Mindfulness: a Natural Fit for Pediatric Practice
by Carla Kemp, Senior Editor

Editor's note: The 2017 AAP National Conference & Exhibition will take place from Sept. 16-19 in Chicago.

Mindfulness is all the rage these days. It's touted as an antidote for stress, anxiety and depression. It promises to improve concentration, patience and even immune function.

But can the practice really do all that?

Clichés and misinformation about mindfulness abound, yet a growing body of research shows it has myriad benefits, said Mark Bertin, MD, FAAP, a developmental-behavioral pediatrician in New York and assistant professor of pediatrics at New York Medical College.

Dr. Bertin will describe those benefits and introduce some mindfulness practices during an interactive group forum titled "Embracing the Moment: Mindfulness and Resilience for Children, Adolescents, and Their Families" from 4:00-5:30 pm Monday (I3154) in McCormick Place West, W181 B and from 2:00-3:30 pm Tuesday (I4089) in McCormick Place West, W181 A. He will be joined by Dzung Vo, MD, FAAP, clinical associate professor at University of British Columbia and BC Children's Hospital, Vancouver, and a member of the AAP Section on Integrative Medicine.

"What we really want to do is help people understand what mindfulness is and what it isn't - I think there is a lot of misunderstanding about that - and most importantly why it can be practical and useful for families and ... physicians as well," Dr. Bertin said.

One way to describe mindfulness is living life in real time and seeing things as they actually are with a sense of openness and compassion, he explained.

The basic premise of a mindfulness practice is acknowledging that we are distracted, and our mind is all over the place all day long, Dr. Bertin continued. The goal, then, is to train ourselves to pay attention more often to what is going on in the moment instead of ruminating about the past or worrying about the future.

"It's not a practice where you're trying to escape anything or go anywhere else," he said.

That doesn't mean you will be calm all the time or your mind will be totally still if you do some mindfulness exercises.

"One of the quickest ways to undermine someone getting started with mindfulness is to imply that it's going to be a quick fix - tomorrow you're going to feel better if you take a few breaths. That's not it at all," Dr. Bertin said.

He compared practicing mindfulness to running. You don't necessarily feel great every time you go for a run. You just know that if you run regularly, eventually you're going to be in better shape.

Mindfulness is a natural fit for pediatric practice, Dr. Bertin said. Parenting is stressful and overwhelming, particularly for those who have children with developmental or behavioral challenges. Helping parents feel more resilient and capable allows them to be at their best more often.

During the hands-on session, Dr. Bertin and Dr. Vo will introduce several mindfulness practices that attendees can start using right away.

"One of the most common starting points is focusing on the breath, not because there's anything magical about
breathing but just because we are breathing,” Dr. Bertin said.

They also will share the latest research showing the benefits of mindfulness for patients, families and physicians themselves.

"Because we're seeing things more clearly and with less reactivity,” Dr. Bertin said, "we're more able to appreciate the things that are going well and we're more able to manage skillfully the things that aren't.”

Follow Dr. Bertin on Twitter @markbertinmd. Follow Dr. Vo @dzungxvo.

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