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Mindfulness and relaxation practice to improve children's executive functioning

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Executive Functioning is the brain functioning involved in mental processes such as working memory, response inhibition, sustained attention, initiation of tasks, shifting focus, cognitive flexibility, self-monitoring and goal orientation. Executive function, or EF, is the chief function contributing to children's ability to self-regulate their emotions. Often children with genetic conditions such as ADHD, autism spectrum disorders, learning disabilities, and anxiety disorders display some level of impairment with EF. Trauma and/or neglect can also contribute to reduce EF. Research is building to show that mindfulness practice and relaxation techniques are effective in down regulating the limbic system and fight/flight/freeze response resulting in improved executive brain functioning. And, if utilized consistently over time, children will default to these tools in times of stress instead of the once-conditioned reactive emotional responses. Once children learn ways to self-regulate their emotions, they can bring themselves back to a state of calm which increases their access to the prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain largely associated with EF, thus improving their executive functioning skills. In this workshop, the symptoms of EF dysfunction and corresponding neurobiology involved with EF will be outlined, research regarding mindfulness and relaxation practice will be discussed and relaxation and mindfulness tools will be introduced and demonstrated. The alternative lens of brain functioning will be applied to the perception of behaviour of concern and taken into consideration in the development of treatment and/or skill instruction plans.

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