

Calm Down and Pay Attention: Cultivating Emotional Intelligence for Kids

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The scene: a first-grade classroom in a Manhattan school. Not just any classroom, this one has lots of Special Ed students, who are very hyperactive. So the room is whirlpool of activity, some a bit frenzied. The teacher tells the kids that they're going to listen to a CD. The kids quiet down a bit. Then they get pretty still as the CD starts, and a man's voice tells them to listen to some sounds.

The voice asks them not to say the name of what they hear out loud, but just to themselves. But as they listen to the sounds, they don't just lie there quietly, like other kids. These hyperactive kids listen with their whole body: when there's the cry of a bird, they move their arms like a bird. But through it all they manage to calm down and stay focused through the entire six minutes.

The voice on the CD is mine, though the words are those of Linda Lantieri, an old friend and colleague. Linda has pioneered programs in social and emotional learning in the New York City public schools that have been adopted worldwide. Her newest program adds mindfulness for kids to the emotional intelligence tool kit, in one version to enhance focusing and attention, in another to help kids learn to calm themselves better. Linda's [book and CD *Cultivating Emotional Intelligence*](#) has instructions adapted to kids' ages – one for five to seven, another eight to eleven, then 12 and up. And she explains how teachers or parents can best introduce these to kids.

Linda's CD exemplifies the ways we can take advantage of neuroplasticity to help children master the abilities that are crucial for emotional intelligence. As Richard Davidson, founder of the Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience at the University of Wisconsin explained in a conversation we had, the kind of training Linda offers kids strengthens their neural circuitry for self-awareness, self-mastery, and empathy (to hear Davidson's explanation, listen to the CD [Training the Brain: Cultivating Emotional Skills](#)).

It was gratifying to hear the reactions of Jon and Myla Kabat-Zinn to Linda's program; Jon has pioneered using mindfulness in health care, and with his wife Myla wrote a pioneering book on parenting, *Everyday Blessings: The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting*. They visited an elementary school in Manhattan that uses Linda's program and watched kids go through the exercises. They were pleasantly surprised to see hyperactive kids calm down and listen attentively during the calming and focusing instructions.

In Richard Davidson's view, this kind of instruction takes advantage of a natural neural window of opportunity during childhood. The neural circuitry that allows us to pay attention, calm ourselves, and attune to others' feelings all takes shape in the first two decades of life. If we leave that shaping to chance, kids can grow up with a range of deficiencies in these key life skills that can trouble them throughout life, in their relationships and at work. But if we offer them a systematic education in these abilities, they can take these skills with them through life.

Perhaps most important for the mission of schools, learning, when kids learn to pay attention and calm down, they learn better. In some of the Manhattan schools teachers play the CDs for the kids right before tests, to help them get in the best brain state for learning and remembering. Linda has created a great assistant for teachers, a way to help kids be better students – not just learning better, but behaving better, too.

Parents and teachers tell kids countless times to “calm down” or “pay attention.” But the natural course of a child's development means that the brain's circuitry for calming and focusing is a work in progress – those neural systems are still growing. They will be shaped by the experiences kids have, so the lessons Linda offers are invaluable. We can help by giving children systematic lessons that will strengthen those budding capacities. That's what Linda has done in her state-of-the-art curriculum – and what any family of classroom can offer kids now.