

# Program aims to improve children's social-emotional skills, reduce stress

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Yoga is one of several mind-body practices taught in the Mindful Coping Power. Credit: University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa

University of Alabama researchers have developed an effective prevention program that can improve a child's stress physiology and

make lasting impacts on social skills, impulsive anger and aggression.

With support from the National Institute on Drug Abuse, Dr. Caroline Boxmeyer, professor of psychiatry and [behavioral medicine](#) with the UA College of Community Health Sciences, led a study on Mindful Coping Power, a new format of the Coping Power prevention program.

Mindful Coping Power provides training to increase a child's social competence and self-regulation to reduce [aggressive behavior](#) and prevent later problems such as substance use and delinquency. The new program incorporates mind-body practices such as yoga and meditation to the existing social-emotional skills training program. Mindful Coping Power also coaches parents on positive parenting and mindfulness.

"Our goal is to identify at-risk children and provide the building blocks of mental health and healthy relationships before adolescence to reduce or prevent later problems such as substance use, violence and difficulty in school and relationships," said Boxmeyer.

Boxmeyer and the research team's findings were recently published in the *Journal of Clinical Medicine*.

In previous research, the Coping Power prevention program had long-lasting effects on reducing proactive [aggression](#), a more intentional, goal-directed form of aggression. However, it has been more difficult to alter reactive aggression, which is found in various mental disorders and typically reflects an impulsive response to perceived social threats, provocation and/or frustrations.

"Our team at UA has been leading this work, nationally and internationally, through the development, testing and dissemination of the Coping Power prevention program, which has more than 25 years of evidence demonstrating its effectiveness," Boxmeyer said. "Despite the

proven effectiveness of Coping Power, it can be challenging to impact behaviors that are more biologically and temperamentally based, such as impulsive and reactive anger and aggression."

Boxmeyer and the other researchers, including Dr. John Lochman, the developer of Coping Power, tested the effects of the Mindful Coping Power and Coping Power programs in a one-year, school-based clinical trial that included 102 randomly selected fifth-grade students with elevated levels of reactive aggression.

Boxmeyer found that Mindful Coping Power improved children's inhibitory control at the end of fifth grade, which led to lasting improvements in reactive aggression at the end of sixth grade, compared to standard Coping Power. Inhibitory control is a specific type of executive functioning that involves controlling one's attention, behavior, thoughts and/or feelings to override other impulses. Children who participated in Mindful Coping Power also exhibited improved [social skills](#) at the end of sixth grade.

The study also found that Mindful Coping Power has a beneficial effect on [autonomic nervous system](#) functioning by improving skin conductance reactivity while playing a computer game designed to cause moderate anger arousal.

The findings in this study support this approach, as improvements in skin conductance reactivity and vagal tone at the end of fifth grade led to long-term improvements in reactive aggression at the end of sixth grade.

"Psychological interventions have begun to focus more on polyvagal theory and improving autonomic nervous system functioning," said Boxmeyer. "This approach can help individuals become more aware of their emotional and physiological arousal, and to learn to regulate arousal, which can help them live with a greater sense of safety, calm

and ease and to develop healthier relationships."

**More information:** Caroline L. Boxmeyer et al, Mindful Coping Power Effects on Children's Autonomic Nervous System Functioning and Long-Term Behavioral Outcomes, *Journal of Clinical Medicine* (2023). [DOI: 10.3390/jcm12113621](https://doi.org/10.3390/jcm12113621)

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