

CHAPTER 1



Building Inner Preparedness

In downtown Manhattan on the morning of September 11, 2001, nobody could have predicted that within hours more than five thousand schoolchildren and two hundred teachers would be running for their lives. It was only the sixth day of school, and most classrooms were already well into their morning routines: unpacking book bags, saying hello to friends. In fact, when the first loud crash occurred, the sound didn't even seem that unfamiliar for New York City on a busy fall morning. Most teachers went on with their morning routines. Then there was the second sound that shook most of the buildings nearby and reverberated for blocks. And some saw what was happening right outside their classroom window. Principals and teachers started to get fragmented information as to what was happening. They soon realized that they were caught in the middle of an unimaginable event as thousands of children were anxiously looking to them to make sense out of what was happening.

Somehow the adults in charge knew that the only way they were going to be able to make the right decisions was to stay calm and help their children do the same. Most schools gathered their children in the gyms or cafeterias. They passed out crayons and paper to students who began to draw pictures of what they had already seen before the shades were drawn. They were drawing pictures of the

twin towers with what they thought were birds and butterflies falling from the windows.

The adults had so little to go on in terms of what to do. Their supervisors were advising them to do various things before all communication was cut off. But those supervisors were more than a mile away and really couldn't imagine what these teachers and principals were seeing firsthand. In the midst of profound uncertainty and danger, these adults had to make the ultimate decision of their careers as educators: saving the children would have to mean evacuating the school and running to safety.

Once they got outside, many were engulfed in a black cloud of dust as children walked and ran hand-in-hand, with some teachers leading them in familiar chants and rhymes to take the children's minds off what they were seeing and hearing. Many of the women teachers took off their high heels in order to run faster. As one third-grade teacher said: "The two eight-year-olds who were holding my hands ran as fast as I could. I'm not sure what kept me going as I hurtled forward in that river of running. . . . I would remember a day or two later that a child said to me, 'Look! Even the dogs are scared.'"

Miraculously, though debris fell around them and confusion reigned, not a single student or teacher's life was lost. In that moment, the adults in children's lives accessed the inner wisdom, courage, and calm it took to successfully evacuate whole schools of young children safely. Children who saw unspeakable sights somehow managed to persevere on their long march to safety that day and, grappling to make meaning out of disaster, imagined that bodies falling from the twin towers were birds in flight.¹

What got these remarkable adults and children through that day was not how well those children had performed on the last standardized test they took. That day, facing the deepest tests of life, the question of academic preparedness took a backseat to the question of inner preparedness. Somehow enough principals, teachers, and students had the inner resources to connect to their deeper wisdom. In

the midst of the devastation around them, they were able to remain calm and balanced. It was from such an internal state of relaxed alertness that they were able to make the right decisions that would lead them all to safety.

Having been in Manhattan on that day and being among those who came to support the teachers and students of Ground Zero, I had some profound realizations. I became more deeply aware that the real tests of life can come a child's way at any moment, and that we as adults cannot protect our children from circumstances beyond our control. The question instead has become how to equip children with the inner strength they need to meet both the intense challenges and the great opportunities that come their way. Can we, in fact, cultivate the "ways of being" that helped both students and teachers at Ground Zero maintain calm and balance in the midst of such profound uncertainty and unknowing?

While certainly it could be argued that the teachers and children that day exhibited the inner resources they needed, what would it take to refill the well from which they had drawn so deeply? As the modern stresses of today's childhood accumulate in children, how can we cultivate the habits of mind, body, and heart it will take to continually relieve the pressure?

As children in the schools at Ground Zero reflected on their year in late June 2002, one young boy in an elementary school a block from the former World Trade Center looked at his teacher straight in the eye and said, "I'll never forget that on that day you held my hand, and you didn't let go." Those of us who are raising our children have to remember how important it is to nurture our own inner lives so that we can offer our children the kinds of support they need to develop their inner strength. We must not let go until we have helped our children feel that inner security.

WHAT THIS GUIDE IS ABOUT

Since September 11, 2001, I have been involved in equipping thousands of children and adults with the skills and strategies that help them quiet their minds, calm their bodies, and identify and manage

their emotions more effectively. As founder and director of the Inner Resilience Program (formerly Project Renewal), I have seen that the capacity to be more in control of one's thoughts, emotions, and physiology can form a sort of internal armor that gives children the inner preparedness they need to face the challenges and opportunities of life.

This book offers some practical ideas and strategies for both you and the children in your care to develop the ability to appreciate silence and stillness by taking regular moments of quiet time together, and to become more skillful in managing stress. It presents an opportunity for you to give your family a scheduled time to bring balance, replenishment, and calmness into your lives. Patrice Thomas, in her book *The Power of Relaxation*, writes about a designated quiet time with children as "heart and soul time."² You can decide what you want to call it and even involve children in choosing a name.

The important point is that you are deciding to have this regular "heart and soul time" as a part of your family's routine. Secondly, in using the CD and accompanying material, you are providing the opportunity to develop some concrete skills in cultivating both your and your child's inner strength and emotional intelligence.

Depending on the age of your child (or children), this journey will be different. Young children, for example, still have a great capacity to access the inner dimensions you will explore here. They still have the ability to see beneath the surface of things. They are full of wonder and awe and can play creatively. Sometimes they can sense things that adults often take time to perceive or know. For example, young children are able to make quick intuitive decisions about whom they will be friendly with. However, when this aspect of a child is not affirmed and noticed, it becomes hidden and repressed. As a result, young children can lose touch with a part of themselves that is already quite well developed.

Sadly, as children move through their childhood, they often receive messages—spoken and unspoken—that the extraordinary experiences of their inner lives are not honored as part of their reality. They

begin to think that they can't possibly know something intuitively or have deep compassion for someone, because they just aren't old enough. As children grow up, the more repressed, forgotten, and locked within themselves the awareness of their inner life becomes. Adolescence offers an opportunity to reopen this line of inquiry, yet young people at this stage are usually met by the adult tendency to ignore or trivialize transcendental experiences. What complicates matters is that few of us have experienced being nurtured in these ways ourselves. If we hope to be a part of cultivating this approach with our children, we will each need to find positive models and experiences that can show us how to live in a more integrated way.

We suggest that you start doing this kind of work with children as young as five years old. Children this age are looking for cues from parents about what is safe to explore and what is not. Doing these exercises with children of any age gives them a clear message that we value and recognize their inner capacities. And it is important to do them regularly to get the benefits that they can provide. The goal is to bring stillness and balance, through the use of these techniques, to every aspect of your life and your child's life. Although this book talks about parents taking the lead in teaching these skills to children at home, teachers also can offer these strategies in the classroom setting. All of the suggestions and approaches in this book are equally applicable and adaptable to both the home and school environment.

I have chosen to focus on two techniques in this book and CD for building inner resilience and enhancing emotional intelligence in children:

1. Relaxing the body (through progressive muscle relaxation and a body scan exercise)
2. Focusing the mind (through a mindfulness exercise)

This chapter describes some of the benefits of teaching children to have a regular practice of stillness, and it includes a review of some of the research that informs the work.

Chapter 2 provides some guiding principles, and it focuses on the role of the adult in creating the welcoming learning environment necessary for this work to flourish.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 are separate chapters for each of the following age groups: ages five to seven, eight to eleven, and twelve years and up. Each chapter includes exercises, tailored to the proper age group, to do both before and after listening to the CD. The CD itself offers a guided contemplative practice, led by Daniel Goleman, appropriate for the age of your child.

Finally, Chapter 6 summarizes some of the steps that can be taken to ensure the long-term sustainability of these efforts on behalf of children.

The ideas and strategies presented here are not meant to be the solution to the various educational, behavioral, and health concerns children face. However, it is helpful for children and adults to have inner mechanisms available that reduce the body's stress reaction itself. Some of these benefits for both you and the children in your care include:

- Increased self-awareness and self-understanding
- Greater ability to relax the body and release physical tension
- Improved concentration and ability to pay attention, which is critical to learning
- The ability to deal with stressful situations more effectively by creating a more relaxed way of responding to stressors
- Greater control over your thoughts, with less domination by unwelcome thoughts
- Greater opportunity for deeper communication and understanding between parent and child, because you are sharing your thoughts and feelings on a regular basis

As you begin this journey of taking a regular quiet time with each of your children, we hope there will be benefits to you as well. You are likely to develop a heightened level of self-awareness and have a deeper understanding of who your child is. As you take these set

times to be fully present with your child in a very different way than you have before, you may find that you are able to bring a new level of present-moment awareness to other parts of your day. I hope it will help you become more available to yourself and your children in general so that you, too, can cope more successfully with life's stressors and enjoy the heart and soul of parenting.

WHAT THE RESEARCH HAS TO SAY ABOUT TEACHING CALMING EXERCISES TO REDUCE STRESS AND ENHANCE WELL-BEING

The severity of unmanaged stress in our society is evident. It is estimated that 70 to 90 percent of all doctor visits in the United States today are for stress-related disorders.³ In a ten-year study, people who were unable to manage stress effectively were shown to have a death rate 40 percent higher than that of nonstressed individuals.⁴ Our society is bent on quick fixes when life challenges come our way. We medicate ourselves and our children. Americans consume five billion tranquilizers every year in an effort to control their stress.⁵

Children's lives are much more stressful today as well. When adults live at a hurried, frenetic pace, their children are at the receiving end. Our society itself, in the United States, has changed in many ways that increase pressure on children and compromise their childhood. Many parents are working longer hours and are allowing work to intrude on their lives anywhere and everywhere. As a result, more children are spending substantial amounts of time with multiple caregivers. There is a constant push for children to achieve at academic skills earlier, and so school becomes a big source of stress in their lives.

Too many young people today are experiencing mental health and adjustment difficulties, and our society doesn't spend the resources to provide appropriate help and attention. It is estimated that one out of five nine- to seventeen-year-olds has a diagnosable mental disorder.⁶ The fact is that an increasing number of children are entering schools in crisis, unprepared cognitively and emotionally to learn. At the same time, educators confront the challenge of higher public

expectations while dealing with diminishing internal resources to do their jobs well.

We often mistake the symptoms of unmanaged stress in our children as inappropriate behavior that needs to be stopped. 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.

A poll conducted by the national Kids Poll surveyed 875 children, ages nine through thirteen, about what caused them stress and what coping strategies they used the most to deal with the stress in their lives. The top three sources of stress that they reported were grades, school, and homework (36 percent); family (32 percent); and friends, peers, gossip, and teasing (21 percent). The top three coping strategies were to play or do something active (52 percent); to listen to music (44 percent); and to watch TV or play a video game (42 percent). Of the ten coping strategies that were chosen the most, not one involved going within or being contemplative, such as the strategies we will explore in this book. The good news, however, is that 75 percent of those surveyed reported the need for their parents to spend time with them when they are going through a difficult time.⁷ This may help as you approach your child in trying out some of these techniques. These strategies will not only help manage their stress better, but also provide them with some quality time with you.

Our experience as children was vastly different from the world our children face. Today's world includes all kinds of stressors that didn't even exist when we were growing up. As an elementary teacher during the 1970s and later as an administrator in New York City Schools, I started to notice that young people's social and emotional development seemed to be on a serious decline. I was seeing children coming to school more aggressive, more disobedient, more impulsive, more sad, more lonely. In fact, psychologist Thomas Achenbach, from the University of Vermont, confirmed my observations. His groundbreaking study of thousands of American children, first in the mid-1970s and then again in the late 1980s, proved this to be true. America's

children—from the poorest to the most affluent—displayed a decline across the board in their scores on over forty measures designed to reflect a variety of emotional and social capacities.⁸

The dominant paradigm in response to this decline in children's social and emotional capacities focused on trying to identify the risk factors that caused this antisocial behavior. There were almost two decades of school-based "prevention wars," like the "war on drugs," to help reduce the negative behavior. In the last two decades we have witnessed a healthy paradigm shift. Researchers and practitioners are studying the concept of resilience—the innate ability we all have to self-correct and thrive in the face of life's challenges. Bonnie Bernard, a pioneer in the field of strength-based approaches, has helped us take a look at how young people's strengths and capabilities can be developed in order to protect them from the potential harm that these circumstances represent.⁹ This body of research has direct relevance as we think about cultivating inner strength in children through giving them a regular practice of quieting their minds and calming their bodies.

The resilience-building research also points to one of the most important protective factors a child can have: the presence of at least one caring and supportive adult (ideally several) who believes in the worth of the child. Children need the adults in their lives to be steady anchors who never give up on them. They also need to learn concrete social and emotional skills, taught both in the home and at school, and they need lots of opportunities to practice those skills so that they become available whenever the child needs to use them. The materials in this book strengthen all three of the above conditions.

What do we know specifically about the benefits of systematically teaching adults and children to relax their bodies and focus their minds as a way of building resilience? Hundreds of studies have been published, some in peer-reviewed journals, of the benefits (in particular) of the calming technique called Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) through the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn, who founded

the Stress Reduction Program at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Kabat-Zinn first studied the use of mindfulness technique with adult patients suffering from chronic pain. He found that patients not only reported a decrease of pain, but also that their blood pressure decreased, and they reported an increased sense of well-being. Today, forms of MBSR are being used in more than two hundred medical centers around the country, for treating not only chronic pain but also cardiovascular disease and the effects of cancer therapy.¹⁰

Kabat-Zinn also conducted a study with psoriasis patients and found that those who were taught a mindfulness meditation practice healed four times faster than the control group. In 2001, Kabat-Zinn studied people who did not have a major medical problem but certainly had their share of the everyday stresses of life. In this study, the volunteers were randomly assigned to either the control or treatment group. The treatment group was taught and asked to practice exercises that included the two calming strategies presented in this book and CD: mindfulness meditation and body scans. The intervention also included yoga. After three months, the group who practiced these calming strategies regularly showed a 46 percent decrease in medical symptoms such as colds, headaches, etc.; a 44 percent decrease in psychological distress; and a 24 percent reduction in the stress response to everyday hassles. The control group showed no significant change in their levels of stress.¹¹

Dr. Richard Davidson, professor of psychology and psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, has also been adding to the research about the benefits of teaching these calming strategies to adults. Through various studies he has conducted over the years on the effects of meditation, we now know that these strategies increase the gray matter in the brain, improve the immune system, reduce stress, and promote a sense of well-being. A more recent study conducted by Dr. Davidson attempted to examine how meditation affects attention. Since meditation can be thought of as a kind of mental training of attention, he decided to examine whether meditation could have a significant impact on performance requiring attentional abilities. He found out that attention seems to be a flexible, trainable

skill. Those participants who had three months of intensive meditation experience were able to do better on a test of attention called the attentional blink. He decided to use the attentional blink to explore the connection of meditation to attention because it was considered to be a fixed property of the nervous system. However, Dr. Davidson's beginning research points to the idea that attention can improve with practice. This new discovery may have some profound implications for children and learning.¹²

Until a short time ago, most of the research into the effects of these kinds of practices has been conducted on adults. More rigorous scientific research began in approximately 2006—using measurable data that could produce reproducible results—on the effects of these calming techniques on children. Today several studies are under way throughout the United States and Canada. The Inner Resilience Program, which I founded and direct, is one such research effort. Through the services of Metis Associates, Inc., we are conducting original empirical research using an experimental design that will examine the impact our services have on a select group of New York City teachers, students, and classrooms. Sixty participants are in the study—half in the treatment group and half in the control group. As part of our intervention, teachers are exposed to the calming techniques included in this book, and then they are taught how to teach these skills to their students using our curriculum, “Building Resilience from the Inside Out—Grades K-12.”

Several of us who are embarking on this more rigorous scientific research are encouraged by preliminary anecdotal findings. Many of us who have been teaching these skills to children have been heartened by some of the changes we've noticed. For example, Kimberly Schonert-Reichl, from the University of Columbia in Canada, observed that children who were taught a mindfulness technique similar to the one in this book were “less aggressive; less oppositional toward teachers; more attentive in class; and reported more positive emotions including more optimism.” Susan Smalley, director of the

Mindfulness Awareness Research Center at UCLA, also found positive results from teaching these techniques to teenagers with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). She found that learning mindfulness techniques reduced their anxiety and increased their ability to focus. Several other, more rigorous, scientific studies are under way. In the meantime, many of us are continuing to experience firsthand the benefits this kind of approach can have for children.¹³

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES¹⁴

A growing body of research suggests that helping children develop good social and emotional skills early in life makes a big difference in their long-term health and well-being. Studies have shown that children's social and emotional functioning and behavior begin to stabilize around the age of eight, and can predict the state of their behavior and mental health later in life.¹⁵ In other words, if children learn to express emotions constructively and engage in caring and respectful relationships before and while they are in the lower elementary grades, they are more likely to avoid depression, violence, and other serious mental health problems as they grow older.

Daniel Goleman, who guides us in the calming practices on the CD that accompanies this book, has contributed much to our thinking about the need to nurture the social and emotional lives of children. Today there are hundreds of efforts all over the world to teach children social and emotional skills as part of their school curriculum.

In his groundbreaking book *Emotional Intelligence* (published in 1995), Goleman summarized the research from the fields of neuroscience and cognitive psychology that identified EQ—emotional intelligence—as being as important as IQ in terms of children's healthy development and future life success. He wrote:

One of psychology's open secrets is the relative inability of grades, IQ, or SAT scores, despite their popular mystiques, to predict unerringly who will succeed in life. . . . There are widespread exceptions to the rule that IQ predicts success—many (or

more) exceptions than cases that fit the rule. At best, IQ contributes about 20 percent to the factors that determine life success, which leaves 80 percent to other forces.¹⁶

Goleman's work helped educators, including myself, understand the importance of emotional intelligence as a basic requirement for the effective use of one's IQ—that is, one's cognitive skills and knowledge. He made the connection between our feelings and our thinking more explicit by pointing out how the brain's emotional and executive areas are interconnected physiologically, especially as these areas relate to teaching and learning. The prefrontal lobes of the brain, which control emotional impulses, are also where working memory resides and where all learning takes place.

Educators and parents alike are now much more aware that when chronic anxiety, anger, or upset feelings intrude on children's thoughts, less capacity is available in working memory to process what they are trying to learn. This implies that, at least in part, academic success depends on a student's ability to maintain positive social interactions. Schools across the country today are systematically helping children strengthen their EQs by equipping them with concrete skills for identifying and managing their emotions, communicating effectively, and resolving conflicts nonviolently. These skills help children to make good decisions, to be more empathetic, and to be optimistic in the face of setbacks.

The hopeful news is that schools and parents, working together, can play pivotal roles in supporting children's healthy development in dealing with their emotions and in their relationships with others. This is referred to as *social and emotional learning* (SEL) because these are indeed skills that can be learned and mastered, every bit as much as language or mathematics or reading can be. Furthermore, teaching academic skills and social and emotional skills is not an either/or proposition. In fact, there is a great deal of research evidence to indicate that students perform better when academics are combined with SEL.¹⁷

What are these crucial skills? In 1995, Daniel Goleman, Eileen Rockefeller Growald, Timothy Shriver, myself, and others founded the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, an organization that focuses on the use of SEL as an essential part of education. CASEL lists five basic sets of skills, or competencies, which can be systematically cultivated both at home and at school, that make up emotional intelligence.¹⁸

- **Self-Awareness:** Identifying your thoughts, feelings, and strengths, and recognizing how they influence choices and actions
- **Social Awareness:** Identifying and understanding the thoughts and feelings of others, developing empathy, and being able to take the perspective of others
- **Self-Management:** Handling emotions so that they facilitate rather than interfere with the task at hand; setting long- and short-term goals; and dealing with obstacles that may come your way
- **Responsible Decision Making:** Generating, implementing, and evaluating positive and informed solutions to problems, and considering the long-term consequences of your actions for yourself and others
- **Relationship Skills:** Saying no to negative peer pressure and working to resolve conflicts in order to maintain healthy and rewarding connections with individuals and groups

When social and emotional skills are taught and mastered, they help children succeed not just in school, but in all avenues of life. Numerous studies have found that young people who possess these social and emotional skills are in fact happier, more confident, and more capable as students, family members, friends, and workers.¹⁹ At the same time, they are far less prone to drug or alcohol abuse, depression, or violence.

When parents and children practice and use the skills at home, the effects are doubly beneficial. Not only are young people better able to acquire the skills, but also relationships within the family tend to

improve when family members listen to each other openly and solve problems together. Children also come to appreciate the fact that learning is a lifelong process, not something that stops when they leave school. Social and emotional learning is like an insurance policy for a healthy, positive, successful life.