SOCIAL EMOTIONAL HEALTH LESSONS

Elementary

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What is Social Emotional Health?

Social emotional health is the ability to manage one's emotions, reactions and relationships.

Children with strong social emotional health demonstrate self-control, communicate well, problem solve, are empathetic, respectful, grateful, gritty and optimistic — traits we admire in the people with whom we want to work and maintain friendships.

The four lessons included here will help children learn about important social emotional health skills such as understanding their brain, identifying feelings and building their own strengths.

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1. PARTS OF THE BRAIN

Description

This lesson teaches students three important parts of the brain and their function.

Objectives

1. Students will learn that their amygdala controls their emotions.

2. Students will learn that their prefrontal cortex helps them make good choices.

3. Students will learn that their hippocampus helps them remember the things that they learn.

4. Students will understand that they control their brain.

It's important to learn this because...

Your brain is the most important part of your body and controls everything that you do.

Vocabulary

Brain
Amygdala
Hippocampus
Prefrontal Cortex

Materials Needed

Parts of the Brain image (page 4)

Parts of the Brain worksheet (page 5)

The Lesson

It is important to teach children about their brains because it gives them a sense of control over their own reactions and behaviors. Young children love to learn about themselves and have a keen interest in how their bodies function. You may be surprised at just how readily children learn this complex information when it is presented in age-appropriate ways.

Explain to students that you'll be talking about their brain.

You may wish to say:

The brain is the most important part of the body! It controls the way our body moves, the thoughts we have, and the feelings we experience.

There are three important parts of the brain that students can understand fairly simply. You may wish to spread this information out into several lessons throughout the day, or one each day.

The first part of the brain to teach is the amygdala. The amygdala is the primitive part of the brain that regulates our emotions and behaviors. Its job is to keep us safe. The amygdala is responsible for the fight, flight or freeze response. This response can prevent clear and reasonable thinking, blocking information from the prefrontal cortex, the reasoning center of the brain.

You may wish to say:

The amygdala is the part of the brain that lets us feel emotions. Emotions are our feelings – like happy, sad, excited, scared or frustrated. The amygdala keeps you safe because it tells you when you are in danger or too excited. But sometimes our amygdalas go a little crazy! When we feel too angry, too scared, or too excited, we can't think clearly or learn new things, and we have to get our amygdala to settle down and be calm.

The next part of the brain to teach is the hippocampus. The hippocampus is the processing and storage part of our brain where information and memories are contained for later use. It works with the amygdala to deal with our responses to fear and perceived threat. The hippocampus recalls previously successful survival strategies.

Teach students about the hippocampus by explaining that it stores our memories.

You may wish to say:

Can anyone tell me what they had for breakfast this morning? Does anyone know their address? Does anyone know what 3+5 is? You remember lots of things! You use an important part of your brain to remember things. It's called the hippocampus. That's such

a funny word! Does it remind you of any other words? It's kind of like hippopotamus. Could a hippopotamus fit inside your head? No way! It's way too big! Your hippocampus is small. Here's where it is in our brain picture. (Show image of The Amazing Brain.) What does the hippocampus do again? That's right! It helps us remember things. You used your hippocampus to remember that!

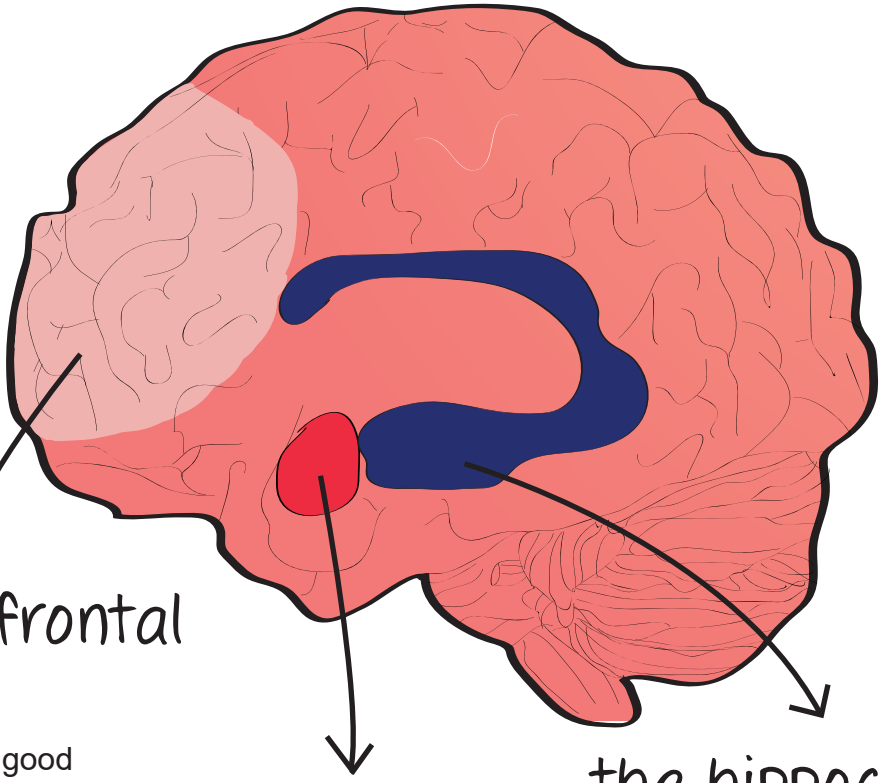
The third part of the brain to teach students is the prefrontal cortex. The prefrontal cortex is the learning, reasoning and thinking part of the brain that controls the decision-making process and supports other executive brain functions. This is the last section of the brain to develop completely, and is under construction until the mid-20's.

You may wish to say:

The prefrontal cortex is the part of the brain that helps us think clearly and make good choices. It helps us to learn at school. Let's think of times that we might use our prefrontal cortex to make a good decision. Everyone imagine that you're walking on the sidewalk and up ahead you see a sign that says, "Sidewalk closed". You have two choices. You can walk in the grass around the sidewalk, or you can cross the street. Your prefrontal cortex looks at the two choices and makes a decision! Let's think of one more example. You're working on a worksheet and you can't figure out a question. You have a few choices. Raise your hand if you can name one of the choices you could make in this situation. (Solicit responses such as: ask for help, skip the question and come back to it, etc.) Your prefrontal cortex helps you think about all of these big decisions and helps you make the best choice!

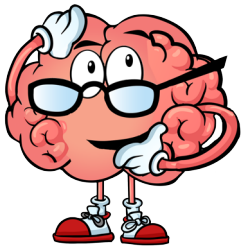
Use the terms amygdala, hippocampus and prefrontal cortex frequently with students to help them identify parts of their brain. When a student recalls something from an earlier lesson, point out that he used his hippocampus. When a student makes a choice, tell her that she used her prefrontal cortex. When a student is experiencing a big emotion, let him know that his amygdala is in charge and provide him with opportunities to calm down so that he can use his prefrontal cortex.

Parts of the Brain



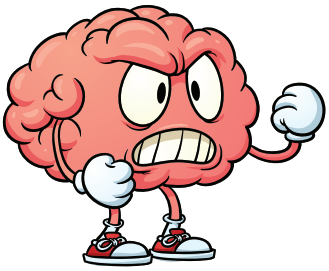
the prefrontal cortex

helps us make good choices, pay attention and learn.



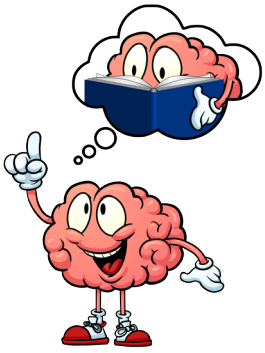
the amygdala

helps keep us safe. It is where all of our emotions come from. But sometimes, if we have strong emotions, it keeps us from thinking clearly.



the hippocampus

helps us remember what we learn and stores our memories.



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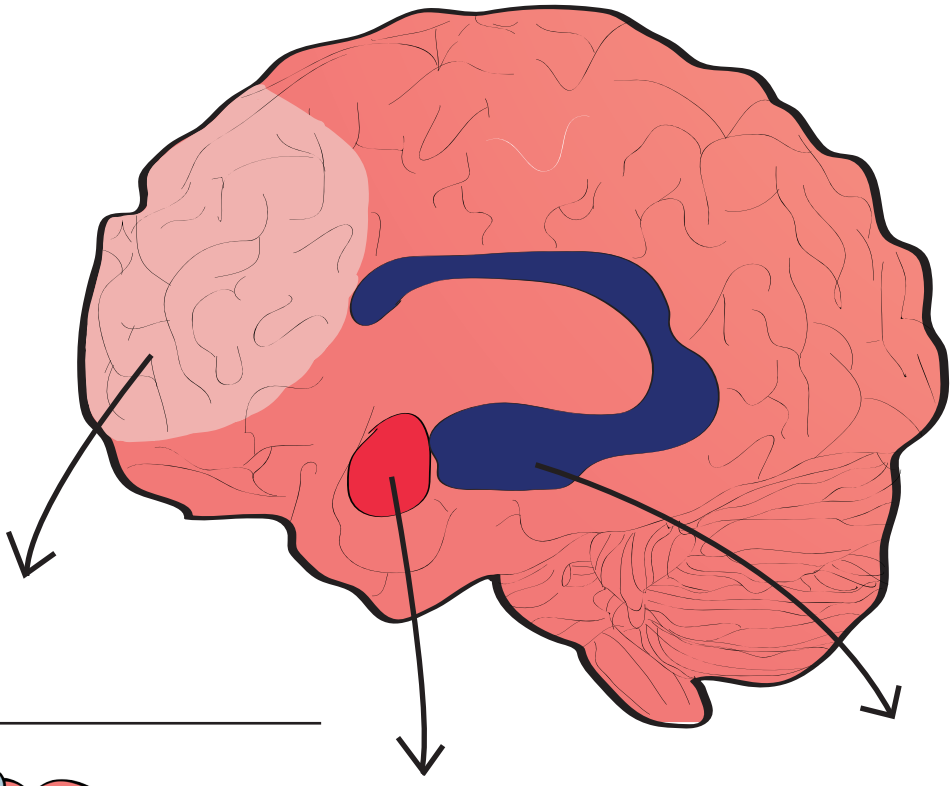
Parts of the Brain



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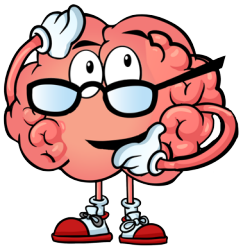

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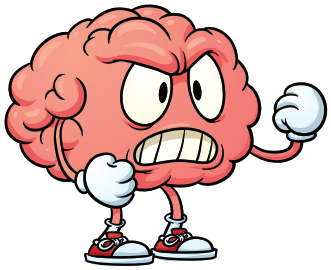

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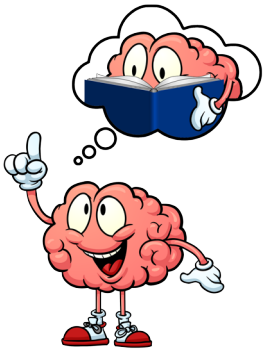


2. BRAIN CITY

Description

This lesson teaches students that abilities can stretch and grow throughout our lives.

Objectives

1. Students will understand that the more they work at something, the better they get.

2. Students will learn that they have inherent strengths.

3. Students will learn that they have tools to help themselves grow.

It's important to learn this because...

Children who believe that their brains can grow are more likely to work hard to improve themselves.

Materials Needed

Brain City Template (page 8)

The Lesson

Explain to students that our brains stretch and grow throughout our whole lives. The more we work at things, the stronger our brain gets at doing those things. Tell them that the brain is like a city. There are small buildings and skyscrapers. Skyscrapers are like the things we're good at – we have really tall buildings. Some of the smaller buildings are things that we're not as good at… yet! But the more we work at it, the more we can grow those buildings.

Tell the students that they will make their own brain city. They should draw tall skyscrapers for the things they are good at, and smaller buildings for the areas that they think they need improvement.

Next, explain that the amazing thing about the brain is that it is constantly changing and growing.

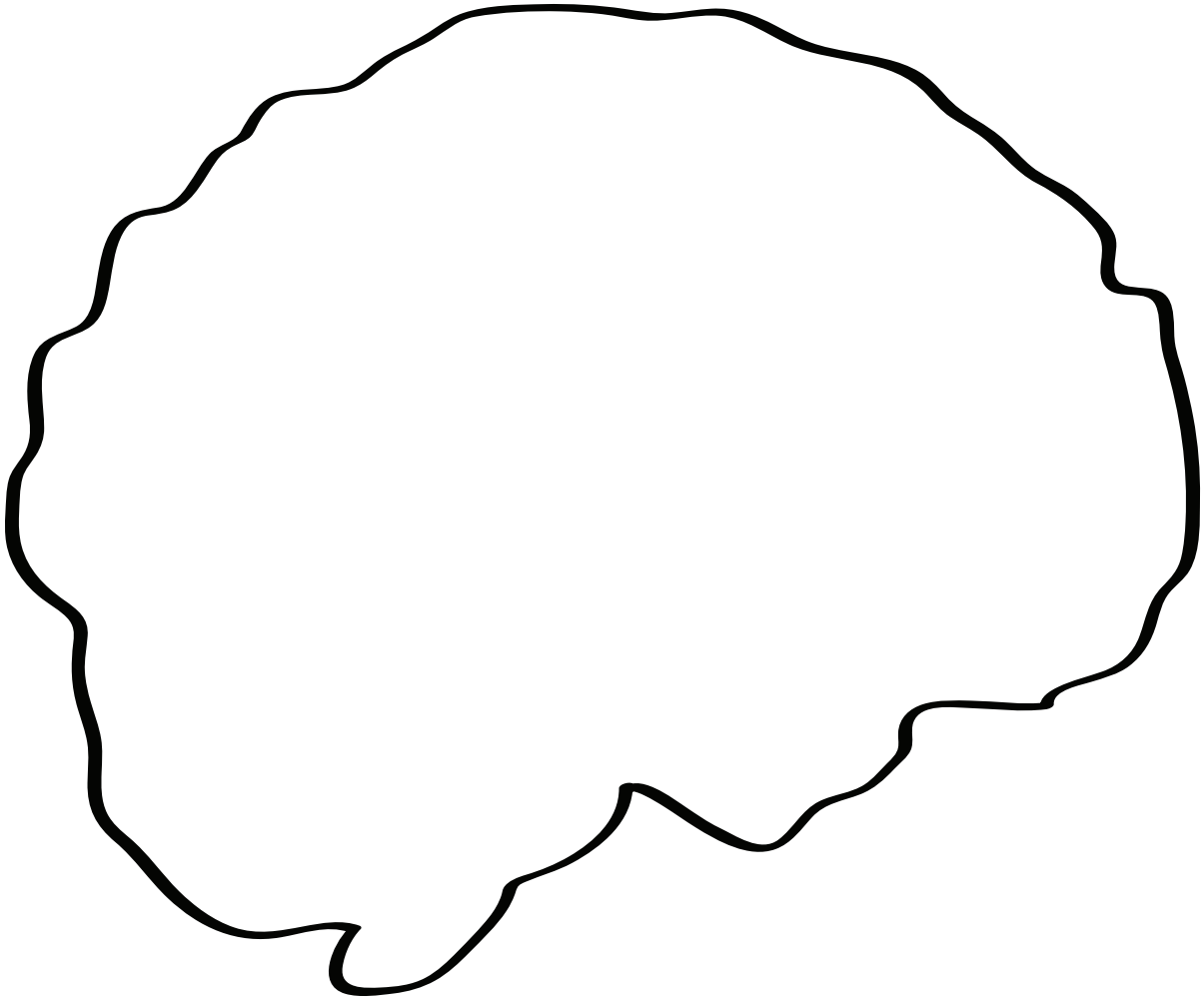
You may wish to say:

The brain is so amazing! It changes and grows throughout our whole lives. Even if we live to be 110 years old, it will never stop growing! Now that we have our brain city, think of yourself as an architect. In order to grow some of the smaller buildings, we need tools – and those tools are called practice! If we practice, we can stretch our brain and grow some of the smaller buildings.

Have students name one way that they can make a small building into a skyscraper.

Name: _____

My Brain City!



I can build my brain city! Here's one way I can make a small building into a skyscraper:

3. FEELINGS THERMOMETER

Description

This lesson teaches students that feelings are a normal part of being human and that emotions can change.

Objectives

1. Students will understand that we all experience different feelings.

2. Students will learn that feelings can change.

3. Students will learn that they are in control of their feelings.

It's important to learn this because...

Knowing that feelings change can help us handle big feelings.

Vocabulary

Feelings
Emotions

Materials Needed

Thermometer, or picture of a thermometer (optional)
Feelings thermometer handout (page 11)

The Lesson

Sometimes children feel really, really happy, or really, really sad. When they're stuck in those feelings, it can be hard for them to imagine feeling any differently.

Think of feelings like a thermometer. We can shift our feelings up and down through a series of small, incremental changes.

Explain to students that a thermometer measures temperature. When something is warm, the thermometer goes up and up. As it cools off, it drops down slowly. It doesn't just jump to the bottom immediately as soon as the heat source is removed.

Show students a thermometer, if available, or a picture of one.

You may wish to say:

This is a thermometer. You may recognize this from the doctor's office or even from baking! The thermometer tells you how hot or cool something is. Imagine that you stick a thermometer in a bowl of hot soup. The temperature would creep up and up and up until it reached the top! When you took it out of the soup, it would slowly go down to the temperature of the air in the room.

I want you to think of a feeling, like happy, angry, sad or nervous. Imagine this feeling all the way to the top of the thermometer – like VERY happy, or VERY angry.

Have students write or draw a picture of a time that they felt a big emotion. Then have them identify ways that they could move one degree down on the thermometer.

Instead of expecting a child to go from very angry all the way to the bottom of the thermometer, try getting the child to just move down one or two degrees. Ask questions such as, "What would need to happen for you to go down one degree?" "What would one degree less than what you're feeling now look like?" "What would you notice if you went down one degree?"

Sometimes it's the first step that makes the difference – getting them from *explosive* to *reasonable*. Then you can work with them to walk them down the rest of the thermometer and cool off.

Setting up this activity while they're calm can give them tools for how to lower one degree on their thermometer. The next time they experience a big emotion, you can show them their feelings thermometer.

Name: _____

My Feelings

I feel like this when: ---->

_____

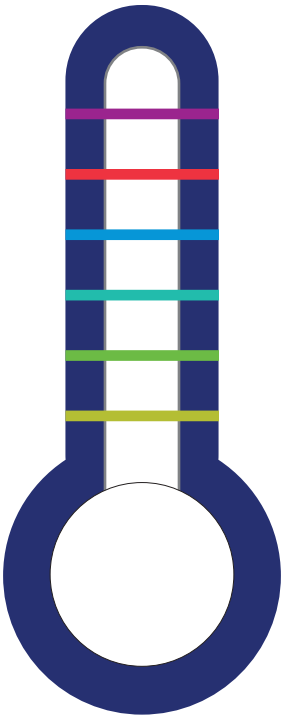
_____

_____

_____

_____

_____



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I could feel like this if:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Here are some things that help me move down one degree on my feelings thermometer:

4. COUNT YOUR BREATHS

Description

This lesson teaches students how to control their breathing.

Objectives

1. Students will understand that the connection between activity and breath.

2. Students will learn which type of breathing helps them feel calm and relaxed.

3. Students will learn how to slow their breathing down when they are excited or have high energy.

It's important to learn this because...

Awareness of the connection between activity and breath gives students control over their own breathing, allowing them to calm themselves down when necessary.

Vocabulary

Breath
Mindful breathing

Materials Needed

Breathing chart (page 14)

The Lesson

Ask students to sit up straight in their seat with their hand on their tummy. Set a timer for 15 seconds. When you give direction to begin, have them count how many breaths they take in 15 seconds before the timer runs out. Have them fill in the appropriate number of squares on the chart.

Next, lead students through a mindful breathing activity. You may use any mindfulness technique you are comfortable with.

You may wish to say:

Sit up tall like you are stacking coins in your back. Close your eyes or look down at the floor. Put your hands on your lap or on your belly. Breathe slowly in and fill your lungs with air. Feel your stomach rise. Breathe out slowly. Feel the air leave your lungs. Slowly, take another deep breath. Feel your chest and stomach rise. Breathe out slowly. Let's do it two more times quietly. Breathe in slowly, breathe out slowly.

Set the timer again for 15 seconds and ask the students to record how many breaths they took on their chart.

Finally, have the students do some form of physical activity. They can run in place, jump up and down, or put on a song and dance. After several minutes of high energy activity, set the timer for 15 seconds and have them record their breathing for the last time.
Follow up with a conversation about what they notice.

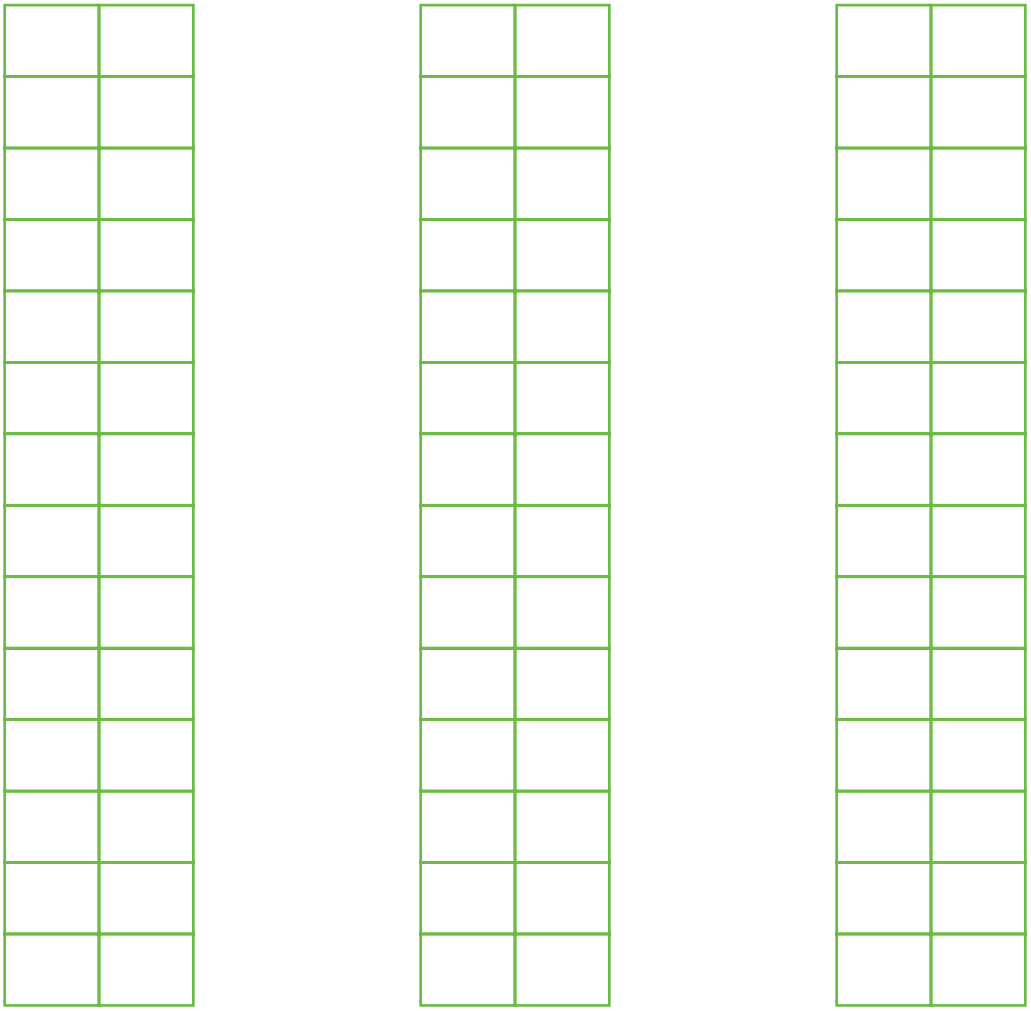
You may wish to say:

When did you take the most breaths? When did you take the least? What do you think caused you to take more breaths? What caused you to take less? How did you feel when you were taking a lot of breaths? How did you feel when you were taking less? What other times of the day do you think you are taking a lot of breaths? What could you do to slow down your breathing? How would that help you?

Name: _____

My Breathing Chart

Here's how many breaths I took:



Regular | After mindful breathing | After exercise

Here's what I noticed:

About Momentous Institute

Momentous Institute, owned and operated by Salesmanship Club of Dallas, has been building and repairing social emotional health in children for over 95 years. Since 1968, the AT&T Byron Nelson golf tournament has been its primary fundraiser. The organization serves 6,000 children and family members each year through Therapeutic Services and Momentous School. Building on this direct work with kids and families, the organization invests in training and research, and shares strategies nationwide to reach far more children than could ever be served directly. In hopes of infusing new, exciting ideas throughout the community, Momentous Institute hosts its annual Changing the Odds conference for educators, mental health professionals and decision makers. The combined support of Salesmanship Club of Dallas, the AT&T Byron Nelson, corporations, individuals and foundations enables these efforts and truly changes the odds for kids in our community and beyond.

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