- Laura: Absolutely. Attunement can be described as tuning in to the child's thoughts, feelings, any sort of mental activity. Their hopes, their dreams, their fears, their emotional landscape. We just tune in to the interior of the child's landscape. Their interior landscape. Attunement is in sharp contrast to the more direction and correction type of learning. To be attuned, we really need to be considering the child's perspective and asking that child to articulate that perspective in any way that they can. Again, this is developmentally very different for different kids. If they can't articulate it, then we do our best as adults to really try to get in and have an understanding and try to articulate it for them and give them the chance to say no, that's not it. It's really this idea, very more simply put, is children feel felt, they feel considered, they feel seen, they feel heard. We're attuned to them.
- Kristie: I think what's interesting is some of the people who do this best are those that have a tradition of working with kids with really severe disabilities because we have to watch for such small, subtle clues of are you happy, are you sad, do you need more, do you need less, because they aren't able to have this wide way of telling us and showing us. They get really attuned into the slightest variations of facial expressions or body posture or sounds that the kids make. That's been something that I've noticed that people that work with kids that have fewer ways to tell us, we really actually pay more attention.
- Laura: That's a great point. I'm glad you brought up the non-verbal, too, because I only really got at the verbal, but definitely, we're looking at affect, we're looking at body language, we're looking at posture, and we're also paying attention to even prosody of speech, how rapid the speech is, how slow the speech is. Again, we want to tune in to verbal and non-verbal.
- Kristie: Yeah. In early childhood, we sometimes talk about this being a match, you know, match to the kid's pace or even just like basic turn taking. We as adults take eight turns and the kid gets one. It's a slight variation of what you're talking about because the attunement is really noticing, but that's me noticing that they maybe need longer or they want to go slower or they want to go faster.
- Laura: Absolutely.
- Kristie: Okay, all right.

Laura: Absolutely.

Kristie: Let's go back to where you were.

Laura: That's the foundation, it is that we want to create this climate. We have an understanding, come to an agreement with teachers about this gets folded into the culture of our classroom, the climate of our classroom. The classroom community is a mindful community. No matter what we're doing, we're engaging in mindfulness. In and out of focal attention, having the quality of compassion, loving, kindness, and non-judgment. Let's look at some of the traditions, the things that we do traditionally in classrooms that can promote this ability. First, let's just focus on focal attention.

Kristie: Okay, perfect.

Laura: Something like narration or people broadcasting or sometimes parallel talk, so you could simply be saying, "Looks like Jamie's creating a pizza out of the Play Doh." You say that, Jamie's sitting at a table with three other people and you just say that. Right? You just narrate that. The potential that has is that Jamie was doing this pizza thing, but Jamie might have been thinking about eating the pizza, might have been thinking about four other things. We don't know, but it has a potential then to say, "Oh, yeah. I'm creating a pizza." Then, it can help him to build on that, to extend his reasoning, and then we can help the other children also, with focal attention, "Oh, Jamie's here and Jamie's doing pizza. I'm doing a pie." Focal attention, very simple. Right? Jamie could have been making that with non-focal attention. Another one I like I don't see very often is teachers promoting self-talk with children. Self-talk is a really important part of brain development. We're just encouraging children to describe what they're doing as they're doing it, that promotes focal attention. I have to attend to what I'm doing to be able to describe it.

Kristie: Two things really quick there, Laura. People that are being evaluated using the class, here's already a dot between evidence-based or requirements or policies or assessments. Right? All this heavy stuff, it requires that we use parallel talk, which you described in terms of narrating what the child's doing. Then, secondly, you used the phrase self-talk, which has kind of two meanings. One is when we do self-talk about our own thoughts, actions, but you meant sort of this idea that the kid learns to do self-talk. Can you just unpack that one more time?

Laura: Absolutely. Yeah. We encourage the child to be talking about what they're doing as they're doing it.

Kristie: Okay.



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Laura: I think the approach, [Tools of the Mind](#), really uses this tool quite regularly. That's the only approach that I've seen and it's really clear that that's something that we want to promote. The idea is, think about yourself as an adult. When things get difficult, do you ever start talking to yourself? Sometimes you talk out loud maybe if you're alone. I notice, I'll do it, the older I get and also the weaker that my brain gets, I notice I talk out loud as I do things because I need to stay on track. That helps me stay on track. It engages your focal attention. It helps you track what you're doing. It's very powerful and there's moments to use it and there's moments to not use it. Right? Sometimes we don't want children talking out loud about what they're doing and if we're having a huge portion of the day that they're engaged in free play, right, which we want children to have self-directed play, there's many opportunities for them to do that.

Kristie: Here's a fabulous thing that some may be already doing, but all of us can strengthen, to be a good play partner during self-directed play is allow and encourage children to engage in their own self-talk and you might do that by modeling, by using self-talk.

Laura: Absolutely, modeling is a great approach. Another way to do that is your role during self-directed free play is the open-ended question. Again, we're talking about [ECERS](#) class, all these different assessments that they're not just trying to make you crazy, there's real reasons for what they're doing. Let me talk about open-ended questions versus directions and corrections because this is a hot button issue for me. I'm in preschools a lot and I hear a lot of directions and corrections. Even if they're in a sweet voice, I hear use your walking feet, you need to put a smock on first, and they're lovely humans. They're beautiful, but the idea is we don't need those as much. The problem with using those is we're not asking children to use focal attention and all parts of the brain. Let me give you something specific.

When you ask an open-ended question, which means you ask a question that does not have a yes or no answer, the child needs to access, tune in to the moment with focal attention, and access the memory center in their brain to remember what should I be doing right now? What is it? She's asking me a question about something, so it could be a question about what the color is, but it could be a question like what do we do before we go outside? Then, I have to use focal attention, she's asking me in this moment, and I have to say in my Rolodex, oh, we clean up. Yeah, we clean up, instead of just coming in and saying clean up time. You need to clean up. The idea is if you want to promote mindfulness, start asking some open-ended questions and limiting your directions and corrections because with directions and corrections, children can respond on autopilot and they often do. You just ping them into doing what you say without the thoughtful intention.

Kristie: I just was reading about some more research about, have you heard the thing called Google effect?

Laura: No.

Kristie: Our brains are able to evolve even when we're older and it's called the [Google effect](#), meaning people are not training their brains to retrieve information and facts because we'll just Google it.

Laura: Absolutely.

Kristie: Then, the problem is, when you Google it, your brain is not paying as much attention because it didn't have to go through the mental gymnastics to find the answer. Then, it's like, who sings this song? You ask you your phone, who sings this song? You don't even have to come up with the lyrics because your phone can hear the lyrics. Right?

Laura: Absolutely.

Kristie: Then, they said the bad side of this is that we have fewer random facts and figures floating around in our brain, so that's one. Two, we don't strengthen those neural pathways to problem solve and think about how do I find an answer. Then, thirdly, we're less creative because creativity requires random things to suddenly come together and make sense.

Laura: Oh, my gosh. That's so beautiful.

Kristie: Total aside.

Laura: The Google effect.

Kristie: That's what I was thinking, like if we give directions and corrections, we're like Google effecting kids earlier. We're just telling them the answer, right?

Laura: No question and I'm going to start using Google effecting because what I normally say is we're dumbing kids down.

Kristie: Ah.

Laura: That doesn't sound as nice, but what I mean by that is that we're not giving children the opportunity. That's the word, the opportunity to be able to access all parts of their brain. We're just getting them to be little lemmings rather than to be creative thinking beings, so that's this idea.

Kristie: We can say there's research that says you'll be less creative, have poor problem-solving skills, and actually, worse recall, which we already struggle with word recall so you know?

Laura: Absolutely. I'm doing it throughout as we speak. Yeah, yeah.

Kristie: Me too.

Laura: The other thing that we didn't really touch upon, but now, I think it links right now, is the idea when I say this helps with brain development, what does this really mean? What is the research? One of the things we're striving for in the brain and in the mind, and in relationships, is this idea of integration. I've used that word a couple of times. Let's pause there with integration means that things are differentiated, but they're linked. An example in our body is we have a liver, we have a spleen, we have an intestine, lung, heart, all these parts of our body, they're differentiated, they do different things. The liver does something very different than the lungs. We want them to be differentiated, but in order for us to be in a state of physical well-being, we need them to be linked. We need everybody to be doing their part, to work in concert, and then we're a physically healthy human being.

Well, the same is true in the brain and as the brain develops, there's different parts. We often talk about it like left hemisphere, right hemisphere, and then Daniel Siegel talks about it as the upstairs brain and the downstairs brain. All we have to know is that there are different parts in the brain, they do different, specific things, they're differentiated, but we need them to be linked, to be integrated, to be working together to function fully. Then we also know that children's brains are not fully developed until adolescence, which is now considered the mid-20s. Adolescence doesn't end at 18, it goes into the mid-20s and your brain is not fully developed until that time. It doesn't mean it stops developing there, but that means the architecture, you're more fully functioning and you can continue to make changes in the brain using the mind over time. This idea is that these strategies, narration, prompting self-talk, open-ended questions, help with promoting the differentiation, the developing of the different parts, and the linkage.

The reason the Google effect talks about this creativity, is that when we use narration, prompting self-talk, and open-ended questions, we're not only stimulating what's predominantly believed to be left hemisphere actions, like language, logistics, like literal linking things, having it be logical, and with verbal and non-verbal behavior, but we're also engaging the right hemisphere, which is more the context. Which is more the imagery, which is more closely directed to the emotional center in our brain and down into our body. We're developing the two hemispheres and then helping

them talk across the corpus callosum. It's differentiation, linkage, integration. It is something children come in and out of all day, and they don't have the capacity to be fully integrated all the time, nor do we as adults. We go in and out of it all the time, but focal attention, which is believed to be held in the prefrontal cortex, predominately is a linchpin. That's the most integrated center of the brain, it's believed. It has the most integrated fibers and it is directly linked to the limbic center and the brain stem so that it can use information from all parts of the brain. It's very powerful, this idea of focal attention.

Kristie: Yeah, definitely. You're just showing how, by doing this thing, we started off way back with focal attention...allowing for integration between parts of the brain, which, of course, promotes learning, and health and well-being. It's allowing the prefrontal cortex, in particular, to thrive and to get stronger. Then, it allows us to actually tolerate some of the stressors that we have in the classroom. What I was thinking about was that all the things that we do in classrooms, you said several things we do in classrooms naturally that promote this integration, that promote the focal attention, but also, we're doing things that are straining the prefrontal cortex and not allowing for integration and/or maybe trying to push focal attention at the wrong time. Let's just talk a little bit, if it makes sense at this point, about those stressors because we can talk about the things we did. Like, the open-ended questions, the parallel talk, promoting self-talk by children, but what are some things maybe we should break the habit of doing because they're straining the brain?

Laura: Absolutely. That's why I start with attuned interactions.

Kristie: Okay.

Laura: Attuned communication, because if we are hoping as adults to promote this idea of focal attention and that's only one aspect of mindfulness, but that's where we are right now, is that a child has to feel safe, connected, and satisfied. Those were three of our basic needs, to be safe, satisfied, and connected. [Rick Hanson](#) talks about those three basic human needs as also tantamount to how our brain develops in the three different layers, the brain stem, the limbic brain, and the cortex or the neocortex.

The idea is that if you are attuned as an adult, you're going to be able to promote this integrated learning. Well, if you're very harsh with the kids, your tone of voice, your body language, if you're giving a lot of directions and corrections, if your routine isn't structured, it's not consistent, if your physical environment isn't designed to consider sensory over-stimulation, so the noise, too much visual stimulation, if you don't have activities that are interesting or if they're too challenging versus just there's some that they can do with ease and there's some that maybe take them to the zone of proximal development, and if you are not keeping in mind the emotional literacy and

emotional regulation aspects- and we can talk about those in terms of the second wing of mindfulness- but it's really, really important, especially for me as a therapist, to have the climate be one where children's emotions are validated and they're taught with compassion and non-judgment to emotionally regulate.

Those are just a few of the things that can really cause these stressors, a few categories that really cause the stressors and really impact your ability for children to be in focal attention. I'm not going to be focal, my attention's going to be more diffuse if I'm feeling threatened. We look at people with trauma and they tend to be hypervigilant when they get older. They tend to have a diffuse attention. I just had a client yesterday in session, a 38-year-old woman, and she couldn't even do five minutes of a meditation practice because she just can't be still. Her brain can't be still. She has to be scanning for everything. That's hypervigilance.

Kristie: Right, right. This is sort of a side note, but it's one of my soapboxes. It's around class size and it's around this idea that it doesn't matter how many kids we throw into a small space with one adult because all these things you're saying, and many times these are kids who are experiencing poverty, have experienced trauma, are experiencing poor nutrition and hypervigilance just to get their basic, core needs met, right? Who's going to pick me up today? Where am I going to sleep tonight? Will I eat? I don't understand the language you're using. I don't know what's going to happen to me. All that stuff. Right? Then, we toss them into these small classrooms. I just want people to know that when I have too few of toys out or when I keep demanding that people share everything, when I want everybody to get along all the time, even though we're in crowded spaces and they're on top of each other, there's a reason that ... There's something actually happening in the brain that kids are going to struggle with that situation.

Laura: Absolutely. They're going to be releasing more cortisone, more adrenaline, and we can't see it. We can't see it. The kid doesn't come in and say my cortisol levels are through the roof today because I didn't eat, my parents are fighting, and my dad is going to be incarcerated next week. They can't say that, but they're showing that with their behavior. A lot of that is stuff that we set them up to have and this class size thing is absolutely true. The physical space and also just the ratios. Right? The number of kids. Our ratios are crazy. It's crazy to have 10 kids...

Kristie: How do we have one adult to 24 different kids, simultaneously. I just always think of the secondary traumatic effects for teachers. I had my own life before I got to school, which was maybe traumatic. I get to school. It's all about punishment and fear and get your test scores up. Now, I've got 24 friends coming and I don't get along with my co-teacher and the therapist is always telling me that I'm not doing stuff with fidelity. It's like, really, how do we expect people to like, be attuned, right?

Laura: Exactly. That's why we're doing the work that we're doing is offering up this idea of mindfulness in regard to the two wings, which is the focal attention, but also, that non-judgment, compassion, loving kindness, this is, hopefully, priming the brain to be in a more open and receptive state, rather than a reactive state. Again, that has to do with differentiation and that's the linkage when we go in and out all day long, but if we're really working on these components in the classroom, then we're going to be more likely as ourselves (and as teachers, too), to be more open and receptive and less reactive. It can decrease our stress load as well. Obviously, if we're teaching practices that will help children stay integrated, or what we might call behave well, then we are going to be less stressed and we're going to be in a more open, receptive state. It's a win/win for everybody.

Kristie: Right. Let's maybe have a little time spent on these loving adults who we love as well, which is a little bit of a side note, but it always comes back to if we don't have the health and well-being of the brain architect intact, how can we expect them to then model and apply practices that will promote the health and well-being of young children? What would we say, because we ended our last podcast with what could we say to teachers and professionals? Where can you begin your journey? What could we offer up to teachers for their own skills around mindfulness? Not just, oh, okay, I can ask more open-ended questions in the classroom, I can reduce the stressors that are creating hyper vigilance, I can use parallel talk during self-directed play. Yeah, fabulous, great, those are all things that they're being evaluated on that have traditions from way back, from Vygotsky to Piaget to Montessori to Reggio inspired. Oh, great, got all those dots, but then it comes back to me. You just started hitting on that second component, which I struggle with the most, the non-judgment, the self-compassion. What could we leave members of the revolution with around that second component?

Laura: I'm going to talk about the second component that teachers are going to use with children, but it's a parallel process.

Kristie: Yes.

Laura: Maybe if it's a both/and ...

Kristie: Okay... All right. All right

Laura: Then, we might go into it a little different. One of my biggest passions is something called [positive descriptive acknowledgment](#) or otherwise known as PDA or PDA Plus. That comes out of the work that I did with [WestEd](#) in terms of the Teaching Pyramid. It's the antidote to praise. If you want more information about it, you can go to my

[website](#) and I have articles there. Just in a nutshell, the idea is that we acknowledge children for their efforts. The way that we talk about this is saying things like, "Andre and Eloise are cleaning up all the art supplies for everyone. You two are being so respectful." That's a PDA Plus. You're just using objective descriptive language, being the camera, and showing children what you see. You're not doing any value judgments. You're not adding anything in.

Now, we can use that for children and that helps develop focal attention because they tune in to what they're doing, but also, that non-judgmental, loving kindness, compassion for self and others because they're starting to develop this internal narrative of I'm a respectful person. I clean up, I help my classroom community. Then, that is like resilience promoting. That's a protective factor for when they get in a stressful situation and they're like well, I'm a respectful person. Oh, I'm going to act in a respectful way, so as to avoid the dissidence.

Well, we can do the same thing as adults. We can scan throughout the day to self-monitor, to acknowledge our own efforts because goodness knows, as a teacher, we don't have our supervisors coming in quite often giving us PDA's. Right? This is, again, going up to management where we have to teach them to come in and actually do that instead of just directions and corrections, but I encourage teachers to do it for themselves. Scan for what's going well in the classroom and then scan for what your role is in that. Oh, my gosh, a lot of times teachers will say to me, "I've got such a great group of kids," and I'll say, "You know what? What's your role in that?"

Kristie: Right.

Laura: Then, that's PDA and that serves as a protective factor for us as an adult. It's not just that I've got a great group of kids, it says I'm creating this environment that is actually promoting the ability for children to be integrated and that helps me be integrated. Then, the emotional literacy and the emotional regulation piece that I talked about earlier, referred to, that we really need to be validating children's emotions, asking them to talk about their emotions, point to their emotions, scaffolding their emotions depending on their ability, to be able to help them enter into the world of knowing the mind. Knowing what my emotions are- when we're aware of something, we can work with it. That's the whole thing about this attention, is it brings things into our awareness so we can work with them. Something outside of our awareness, we're not able to work with it, but it still works on us. I also promote that in teachers. What's your emotional literacy? What's your emotional regulation strategy because literacy and regulation equal emotional intelligence?

This is the place where most of us as adults are really lacking and it's not our fault. The era we grew up in, we didn't spend a lot of time talking about emotional

intelligence. Thank goodness for [Daniel Goleman](#) because I never even heard that phrase until Daniel Goleman wrote his book. We just were more, got the messages of like, don't be sad, don't be mad, move on, pull yourself up by your bootstraps. We don't want to do that because emotions are energy and they can wreak havoc on us. When I see a teacher that's burned out, that's dejected, that's in this flat state, it's typically emotions are wreaking havoc and so I can help them with emotional literacy skills and then emotional regulation skills. We don't want things like drinking too much, not sleeping, you know, over exercising. There's a lot of strategies we use as adults to regulate our emotions that aren't healthy. I don't do therapy with teachers. They can come, they can come for therapy, that's different, but just basic putting the oxygen mask on yourself strategies because you're the nurturer. We want to nurture the nurturer.

Kristie: Yeah, and it's even like what we've talked about before. That self-awareness of, certainly of your strength and your super powers, but also that awareness of that shark music because that's, again, once I'm aware of that, what's bugging me or grating on me or leading me to react instead of respond or putting me in autopilot, then I can do something about it. Until I'm self-aware, I'm just going to keep going around the same loop.

Laura: Absolutely. The difference between attention and awareness is just, really quickly, if you want to, if you're not driving, you can think about an exercise to show you the difference between the two. Right now, just move your attention as if you're holding a book in front of your face, put your attention there. Then, you can move your attention to the middle of the room. Then, move your attention to the far end of the room. Now, move your attention back to the book. That's your attention, you moved it to the book, middle, far. Awareness is what you noticed when you looked at that book. What you noticed when you went into the middle of the room and what you noticed when you went to the far end.

If you were using focal attention, you started to actually notice and become aware of what was in front of you, but then you might notice the quality, you might notice it's dirty, you might notice it needs to be moved. We're having an awareness about it. A lot of times when people have been through trauma, when they start to notice something and it becomes agitating, they shift their attention. They shift out. They don't stay there. They can't be still with that. It happens with a lot of teachers, they can't be still with that. We just can't be still with what ... I'm attending to something, but the awareness is too scary, it's too overwhelming. Same with children...

Kristie: Same with children. Absolutely.

Laura: Huge, huge piece.



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Kristie: When we see them move from thing to thing to thing, have we taken the time to go oh, it's not attention disorder, it's something that when I go to do that, like you said about your client the other day that couldn't sit still for five minutes or whatever you want to call sit still, right? Sometimes I feel I'm the same way. I say to people all the time like, what did we do without our phones when we got to a stop light? They're like, "Oh, how do you know I check my phone?" Because I'm like everybody else, it's like we use it to complain. We would rush through the light so we wouldn't get stuck, now we're like oh, I'll slow up so I can check my email one more time. If you think I'm the only one doing that, I'm not.

Laura: No, you're not, you're not. Absolutely.

Kristie: Right? I got away from our little kid analogy, but you know.

Laura: It's illustrative, it's important. You accessed our right brain because we all have an image now of, oh yeah, I do that. Our ability to just be in the space, to be aware and to notice. I like to say instead of, I often replace attention with notice. What do you notice? Especially, if I'm guiding someone in a meditation practice, which meditation is just extended mindfulness and I'm just asking them, what do you notice? What sensations? What do you notice? Not, what are you paying attention to? Also, because especially in classrooms, when teachers tell children to pay attention, it often has a harshness to it. I'd like to invite them to consider saying, "What do you notice? What do you notice right now?"

Right now, I have a nephew that I'm helping out. I mentioned him last time, too. He's so sweet and he's seven and he's been diagnosed with ADHD. I'm developing a framework for him about noticing. Stopping, noticing, asking himself what his choices are, and then pick one and proceed. So, the notice, the N, and it's called snap. The notice is just notice, how am I feeling? How am I thinking? How am I behaving? Then, how are others maybe thinking, feeling, and behaving? That noticing is taking attention, but the power of attention is to actually enhance our own awareness. The power of attention can create choice and change. I can choose what I want to do, I can choose how I want to behave, and then I can change what I'm doing and change how I'm behaving.

Kristie: Maybe we'll kind of leave that as what we invite people to do- invite themselves to notice, invite others to notice. You talked about classroom climate. Just, you know, we always say take a breath, but that's all in the same vein, right? If I take a breath, I've created some space and opportunity to notice.

Laura: Absolutely, and it's easier to be able to take a breath if you're in a classroom, if you've become part of, as a teacher and as a child here, in a classroom that's promoting mindfulness because the part of the brain that helps us with the pause, the break between stimulus and response, is that prefrontal cortex. If we're engaged in learning all day, open-ended questions, parallel talk, emotional literacy, emotional regulation, positive descriptive acknowledgment, we're harnessing the integrative fibers of that prefrontal cortex to keep us integrated and we can have more pause, more spaces for breath. It's easier. It's hard to pause. There is a stimulus or a trigger and we respond. Think of how many times a day we do that and we're encouraged to in the Western world. We're encouraged to in school, like, quick, answer quick, know it quick. We're not encouraged to just take this space, just pause, but if we don't have to learn how to breathe just by breathing, we can also learn to take space by practicing these focal attention strategies with compassion and non-judgment.

Kristie: On that note, I just took a good breath. Right. I will make sure that all of the things that we talked about have links. In today's podcast episode's show notes, we'll have a downloadable that will show you the alignment between current, really good, early childhood practices and how those really fit under this umbrella of mindfulness so that you can see that. And then we'll encourage you to keep thinking about mindfulness as this way that we are building brains and to not get too caught up in a trend, or thinking about spirituality or thinking about it's one point in the day, like you said, we're going to do this activity...but rather, it's this approach to how we're building young children's brains. Then, we'll lastly leave you with our gratitude- both to you, Laura, and to members of the revolution; and with that, I hope that people will take an opportunity to notice a little more.

Laura: Thanks, Kristie.

Kristie: Thank you, Laura.



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