

## **Transcript: Supporting the Mental Health and Well-Being of Students with LDs through Integra Mindfulness Martial Arts (Part I)**

[Music]

[Narrator:] This isn't what one normally envisions when they think of a children's mental health centre. Students' muscles ache with fatigue as they hold difficult yoga poses. They clear their minds of the busy city in which they live through guided meditation...all on floors lined with exercise mats, helpful for softening the fall of students as they practice jiu jitsu grappling.

This is a typical mindfulness martial arts class, also known as MMA, for students with the Integra Program at the Child Development Institute, an accredited children's mental health agency. Some students are aware, but many are not -- MMA was created by Integra to reach the students who won't come in for counselling.

[Trish McKeough:] A major coping strategy that they use, one that causes a lot of problems for them is avoiding. So, avoiding homework, avoiding school, avoiding doing the dishes, and certainly avoiding coming to talk to a counsellor.

[Narrator:] Increasingly, mindfulness practice has been introduced into educational settings. Through the Integra program's research partnerships with Ryerson, McMaster, the University of Toronto, and the studies done by Dr. Karen Milligan, there is evidence of its effectiveness. It has been shown to improve students' self-awareness, self-regulation and executive function. One example of such a program in Ontario is Integra MMA.

They think they're just practicing to be a warrior, but these students are learning to regulate their emotions too.

[Ben:] It's a way to go and just immediately calm and take all your energy that's been stored up. It's a good place to forget about it and work out, meditate and do yoga.

[Trish:] It's really about better emotion regulation. So, you know, noticing and managing difficult thoughts, feelings, so that we don't end up doing things that get ourselves in trouble.

[Jack Manchester:] With increased awareness of what your thoughts and feelings are, you become much more effective at noticing how those are affecting your behaviours.

[Narrator:] Integra MMA instructors welcome students to the dojo, a term to describe the martial arts training place. All students in this class have learning disabilities and a concurrent mental health concern such as anxiety, depression or disruptive behaviour.



[Trish:] So we get the kids who can be great martial artists when we accommodate their learning disabilities.

[David Jurasek:] There have been kids who you think 'these kids...you know...they can't handle anything.' They can't sit in the classroom, they can't -- drive their parents crazy, you can't even talk to them. Kind of everybody gives up on them, and we don't even know if they're going to buy into any of this. When they end up sticking around, it's really amazing.

I think there's this incredible paradox. We have kids who cannot sit still, cannot focus at school, can't get themselves organized, you know, can't make friends - like, there's all of these barriers and limitations, and we're asking them to sit and meditate.

[Narrator:] But despite these barriers, the students in this room are focused, in control of their emotions, and confident in their ability to overcome any challenges that come their way.

On any given day, you'll witness students engaging in a mindful moment or mindful self-talk. These have proven to be dependable strategies to help students cope with stressful or uncomfortable situations.

[Andrew:] A mindful moment is sort of like a mini meditation, it's where you let everything go of the outside world, and you just be with your own thoughts and your feelings. There's this kid who would bully me a lot, he would say mean things about me. One day he got particularly angsty towards me, he started going on about my mom, and how her leg -- my mom is missing a leg, and he would call her one leg, and that would really get on my nerves, and he started saying that all the time. And I would say I would use my mindful moment, just be with it, just go with the flow, just notice and go "hm - he's annoying me", and then just ignore him, just plop that somewhere where I would not notice it.

[Trish:] We also teach them something called "mindful self talks". We have the mindful self talks all over our dojo, there are things like you know, "this will pass", "everything changes", or you know, "let it go", "just do it", "I'm gonna fake it till I make it."

[Trish:] Whether you feel like you didn't do as well as you'd like to do, whether you got mounted, or you got your back taken, let it go.

[Narrator:] Through the Integra MMA program, they've learned about awareness and acceptance, which, over time, has helped improve their emotional regulation.

[Ben:] I know that I'm in control, I used to have a lot of trouble being in control, but now I'm in control 99.9% of the time. Last year, I was feeling very depressed so I used the stuff from MMA plus the stuff my psychiatrist told me. I used my breathing, I used a couple of mindful moments, I did some meditation, and it did help, it helped calm me in that moment. It wasn't a long term thing, but it was short term, I needed short term in that time.



[Trish:] School can be so challenging as we know for kids with LDs and so we give them a way to cope with that so they don't just have to run from it, so they can actually -- "Oh, I'm frustrated in math class, I can notice I'm frustrated, I don't even need to change that, but I can still do math, even though I'm upset."

[Jack:] So the frustration, the avoidance, the self-doubt, the low-confidence, those are things that really can be usefully addressed.

[Narrator:] Students are taught terms such as "Fight, flight or freeze" to describe their feelings.

[Trish:] If I'm in flight, I run away.

One of the main concepts of the program we look at is learning to notice when we're sort of in "fight, flight or freeze." What am I arguing, or avoiding or getting stuck on the same ideas over and over again? So we just very systematically teach youth, you know, notice when you're in "fight, flight or freeze", do a mindful moment, give yourself a mindful self-talk, and then you can do something to make the situation better.

[Ben:] When I was in "fight, flight or freeze", I would freak out, lose all control. I've jumped out of cars before, tried to runaway, tried to commit suicide a couple of times. But ever since MMA, I - like it's gone down at a decreased rate.

[Narrator:] They learn to become aware of their emotions, and then regardless of whether they're happy, sad, angry or frustrated, to accept those feelings.

[Trish:] Be on the lookout for "fight, flight or freeze." Use your breath to help you stay anchored, so you can use the skills that you've been training.

[Andrew:] I used to be one of those people who would get into fights a lot and get suspended and I used to procrastinate with my homework all the time, and I just used to blank out on tests all the time, I found school very hard. And sometimes they do happen, but I catch most of them before they happen now. I'm able to control my fight, flight and freeze, and whenever that happens I just go into be, and I just realize that I'm in fight flight and freeze.

[Narrator:] While it is not your traditional form of counselling, research provides evidence to support the benefits of MMA.

[Trish:] We had a matched waitlist controlled study where they compared kids who did the program with kids who received no treatment while on a waitlist. And that one found that kids who had ADHD, they improved in their focus, and their ability to sort of inhibit behaviours. And kids who had anxiety, we saw that their anxiety decreased significantly. And so what was cool about that study was that we found that we could put kids together who had different things going on, so kids with



LDs, kids with anxiety, kids with ADHD, kids with depression. And they each got what they needed from the program you know, depending on what you were struggling with, you had a different benefit from receiving the same program. The latest research that we've been doing is in progress. We've decided to shift from measuring you know, "how's your anxiety, your focus, your behaviour, your thinking?" to now -- we're actually looking at biological changes. So kids are getting EEGs done to look at brain activity, and they're getting heart rate variability tests done, and you know the date is not officially out yet, but we're seeing some really promising things that after doing the program for you know 20 weeks, a year, that you're actually seeing changes occurring in the brain.

[Narrator:] The journey to where these students are today wasn't easy. They faced and continue to face difficulties in class every day. But by overcoming difficulties in class, these students also develop strategies to overcome difficulties in life too.

[Student:] So make sure you stay facing the -- that's it, yeah! That's what I'm talking about. Yeah!  
(talking)

[Trish:] They keep coming back and telling me the different ways they've applied the skill. 'Oh, I didn't shove my little brother this week' or you know, 'my girlfriend broke up with me and I'm really devastated but I'm still going to school.' Or you know, 'I forgot my Iphone on the bus and I was all freaked out and I didn't know how to get home but I was able to sort of calm down and work it out.'

[Andrew:] Whenever I have a test, I just do a mindful moment and I just be with it, and sometimes a skillful mean will come, sometimes, not all the time and I'm okay with that.

[Trish:] We do our best to really make the links between you know - here's this martial arts technique, and you know, here is a way that this skill can be used in the rest of your life.

[David:] It just happens very slowly, it sort of seeps into their bones, that they start to feel more confident, more powerful, calm.

[Narrator:] Through the Integra MMA program, students with learning disabilities develop sustainable strategies for long-term success no matter where life takes them.

[David:] One of the things that's most important to me is helping kids to feel that they are powerful, you know, that they can affect the world and they can affect themselves. Because a lot of the times I feel like I think they feel disempowered by circumstance around them. I want them to feel free. I want them to feel like they have choices, they have options, they can deal with reality and not feel trapped.

[Andrew:] I feel happy, I feel like I'm actually doing something now I used to - just all about be fun, if something would be boring I wouldn't like it, and now I find I have something in my life I can proud of.



[David:] These students - it's amazing how much effort they put into it, and how they stick with something that's so difficult, it just blows my mind sometimes.

[Narrator:] For more information on supporting students with learning disabilities through Integra Mindfulness Martial Arts, visit [www.LDatSchool.ca](http://www.LDatSchool.ca). Additionally, you can contact Trish McKeough at the Integra Program of the Child Development Institute directly.

