

BY BARRY BOYCE

## Teach Our Children Well

ONE OF THE MOST PROMISING applications of mindfulness today is in grade-school classrooms, where the rise of bullying and other forms of antisocial behavior has alarmed parents, teachers, and government leaders. While efforts are under way to teach simple forms of meditation to schoolchildren, the most promising initiatives focus on using contemplative techniques to help teachers reduce stress and improve their emotional awareness, concentration, and responsiveness.

“We will provide a great service if we can help teachers apply mindfulness to their emotions in the intense classroom environment,” said Patricia Jennings, director of the Garrison Institute’s Initiative on Contemplation and Education and a research associate in the Prevention Research Center at Pennsylvania State University. “If teachers can notice the emotion within their body, they can stop and make choices. Instead of seeing

children with challenging behavior as problems, they can experience them as suffering human beings who need compassion. Over time, that will change how they lead their classrooms.”

“Prevention research” focuses on preventing a host of negative outcomes—drug abuse, eating disorders, violence, and suicide, to name a few—that can result in part from difficult school environments. In some quarters, contemplative practices are regarded as a subset of this growing field, which is one factor that is helping to spur the development of contemplative education as a mainstream discipline.

Garrison’s professional development program for teachers, **Cultivating Awareness and Resiliency in Education** (CARE), recently received a major grant from the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute for Education Sciences (IES). The CARE program helps teachers learn skills that can transform the classroom environment into one that fosters not only academic but also social and emotional development. The curriculum combines exercises for recognizing emotional patterns—one’s own and others’—with contemplative practices such as mindfulness meditation. Jennings developed the program in conjunction with Richard Brown, chair of the Contemplative Education Department at Naropa University; Christa Turksma, prevention con-



*Teachers at Garrison Institute’s CARE retreat*

sultant at Penn State; and other researchers, educators, psychologists, and experts in contemplative practice.

To date, CARE training has been piloted in school districts in Denver, San Francisco, and Philadelphia. The federal grant of about \$930,000 will fund further development and evaluation of the program over a two-year period in rural and suburban elementary schools in central Pennsylvania. (About \$290,000 of the grant goes directly to Garrison.) For the first time, data will be collected on how CARE affects students in the classroom. The number of classrooms studied will be much larger and will be drawn from a wider range of school districts than the previous pilots.

“This grant is very good news for the growth of this field,” said Jennings, who will be the principal investigator for the project. “There is no precedent for funding this kind of work. Surprisingly, there has been very little research into what is required to be a good teacher in terms of the psycho-social skills needed to run a good classroom and foster a healthy class climate and good student-teacher relationships.”

In addition to long-term studies within schools, Jennings told me, the Garrison program is focused on “developing the field of contemplative education. We need to define what it means, identify those who are working in this area, help them communicate with each other, and develop our work in a way that is secular and testable, so that it can be applied in the school districts that educate the majority of children in North America.”

Garrison’s next CARE teacher training retreat will be August 8-13 at the institute in Garrison, New York.

The Center for Mindfulness held its seventh annual International Scientific Conference for Clinicians, Researchers, and Educators in



March, and recently issued a call for papers and presentations for next year's conference, April 7-11, in Worcester, Massachusetts.

Nancy Bardacke, founder of the **Mindfulness-Based Childbirth and Parenting Education Program**, was among the many presenters at this year's conference. She and Larissa Duncan—from the Osher Center for Integrative Medicine at the University of California in San Francisco, where Bardacke's program is now presented—reported on preliminary evidence that suggests mindfulness practice improves mothers' ability to cope with a crying baby, fatigue and interrupted sleep, breastfeeding, a baby's admission to neonatal intensive care, and challenges in the changing relationship with a partner. Bardacke is working on a book, *Mindful Birthing: Training the Mind, Body, and Heart for Childbirth and Beyond*, to be published by HarperCollins in winter 2011.

"Pregnancy, birth, and early parenting is the most transformative period in the adult life cycle," Bardacke said when I talked to her about the significance of her work. "The experiences that emerge during this time can be some of the most stressful of people's lives. Nothing really prepares you for it. Mindfulness skills help everyone involved navigate this transition, and are a foundation not only for the uncertainties of the birth itself but also for the new life of parenthood that follows."

Bardacke was a nurse-midwife with a background in yoga and meditation when she took a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course for health profession-

als in 1994, and decided it was time to develop a comparable program for childbirth. She "kept the essential elements and morphed it into something that would work for expectant couples. Whereas MBSR addresses an individual's health, in our program two, really three, people are involved." She began Mindfulness-Based Childbirth and Parenting (MBCP) in 1998 and has taught it continuously since then. It includes an introductory session, nine weekly

classes before birth, an all-day practice session, and a reunion class following birth. She also offers one-day and weekend courses for parents and health professionals.

Bardacke feels confident that longitudinal studies of mindfulness applied to the childbirth process will show a range of benefits to the mother, the child, and the couple. She feels it is time for this methodology to become more widespread, and has started a professional development and training program for MBCP. "Most people having children take childbirth education," Bardacke says. "What a wonderful opportunity to teach skills that can last a lifetime. This is bigger than just focusing on mindful birth. Through practice, we can interrupt intergenerational patterns of dysfunction. This is violence prevention, shaken-baby prevention, family-breakup prevention. It's another means of helping create a more peaceful society."

Another presentation at the Center for Mindfulness' annual conference focused on training **U.S. Forest Service firefighters** in "mindfulness-based situational awareness." James Saveland, program manager for Human Factors and Risk Management at the Rocky Mountain Research Station in Fort Collins, Colorado, talked about the training in simple mindfulness techniques that he and Ted Putnam, a retired forest service employee who does accident investigations, have been doing with fire crews. Saveland told me that Putnam had been a key investigator into Colorado's South Canyon fire in 1994 that killed fourteen firefighters.

Following the investigation, Putnam organized a human factors conference and has been pushing ever since for greater attention to the role of situational awareness—a term used largely in military contexts that refers essentially to the intimate awareness of one's surroundings on a moment-to-moment basis as a precursor to decision-making under stress.

Saveland had begun to take an interest in work done at a human performance laboratory at the University of Montana that suggested there were many similarities between firefighters and elite endurance athletes. He then started to research endurance athletic training that employed mindfulness training, and was impressed with how applicable this approach might be to firefighter training. Last year, he and Putnam piloted a half-day course that introduced firefighters to situational awareness and recent research on the benefits of enhancing it. They taught mindful breathing, walking, and body-scanning, and suggested how mindfulness could be applied to any kind of physical activity.

"We used Jon Kabat-Zinn's definition of mindfulness as 'paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, as if your life depended on it, nonjudgmentally,'" Saveland said, "which resonated well with this group. We also taught Andrew Weil's 4-7-8 breathing exercise as a way of pausing, taking a moment, and collecting thoughts. We suggested they might use that before a morning briefing, for example." Based on the success of doing the half-day course with a number of crews, this year Saveland and Putnam are doing more in-depth training with two crews in the field, looking at how mindfulness techniques could be incorporated into daily operations.

"We're trying to encourage the crews to see this as part of mind-body fitness," Saveland said. He's written a guide to bringing mindfulness into a daily physical fitness routine, something common to all firefighters. "We're trying to break down the stereotype of mindfulness as esoteric. Ted and I are both meditators and we were smoke jumpers, so we have some credibility in the community. They know we are motivated by a desire to save lives." ♦