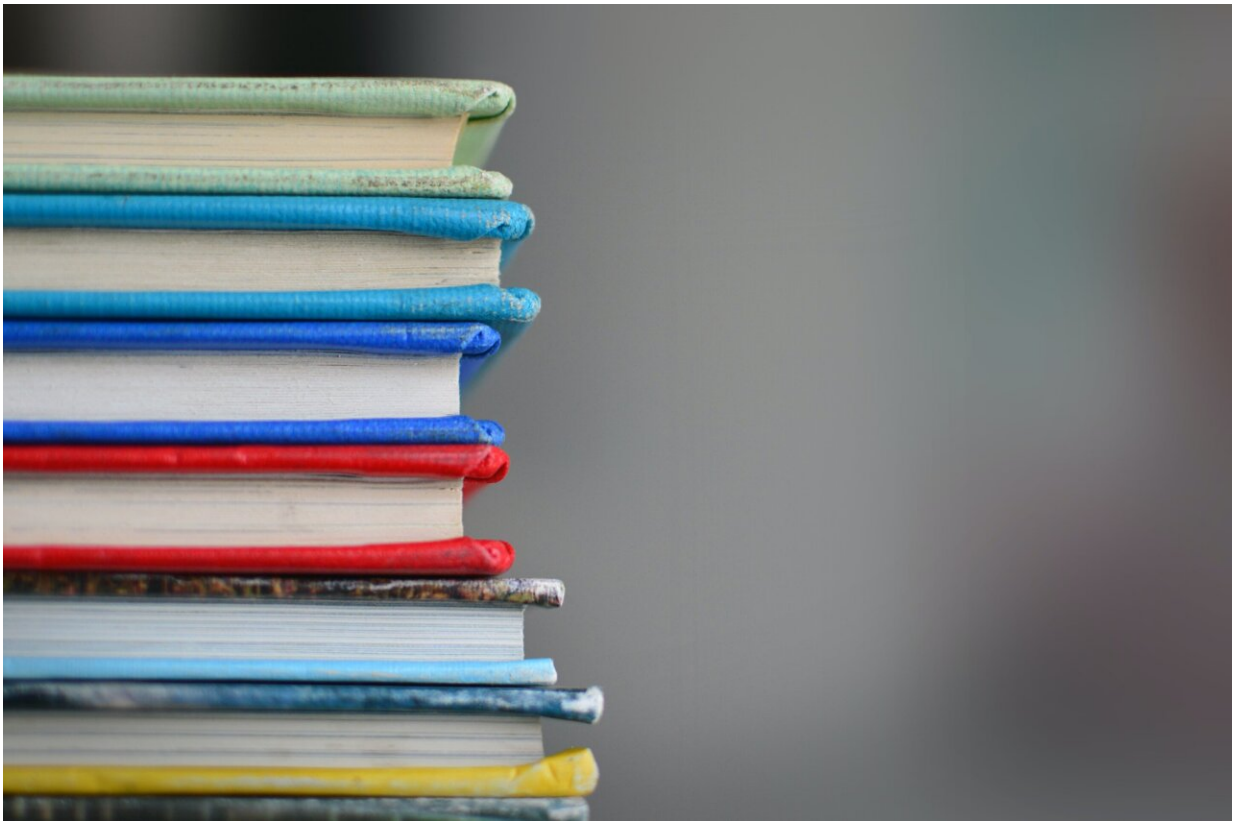


Five minutes of mindfulness can improve kids' reading

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Engaging middle-school students in brief mindfulness exercises could boost their reading performance—and could offer an effective intervention to help youth from historically minoritized backgrounds,

according to a new Cornell study.

The study is believed to be the first to explore the effect of mindfulness practice on an academic skill—[reading comprehension](#) and fluency—rather than on [academic achievement](#), the focus of many mindfulness studies. It is also the first empirical evidence indicating that mindfulness practices may support reading among racial minority and economically disadvantaged youth.

"This is a measure of tapping into the actual skills that students are using to make sense of the text they're reading, rather than simply a grade they would get for the semester," said Josh Felver, extension associate in the College of Human Ecology's Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research. Felver led the research, which was [published](#) in *School Psychology* on Nov. 1.

The study, conducted during the 2017–18 [school](#) year, included five seventh-grade English Language Arts (ELA) classes from the same New York state school, where 70% of students are Black and 88% live below the poverty level. The school's demographics are relevant, researchers said, because there continue to be racial and socioeconomic disparities in reading outcomes.

Five ELA classrooms with a total of 56 students were randomly assigned to study conditions. Three classrooms did a five-minute mindfulness exercise at the start of every class throughout the school year, including self-awareness of breathing and cultivating positive mental habits. In contrast, two classrooms engaged in typical academic warmup activities without mindfulness practice.

To measure the effects of the mindfulness exercises, researchers used AIMSweb Maze, a curriculum-based reading comprehension assessment in which students read a passage for a set period and then arrive at a

section of the passage with a missing word. The students circle one of three words to fill in the blank. This assessment measures reading comprehension and fluency, essential skills to construct meaning from text.

"It's a tool used by many schools around the world as a best practice for assessing reading," said Felver. "You can do screenings multiple times a year to see how students are responding to an intervention or identify students who could use additional academic support."

The assessment was conducted three times—at the beginning, middle and end of the school year. By the end of the [school year](#), researchers found that the students who practiced mindfulness before the start of class read on average 4.41 more words correctly during a timed reading exercise.

These results indicate a link between mindfulness exercises and improved reading comprehension, an especially important finding in a school where only 8% of students and 4% of Black students achieved proficient scores on New York state's ELA assessment, compared to 40% for all New York state seventh graders in 2017–18.

"Given the large, persistent disparities in standardized measures of reading among students of color, it is exciting that we found evidence that a time-efficient mindfulness practice has a positive influence on educational outcomes," Felver said.

The researchers note that mindfulness practices can also help with attention regulation and stress reduction. Students in [school districts](#) located in economically disadvantaged communities commonly experience high levels of stress, which can affect their health, so mindfulness exercises like the ones used in this study may offer other health-related benefits in addition to boosting their reading performance,

Felver said.

While the results show a relationship between mindfulness practice and reading comprehension, the researchers note more studies are needed, with a focus on a larger sample size, the number of assessments taken through the year, and whether mindfulness exercises can improve other academic skills such as writing and math performance.

"There is a significant need for feasible, effective interventions like this one to help youth from historically minoritized backgrounds bolster their reading skills so that they may be successful in school," said Felver.

More information: Joshua C. Felver et al, Effects of brief mindfulness practice on reading performance among racially minoritized adolescents, *School Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1037/spq0000368](https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000368)

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