

The Effects of Mindfulness-Based Interventions on Cognition and Mental Health in Children and Adolescents: A Meta-Analysis of RCTs

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Abstract

Background. Mindfulness based interventions (MBIs) are an increasingly popular way of attempting to improve the behavioural, cognitive and mental health outcomes of children and adolescents, though there is a suggestion that enthusiasm for MBIs has moved ahead of the evidence base. As things stand, most evaluations of MBIs have involved either uncontrolled or non-randomised trials that, although helpful in identifying the likely efficacy of an intervention, should be regarded as preparation for randomised, controlled trial (RCT) evaluations.

Method. This is the first meta-analysis of MBIs with children and adolescents (age range 4-18 years) that focusses exclusively on RCTs and includes separate analyses of the RCTs that set MBIs against an active control group – the gold-standard in intervention research.

Results. Across all RCTs we found support for significant positive effects of MBIs, relative to the

comparison condition, for outcome categories of Mindfulness, Executive Functioning, Attention, Depression, Anxiety/Stress and Negative Behaviours. However, when considering only those RCTs with active control groups, support for significant benefits of an MBI was restricted to the outcomes of Mindfulness, Depression and Anxiety/Stress. Effect sizes for these significant effects ranged from small to small-to-moderate.

Conclusion. This meta-analysis reinforces the efficacy of using MBIs for improving the mental health and wellbeing of youth when using the gold standard RCT methodology.