



SCOTTISH RITE CHARITABLE FOUNDATION
VALLEY LIAISON COMMITTEE
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Research funded, in part, by the Scottish Rite Charitable Foundation and directed at “Solving the Puzzles of the Mind” takes many different forms and paths, as we have discovered. In this message, we learn a bit about the work being done by Dr. Karen Milligan, Assistant Professor of Psychology at Ryerson University in Toronto. The title of her research is “Using Mindfulness-Based Martial Arts to Improve Attention and Executive Functions in Youth with Learning Disabilities and Mental Health Issues.” This summary is based on a video recording of her presentation to Toronto Scottish Rite and it is available at the SCRF website (www.srcf.ca) under the heading Videos.

Dr. Milligan begins her presentation by reminding everyone that children with learning disabilities (LD) are bright, by definition. They have average to above average intellectual abilities and are often identified as “gifted”. The difficulties they experience are with how they process information and how they are able to use it. They struggle with an impairment in the ability to take in information, or how to understand and remember it or with how to work with it and express that information. This, obviously has an impact on their academic performance especially in reading, writing and math.

This difficulty is not due to cultural or educational factors and it does not go away in adulthood but remains as a lifelong issue. It may appear to be less problematic as the child ages but that is typically because they have learned alternate methods of coping. The key, then, is to help them get on the right path, to help them navigate these difficulties.

The impact of LD extends beyond the classroom. These children often are unsure of how to act in social situations, they are unable to read social cues and to interact with those around them. They often suffer with mental health issues such as increased stress, anxiety, depression and suicidal tendencies. Because they experience failure frequently, they have a lower sense of mastery or the ability to do things correctly; they experience anxiety and frustration, especially those who are gifted because they just can’t get their ideas across and they know this is an issue. This often leads to an avoidance of those stressor situations – they don’t complete their homework, they skip social events or they act out, they become the class clown because it’s easier to be laughed at for doing something funny than it is for being “dumb”.

The issue, first and foremost, with treating children with LD and mental health issues is how to engage them. Children or teens, especially boys, generally do not want to sit and talk about their thoughts or their feelings. So it is necessary to find a means to “hook” them so they will want to attend. Then, promoting attention and focus, particularly in stress situations, is essential. The treatment or intervention must be adaptive to the varying learning strengths and needs of the individuals and it must promote mastery, flexibility, trust and community.

Integra Mindfulness Martial Arts started in 2002 as a means to teach the youth not to get rid of, or ignore, their feelings but to accept them and in so doing, rather than react impulsively to them, choose to act differently. The program operates over 20 weeks with the sessions being once a week for an hour and a half. At the same time, meetings with the parents are also taking place. The results have shown a significant improvement in oppositional behaviours and conduct problems as well as much less aggressive behaviours.

The next phase of this research is equally fascinating and will be the subject of the next message. In the meantime, check out the video on the website at www.srcf.ca to learn more of this research. And remember to use the blue envelope to make your donation to the Scottish Rite Charitable Foundation!

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