

“Pause Anger:” Emotion Regulation Effects of a Mindfulness Intervention

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ABSTRACT

This study used a mixed-methods approach to examine changes in students’ self-reported anger regulation strategies towards the beginning and end of a mindfulness intervention. 194 elementary school students reported their anger regulation strategies in response to likert-style and open-ended questions. Intervention effects suggested that students increased their reported use of anger withdrawal and “pause anger,” in addition to gender differences.

BACKGROUND

- Emotion regulation: “The extrinsic and intrinsic processes responsible for monitoring, evaluation, and modifying emotional reactions” (Compas et al., 2014), including anger (e.g., Zeman, et al., 2007).
- Unlike “deactivating” emotions (e.g., hopelessness), anger urges students to action (Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, & Perry, 2002).
- One anger regulation strategy that is gaining increasing attention is mindfulness, which includes “nonreactivity” (Christopher, Woodrich, & Tiernan, 2014). Yet, little research has measured or examined nonreactivity among elementary school children.

INTERVENTION

- In the current study, two elementary schools created a mindfulness intervention, and we conducted emotion regulation assessments of the students towards the beginning of the intervention and four months later, at the end of the school year.
- One of the goals of the intervention was to help teachers promote students pausing before acting on angry or frustrated feelings.
- Other goals were to promote mindful strategies like breathing deeply to manage anxiety.
- The intervention involved school-based mindfulness training with teachers, a school wide presentation with students, and one of the two schools set aside 10 minutes per day for mindful activities like coloring book drawing.

HYPOTHESES

- a) The schools’ intervention would increase students’ self-rated nonreactivity over the course of the intervention.
- b) The changes in nonreactivity would be most pronounced among older elementary students.
- c) We expected an increase in mindfulness-related responses to open-ended questions on anger regulation.

METHODS

- Assessed 3rd - 5th grade students’ (n = 194) regulation strategies in February, towards the beginning of the intervention, and four months later at the end of the school year in June of 2015.
- Graduate students individually administered interviews and entered the data in SPSS.

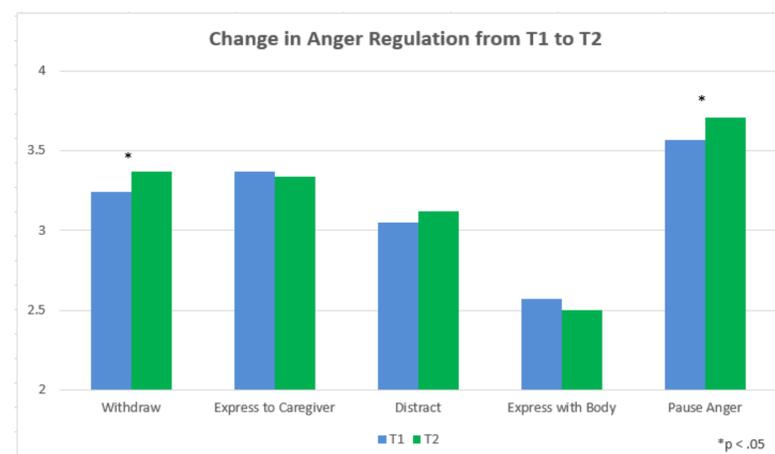
Quantitative Methods

- Emotions as a Child questionnaire of anger regulation strategies (EAC; Magai & O’Neal, 1997)
- Added a “pause anger” subscale to the EAC.
- All scales had adequate internal consistency.

Qualitative Methods

- Asked students: What strategies would you use to wait before acting on your anger?
- Five categories were devised to code responses:
 1. Express thoughts/ feelings to others
 2. Withdraw from others/ feel the anger in private
 3. Distract yourself
 4. Use a pause anger strategy
 5. No strategy

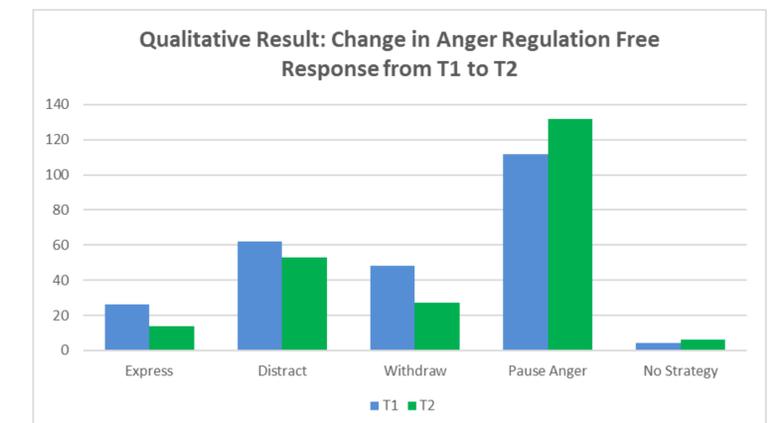
RESULTS



Quantitative Results Continued:

- No change in Anger Distract, Anger Express to Caregiver, and Anger Express with Body.
- **Significant increase** in Pause Anger ($p < .05$) AND Anger Withdrawal ($p < .05$).
- **For boys:** Decrease in Express Anger with Body ($p = .06$), increase in Pause Anger ($p < .05$).
- **For girls:** Increase in Anger Distract and Anger Withdraw ($p < .05$). The girls may not have increased in Pause Anger over time because their T1 levels were already higher than for boys.
- Strategies changed for **all age groups**.

Qualitative Result: In response to open-ended questions, students increased in Pause Anger and decreased in Anger Withdraw and Express.



CONCLUSIONS

- Overall, students’ use of a mindfulness strategy, Pause Anger, significantly increased by the end of the schools’ mindfulness intervention.
- Other emotion regulation strategies changed as well. Intervention effects differed by gender.
- Students may respond somewhat differently to open-ended versus close-ended emotion regulation questions. Both methods showed an increase in Pause Anger, but quantitative results also indicated an increase in Withdraw, while qualitative results indicated a decrease in both Withdraw and Express.

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