

Windows of Opportunity

A new book and CD help students build emotional intelligence.

BY DANIEL GOLEMAN



Frank Ward

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 a whirlpool of frenzied activity. 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 asks the kids to lie down on their backs, arms at their sides, and get a "breathing buddy," like a stuffed animal, who will sit on their stomachs and help them be aware of their breathing. The voice takes the children through a series of breathing and body awareness exercises, and the kids manage to calm down and stay focused through the entire six minutes, which ends with them wiggling their toes.

"You've just learned how to make your body feel calm and relaxed," says the voice. "And you can do this again any time you want."

The voice on the CD is mine, though I'm reading the words of Linda Lantieri, who has pioneered public school programs in social and emotional learning that have been adopted worldwide.

Her newest program adds an important tool to the emotional intelligence kit: mindfulness, a moment-by-moment awareness of one's internal state and external environment. In a new book, *Building Emotional Intelligence*, which comes with the CD, Lantieri uses mindfulness training to enhance concentration and attention among kids, and to help them learn to better calm themselves. *Building Emotional Intelligence* comes with instructions that explain how teachers and parents can adapt Lantieri's exercises to kids at different age levels (five to seven, eight to 11, or 12 and up) and provides detailed explanations of each exercise.

Lantieri's project exemplifies the ways we can build on scientific insights to help children master the skills of emotional intel-

ligence. As Richard Davidson, founder of the Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience at the University of Wisconsin, explained to me in a recent conversation, 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. And yet kids today face a range of social conditions—primarily stress caused by school and peer pressures,



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unstable home lives, and hectic schedules—that foil the healthy development of this circuitry.

"We often mistake the symptoms of unmanaged stress in our children as inappropriate behavior that needs to be stopped," writes Lantieri in *Building Emotional Intelligence*. "Children are reprimanded by teachers and parents for actions that are really stress reactions, rather than intentional misbehavior. The situation becomes a downward spiral of one stress reaction after another, and both adult and child are caught in it."

As a result, kids can grow up with a range of deficiencies in these key life skills—deficiencies that can trouble them throughout life, in their relationships, and at work. For

20 years, writes Lantieri, schools have waged "prevention wars," like the "war on drugs," to reduce antisocial and self-destructive behavior. In *Building Emotional Intelligence*, she argues that we must instead focus on building resilience and self-knowledge. By offering kids a systematic education in social and emotional intelligence, we can help counteract the negative forces in their lives, and they can take these skills with them as they mature.

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 Lantieri offers are invaluable. In the Manhattan schools I visited, teachers played the CD for kids right before tests, to help them get in the best brain state for learning and remembering. Lantieri has cre-

ated a great assistant for teachers, a way to help kids be better students—not just for better learning, but for better behavior, too.

"A window of opportunity exists right now in our society for these kinds of approaches to make their way into our homes and our schools," writes Lantieri. "It is essential for children to learn new ways to have their human spirits uplifted and

their inner lives nourished as a normal, natural part of their childhood experience. Far from being marginal or irrelevant, attention to building our children's emotional intelligence and inner lives will help us achieve the equilibrium we all need in this chaotic world."

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Goleman's full conversations with Richard Davidson, "Training the Brain," can be heard as part of the audio series *Wired to Connect: Dialogues on Social Intelligence*, available through More than Sound Productions (www.morethansound.net).