Middle-School Mindful Spending Lessons:
A Missing Piece to the Financial Literacy Puzzle.

Submitted to the Stanford Initiative for Financial Decision Making
In response to their request for papers assessing the effectiveness of financial education
and its impact on financial behavior and other outcomes.

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February 24th, 2025

Abstract

This paper will explain how the gap, in years, between when humans develop their money personality in childhood and early adolescence, and when they get to regularly employ their money habits and beliefs as adults, presents an issue; it prevents the establishment of foundational financial literacy.

It will explain how early (i.e., before high school) personal finance lessons on mindful spending bridge that gap; why they are a critical piece to the financial literacy puzzle.

It will outline how middle-school mindful spending lessons allow students to acquire a powerful insight (that anyone can get and use financial information to improve their life) while their money personality is still in development.

It will describe the content and tools employed in the middle-school mindful spending lessons delivered by an early financial education *nonprofit* organization.

It will detail post-lesson feedback from students (their educators and parents) which corroborates that these middle-school mindful spending lessons bring about positive behavioural change.

It concludes with a formal request for assistance from researching behavioural economists to partner with GiftingSense.org (the aforementioned mission-driven early financial education nonprofit) in service of delivering these lessons to as many youths as possible.

Introduction

Does financial literacy remain elusive because of a timing mismatch?

Why, when there is more readily available, and democratically accessible financial information available than ever before in the history of the planet, do citizens continue to struggle with successfully managing their personal finances? This paper will assert that financial literacy remains elusive because of a timing mismatch between when we develop our money habits and beliefs, and when we put those habits and beliefs into operational reality.

We know that financial information needs to be relevant to be helpful[1]. In fact, this helps explain *why* most financial knowledge is delivered in adulthood; people face most of their consequential personal financial choices as adults.

However, we also know money personalities are established during youth[2]. The fact that we develop our money habits and beliefs long before we put them into operational reality presents an issue: In the intervening period (late adolescence into early adulthood), unproductive habits and beliefs are left to entrench and solidify, making them even harder to identify and re-engineer, when they eventually lead to personal financial difficulties.

This is why giving middle-school-age children the opportunity to have positive money management experiences is a critical piece of the financial literacy puzzle. Middle school is when most young people are beginning to earn (via allowance, after-school jobs, holiday or birthday gifts) and spend small amounts of money – so they have “skin in the game”. The timing is also right because their money personalities are still in development.

Middle school is when we can convince students that anyone can successfully pursue money-smarts, for a shockingly small investment of class-room time.

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[1] Thinking Fast and Slow. Daniel Kahneman. This book made the research of Drs. Kahneman and Tversky accessible to lay people. It explained why relevant (versus more) financial information helps people make better financial decisions. It also explained how accretive interventions that help us corral and organize the information relevant to a decision, can be. https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/11468377-thinking-fast-and-slow/

[2] Habit Formation and Learning in Young Children. Dr. David Whitebread and Dr. Sue Bingham. University of Cambridge https://kidwealth.com/wp-content/uploads/the-money-advice-service-habit-formation-and-learning-in-young-children-may2013.pdf

B1: Why don’t later-in-life “just-in-time” financial lessons work well?

We don’t start any other subject “in the middle”.

We don’t begin any other subject “in the middle”. We learn the alphabet, then how to read. We learn our numbers and then how to complete mathematical operations. We leg into almost every other life skill *but* managing our personal finances. What comes before having to budget, select a credit card, financial institution or financial product, such as a car loan or mortgage? For many citizens, almost nothing.

Mastering the basic matters.

Think of thinking-before-buying as the ABCs or 123s of financial literacy, the missing foundational piece to the financial literacy puzzle. If we want today’s youth to grow into adults who are “good with money”, they need high school and post-secondary personal finance courses. However, they also need foundational personal finance lessons before high school. Mastering the basics gives kids the appetite and confidence to enjoy learning more about *any* subject, why would personal finance be any different?

***When* we learn the basics also matters.**

The timing is key. Acquiring the insight that anyone can get and use financial information *early in life* (i.e., before high school) is what gives students the ability to avoid early financial pitfalls. Humans typically decide to pursue a skill when they can observe or experience it and think to themselves “that looks like fun” or “that was helpful”. Early mindful spending lessons pave the way for that reflective moment vis-à-vis managing personal finances.

We leg into every other life skill but managing our personal finances.

No one begins to cook by making a complicated meal for eight. As children, we make a sandwich long before we would ever set out to “make dinner”.

But for far too many people, the first time they really think about personal finances is when they either amass punitive debt or buy a home; a large and complicated decision. We need to give students the opportunity to “*make a financial sandwich”*, to practice simple but achievable personal finance decisions when they are young, and the stakes are low. Deciding whether a possible purchase makes sense for you and your family at a moment in time presents just such an opportunity.

Which explains why real-time, adult financial education lacks the necessary foundation to make it "stick".

It's no wonder that later-in-life, "real-or-just-in-time" financial lessons don't help as much as we'd like. Think about the example of selecting a mortgage product. That decision is rife with unfamiliar, intimidating language and concepts (e.g., amortization and term).

While jargon is only vocabulary without understanding…if you don't get comfortable asking questions to clarify what a piece of financial jargon means as a child, when no one expects you to have all the answers about money, it's very unlikely you'll be comfortable doing so as an adult, when earning is (albeit falsely) associated with some level of financial capability. This dynamic is exacerbated when there are language and/or additional cultural barriers.

B2: Why are early mindful spending lessons so effective?

Engaging + Efficient = Effective

1. **They're engaging:** Mindful spending lessons are engaging because they make learning about money immediately helpful to school-age children.
2. **They're efficient:** Mindful spending lessons are efficient because they can be provided in a way that does NOT impose an undue burden on educators or classroom schedules.

Engaging

Thinking before buying is an easy-to-learn, powerful and sticky life skill. It makes learning about money immediately helpful.

a) **Easy to Learn:** Mindful spending is easy to teach (and learn!) when the methodology employed allows children to work on a problem that matters to them in real-time. Personal finances are personal. Purpose-led learning that yields real life guidance is so much more interesting to 10-14-year-old students than dry lectures on concepts/ decisions they won't face for years. Did you care about mortgages and interest rates when you were 12 years old? Probably not. Chances are you were much more interested in how to procure a desired piece of sports equipment or clothing, a ticket to a concert or pro sports event.

b) **Powerful:** Mindful spending lessons are powerful because they allow children to experience first-hand how taking mere minutes to ask and answer simple questions about typical childhood (tween or teen) purchases, before spending their money or anyone else's, is a seriously effective disappointment avoidance tool.

c) **Sticky:** Mindful spending lessons are sticky because children are like everyone else, they enjoy success. Once young people discover they can avoid disappointment (not to mention reduce waste, improve family harmony and protect the planet) by taking a beat to reflect on a choice before making it, they continue to make that small investment. They may not use this language, but they inherently recognize the high return-on-investment (ROI) mindful spending delivers.

Efficient

Many educators want to deliver early financial education. But their genuine desire to get that job done is challenged by the reality of having to meet myriad curricular requirements within a limited school calendar. Mindful spending lessons solve this issue because a meaningful introduction to thinking before buying (the habit of asking and answering simple questions about typical purchases before spending) can be delivered in one 40-50-minute class.

Teachers can also prepare to deliver their own workshop to their own students in their own classroom in one hour. So, the maximum commitment for an educator is two hours –from start to finish–if they deliver their own workshop. If they ask external workshop leaders to conduct the session, the minimum amount of time required is 40 minutes–the amount of time some schools have allotted to (even we were surprised!) very successful workshops.

Early mindful spending lessons prime the demand pump for the subsequent knowledge that brings about true subject mastery.

Of course, there is more to becoming fully financially literate than wise spending habits. But when kids get comfortable with basic personal finance terms and ideas, they're also and just as importantly developing the confidence required to seek out the more sophisticated financial information that they'll need later in life when it is relevant and therefore helpful.

Mindful spending lessons prime the demand pump for the more sophisticated financial information we require later in life in two ways:

1. They allow students to experience first-hand that *anyone* CAN ask questions about money before making a personal financial decision, and
2. They allow students to experience first-hand that asking those questions is a quick but seriously effective disappointment avoidance tool. No more repeat, wrong-size, too-young, too-old, "not your jam" holiday or birthday gifts is a meaningful real-time benefit to young people.

What do financially literate people possess?

Financially literate people don't necessarily possess all the knowledge they need to make every decision they face in their heads. What they possess is confidence in their ability to seek out and employ the knowledge they need. That confidence is what purpose-led middle-school financial education can deliver.

B3: What content and tools do GiftingSense.org mindful spending lessons contain to make them relevant and lasting?

What is GiftingSense.org?

GiftingSense.org is an early financial education nonprofit with arms in Canada and the United States. It houses a free and safe mindful spending tool called the DIMS - DOES IT MAKE SENSE?® SCORE Calculator. We worked with digital developers to build the DIMS SCORE® Calculator to scale delivery of the questions that prompt a young person to reflect on a consumer choice before making it.

What is the DIMS SCORE® Calculator?

The DIMS SCORE® Calculator is a weighted questionnaire that distills answers to simple questions about typical childhood (tween or teen) purchases into a number between 1 and 10. The higher the number (the threshold value of 8 indicates a young person has collected enough information about a possible purchase to discuss if it makes sense for them and their family), the better. The tool[3] culminates in a shareable summary of all the math and thinking a student has completed when planning to spend, called a DIMS SCORE® Report[4].

What types of questions does the calculator ask?

The DIMS SCORE® Calculator asks students four types of questions[5] about a possible purchase:

1. **Identifying questions**: "Is this an item or an experience? What size, model, color? When is the concert? Where is the venue?"
2. **Research the full cost questions**: "How much do the basketball shoes cost? What so sales tax and shipping add to their cost? or, How much do safe transportation, snacks and souvenirs add to the cost of attending a concert or pro sports event?"
3. **Evaluate the purchase questions:** "How often will you use it? Can someone else use it when you are done? Is this your first time going to a pro sports event without your parents? Will you have to miss school to attend?"
4. **Ready to discuss this purchase questions: "**Are you ready to share the math and thinking you've just completed to serve as the agenda for a relaxed,

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[3] Test-drive the DIMS - DOES IT MAKE SENSE?® SCORE Calculator: https://giftingsense.org/

[4] View a DIMS SCORE® Report (a shareable summary of all the math and thinking a young person completes when calculating a DIMS – DOES IT MAKE SENSE?® SCORE: https://giftingsense.org/dims-score-result/5jh7t3xa/?print=yes

[5] Learn how the DIMS SCORE® Calculator works: https://giftingsense.org/how-it-works/

productive conversation about spending? Should you attach a hand-written note to your DIMS SCORE® Report?"

How much can a free online tool accomplish? A lot!

Answering these questions (from first screen to summary generation) takes as little as 4 minutes. But those 4 minutes help students understand the full cost of a possible purchase, as well as how much they are likely to use or appreciate an item or experience *before* any money is spent.

The DIMS SCORE® Calculator helps students avoid FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) and subsequent buyer's remorse by acting as a "spending speed bump"; it slows down the pace at which a consumer decision is made–just enough to allow a young person to avoid an impulse buy they may end up regretting.

Children aren't thoughtless when they repeatedly ask to spend, what they are, is inexperienced. The DIMS SCORE® Calculator gives them experience making consumer decisions when the stakes are low - at a time in their lives when productive money habits can be easily imprinted.

One other way to think of the pause before purchase imposed by the DIMS SCORE® Calculator, is that it re-introduces some of the friction that spending cash in bricks and mortar stores did, for today's parents when they were in middle school. When children have a tool that helps them slow down and really looking at a spend, they spend differently.

How did we gain the trust of schools and educators?

I have been volunteer-teaching (primarily) 10–15-year-old students how to think before they buy in hands-on, interactive workshops in schools, community centres and private homes since 2015. For a decade, home form teachers and I have observed that allowing children to work on a problem that matters to them in real-time: *"Should I buy this item or experience?"* convinces students that money smarts are worth pursuing.

In addition, the Financial Education Initiative at the University of Chicago developed a set of questions parents and community members can ask schools to understand if a financial education program is high-quality and unbiased. We answered all of them in a blog post[6]. Several educators have told us this post was what helped them answer questions from administrators, ultimately paving the way for a Gifting Sense workshop.

[6] Find the Gifting Sense answers to all 17 of U Chicago's 17 "Questions to Pose" to help parents and community members understand if a financial education program is high-quality and unbiased here: https://giftingsense.org/answering-chicagos-questions-to-pose/

B4: What evidence is there to suggest that the DIMS SCORE® Calculator sparks positive consumer behavior change?

Product Market Fit

The DIMS - DOES IT MAKE SENSE?® SCORE Calculator has been embraced by students, schools and households from Maryland to Malaysia. Citizens are requesting additional versions/ silos (French/ Spanish versions, Pets, First Car, First Apartment…) of the DIMS SCORE® Calculator faster than we can comfortably produce them. This speaks to product-market-fit[7] which results when an available solution solves a problem; in other words, it speaks to efficacy.

Workshop Feedback/ Testimonials

We regularly receive feedback from parents, educators and most importantly, students, that indicate mindful spending lessons spark positive changes inside the classroom, outside the classroom, and at home. For example:

Parents:

1. “My son came home and delivered a very well-thought-out argument about why he wants a particular game; he went on to articulate the total cost, the cost per use and declared that he got a DIMS SCORE of 8! I was impressed at his passion and understanding of things like sales tax, etc.”
2. “My 11-year-old daughter immediately started using the DIMS SCORE Calculator to determine whether her upcoming purchases made sense. She told us all about ways to be more environmentally friendly with our purchases.”
3. “This is the exact structure my family needs - me and the kiddos!”

Educators:

1. “My 7th and 8th Graders were engaged and found [the program] very valuable to share with their peers.”
2. “Very engaging approach to introduce financial literacy to kids - should be incorporated into the school curriculum.”
3. “I was looking for something I could use in the classroom next week and this is it.”

Students:

1. “After this lesson, I am definitely going to be more careful!”
2. “At first I didn't believe that this class would help. But after taking it, I benefited a lot. Now I think about all the pros and cons about an item before asking for it. The website that you use to see if an item is good or not is very helpful. You can save a lot of money with it.”

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[7] Learn more about “product market fit” here: https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/how-to-find-product-market-fit

3. "The DIMS SCORE® tool really helps when I'm not sure if I should or shouldn't buy something."

See more testimonials, including those received from schools, community organizations and personal finance experts on the Press & Recognition page of our site[8]. In today's world of mostly digital communication, it seems worth noting that we've been stopped in the street by students walking home from school and told how a Gifting Sense workshop "made our family's holidays better". We've even received drawings and hand-written note cards.

Awards/ Partnerships

Awards, partnerships and media mentions can also be found on the Press & Recognition page of GiftingSense.org.

Of particular note:

1. Gifting Sense has been recognized at the Money Awareness & Inclusion Awards[9] for ***three*** consecutive years: Running-Up to large household names in 2022 (U Chicago/ finEdge), 2023 (UK Green-Your-Pension Initiative Make My Money Matter, for the Sustainable Finance Prize), and 2024 (The Financial Times FLIC) in the category of Best School-age Nonprofit Financial Education.

2. The national nonprofit Next Gen Personal Finance partnered with Gifting Sense in a 2024 Holiday Interactive[10], after profiling the DIMS SCORE® Calculator in a 2022 blog post[11]. Learn who else "trusts us" by reading the answer to our 4th most Frequently Asked Question[12].

3. The DIMS SCORE® Calculator was presented to the UK Houses of Parliament[13] as a way to deliver early financial education to school-age children in a way that does NOT impose and undue burden on educators or classroom schedules.

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[8] Additional testimonials, as well as awards and media mentions can be found on the Press & Recognition page of GiftingSense.org: https://giftingsense.org/press-recognition/
[9] Learn about the Money Awareness & Inclusion Awards: https://www.maiawards.org/
[10] View NGPF's 2024 "Gifting Game Plan" Holiday Interactive: https://www.ngpf.org/curriculum/consumer-skills/?type=activities&activityId=550&rl=1&redirected=true employing the DIMS SCORE® Calculator.
[11] View NGPF's 2022 Blog Post on the DIMS SCORE® Calculator: https://www.ngpf.org/blog/interactive/interactive-gifting-sense-gets-young-people-to-think-before-they-buy/
[12] Learn who trusts us in the answer to our 4th most Frequently Asked Question: https://giftingsense.org/faq/
[13] See the MAIA submission to the UK Houses of Parliament here: https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7174886701977210880

An Eye-Opening Statistic!

93%* of the students we've had in Thinking Before Buying workshops state they've received holiday or birthday gifts they did NOT use or appreciate.

So, imagine their delight at discovering a free tool that helps them collect and organize financial information in way their parents are open to receiving–that lets them politely ask for the items or experiences they would like to receive?

Parents report being similarly delighted with a way for their children to quickly, but not arbitrarily, assess a possible purchase before asking for the money to make it. When adults institute the household policy of "in this family we think before we buy", they report receiving fewer, better-quality requests to spend.

*We use the Nearpod LMS to deliver our workshops. Nearpod allows us to seamlessly embed interactive activities into workshops. One of these activities is anonymous polling of student answers to questions about their lived experiences receiving gifts.

You can preview a Gifting Sense® workshop on Nearpod here: https://app.nearpod.com/?pin=4C46EDCB299C5A3A1FB63811DA54FD67-1&&utm_source=link

B5: Do mindful spending lessons work for learners from all economic realities, even those who live with scarcity?

In their collaboration Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much[14], behavioral economist Sendhil Mullainathan and psychologist Eldar Shafir do a deep dive into both the short and long-term impact of constantly living with less. Below please find a brief summary of their findings and how it shaped our work at the Gifting Sense project.[15]

Living with scarcity imposes a bandwidth tax.

Living with scarcity imposes a "bandwidth tax". Think about a computer that slows down because you have too many programs running in the background; constantly managing scarce resources takes up so much mental energy you automatically have less for the rest of the things you are supposed to be doing every day – like learning. Mullainathan and Shafir believe this "bandwidth tax" is the primary difference between equally capable people being able to make financial decisions that hurt or help their future selves.

Which is why simple reminders to avoid pitfalls can be incredibly powerful.

But there is good news: Calculating the DIMS - DOES IT MAKE SENSE?® SCORE for possible purchases can offer children living with scarcity just the right amount of "rule of thumb" guidance to avoid early financial pitfalls. Anything more involved than "rules of thumb" is just too hard for children who live with scarcity to adhere to, according to Mullainathan and Shafir. But simple reminders to avoid pitfalls can be incredibly powerful. This is why we encourage even just regular use of the phrase "What's the DIMS SCORE®?" after workshops. It's a simple reminder that there is life beyond immediate choices.

And we can customize a DIMS SCORE® Calculator for a given community or institution.

Please also note that the DIMS SCORE® Calculator is now fully customizable so communities or institutions can ensure students will be able to see themselves (via a custom avatar) in the tool they're using, as well as ask and answer culturally sensitive and/ or appropriate questions.

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[14] Mullainathan and Shafir's book https://www.goodreads.com/en/book/show/17286670-scarcity
[15] Scarcity was reviewed in a Gifting Sense blog post: https://giftingsense.org/the-real-cost-of-scarcity/

Discussion

Mindful spending prevents serious downstream problems.

Humans typically decide to pursue something when they can observe or experience it and think to themselves “that looks like fun” or “that looks helpful”. We’ve explained why we need to ensure that today’s school-age children receive that opportunity vis-à-vis personal financial management *before* high school: Thinking before buying allows young people to discover first-hand that anyone can get and use financial information to improve their lives - when their money personalities are still in development.

Let us now discuss just some of the reasons why this insight can't help but allow children to earn, save, share, and invest more as their futures unfold. In other words, let us discuss how mindful spending prevents serious downstream problems.

Mindful spending lessons prepare young people for “nudges” and systems.

Daniel Kahneman’s research (made accessible in his book Thinking Fast and Slow[16]) supports the idea that a mindful spending tool such as the DIMS SCORE® Calculator is exactly the sort of “nudge” or system that helps people avoid relying on heuristics (mental short cuts used to make judgements, typically reliant on information that is right in front of them and so seems representative but may not be) when making personal financial decisions.

The idea that we could help today’s students exit adolescence aware that more deliberate and analytical reasoning takes a relatively small amount of time but can yield a meaningful ROI in terms of avoiding disappointment and reducing waste – is very exciting. Think about how DIMS SCORE® calculations could reduce the anchoring effect (the tendency to be influenced by irrelevant numbers we’re exposed to) of social media!

Mindful spending is a skill that supports our will.

Dr. Stuart Ablon’s popular assertion that children don’t lack the will to “do better”, but rather the skill[17] certainly rings true when it comes to personal finances – who among us (young or old) doesn’t *want* to be “good with money”? It does indeed seem unlikely that a lack of motivation is the issue, but rather as Dr. Ablon suggests, a lack of personal

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[16] Thinking Fast and Slow, Daniel Kahneman: https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/11468377-thinking-fast-and-slow

[17] Dr. Stuart Ablon is a professor of Child and Adolescent Psychology at Harvard Medical School. His well-shared work culminates in the idea that collaborative problem solving allows children to develop the skills required to behave in a desired manner because young people typically lack the skill, versus the will, to behave as we might like: https://www.goodreads.com/author/list/6789178.J_Stuart_Ablon https://www.melrobbins.com/podcasts/episode-244

finance skill. He further suggests families engage in collaborative problem solving to help their children develop the skills they need to make behavioural choices that will support their well-being.

As stated earlier (Page 12 above, “An Eye-Opening Statistic”), families that adopt the household policy of thinking before buying report fewer, better-quality requests to spend. This is not a surprise as most family discord with regards to spending results from the fact that left to their own devices children aren’t yet able to fully appreciate the costs (including phantom) of a possible purchase, nor how much they will be able to use and appreciate an item or experience, before they spend their money, or anyone else’s. They lack the skill required to understand “what the big deal is” with “just going to the movies”.

Thinking before buying helps young people develop the skills they need to act on the motivation most people already have – to be “good with money”. It helps young people avoid buyer’s regret, and its first cousin, waste. This is important for lots of immediate reasons when we are young, but a critical one when we are adults; mindful spending helps us build an investable surplus!

Mindful spending helps us build an investable surplus.

The idea that people want to “behave well” but lack the tools required to do so also calls to mind the intense focus investing receives in popular media. It isn’t that investing doesn’t deserve our attention; it is indeed the way people with lasting financial flexibility tend to achieve that flexibility. But too much attention on investing puts the cart before the horse because a person has to be able to afford to invest!

The majority of citizens build investable surpluses from spending less than they make. Most people understand they *should* spend less than they make. What they don’t always understand is how to live the life they want… and spend less than they make. Which explains why the ability to slow down and quickly but not arbitrarily assess a purchase before we make it is such an important life-skill: it’s the surest route to living the life we want and spending less than we make.

Early mindful spending lessons offer a massive positive externality.

Early mindful spending lessons deliver a massive positive externality because they immunize students against a future state (financial illiteracy) which doesn’t only impact the student, but that student’s future employer, life partner, offspring and even the planet. Early mindful spending lessons immunize students from NOT pursuing financial knowledge for either fear of looking stupid, or a disbelief that someone from their background can have personal financial agency.

Getting comfortable asking questions about money as a child prevents all sorts of downstream issues (e.g., unwittingly amassing punitive amounts of debt), and again, not only for the student receiving the lesson, but also that student's future employer, life partner, and offspring…

Childhood financial legacy is not destiny.

In North America, wealth management professionals are increasingly focused on helping children who grow up with abundance manage their good fortune. Why? Because we know growing up with money doesn't automatically mean you'll develop the life skills required to live as a money-smart adult. Well, isn't the other side of that coin that children who grow up living with scarcity can absolutely learn how to become money-smart adults?[18]

Finally, mindful spending benefits the environment.

We cannot submit this paper without also stating that thinking before buying is the easiest way to be a planet protector: When you only buy (or ask others to buy for you) items and experiences that are used and appreciated, by default, you're lowering your carbon footprint as well as the number of items you contribute to landfills in your lifetime. (NB: A virtual reality field trip to a landfill is a very popular interactive activity in a Gifting Sense workshop.)

Skeptical? Know anyone with dentures?

If you are skeptical about the ability of good simple habits, adopted young, to permanently improve the well-being of citizens, look no further than the history of oral hygiene. Oral cavities moved from an early onset childhood disease to a late onset adult disease in the 40 short years following the Second World War, thanks to adoption of regular toothbrushing.

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[18] Explore why childhood financial legacy is not destiny in this Gifting Sense® blog post: https://giftingsense.org/legacy-doesnt-have-to-be-destiny/

Conclusion

This paper set out to describe how the gap, in years, between when humans develop their money personality in childhood and early adolescence, and when they get to regularly employ their money habits and beliefs as adults, prevents the establishment of foundational financial literacy.

It then explained how mindful spending lessons in middle school can bridge that gap; why middle-school mindful spending lessons are the missing piece to the financial literacy puzzle.

Mindful spending lessons take so little time but solve so much!

If children can exit adolescence knowing from first-hand experience that they are fully capable of getting and using financial information to make their life better, the job of building a financially literate society will be vastly simplified.

Financially literate people don't necessarily possess all the knowledge they need to make personal financial decisions; what they possess is confidence in their ability to seek out and employ the knowledge they need. And that confidence is what early mindful spending lessons can deliver.

Assess our approach in service of scaling it.

We welcome objective third-party assessment of our approach and primary innovation: the DIMS - DOES IT MAKE SENSE?® SCORE Calculator.

Gifting Sense is a free public good. Our scale model is "teach the teacher". But even with no cost to teachers and a willingness to share all we have learned over the last ten years; it can be extremely challenging for educators to bring external supplementary resources into a classroom.

We believe an independent assessment is the next necessary step–the step that will pave the way towards broadly incorporating mindful spending lessons into state and province approved middle school curriculums across the United States, Canada and beyond.

Help us prepare young people to prepare themselves - to be confident consumers who know how to make decisions they'll be happy with in the longer term. This won't only improve their personal financial futures–but those of their immediate families, future employers, life partners, offspring and the planet.

References

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2. **Thinking Fast and Slow. Daniel Kahneman.** This book made the research of Drs. Kahneman and Tversky accessible to lay people. It explained why relevant (versus more) financial information helps people make better financial decisions. It also explained how accretive interventions that help us corral and organize the information relevant to a decision can be. https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/11468377-thinking-fast-and-slow/

3. **Test drive the DIMS – DOES IT MAKE SENSE?® SCORE Calculator** (the mindful spending tool employed in a GiftingSense.org workshop) here: https://giftingsense.org/

4. **Learn how the DIMS SCORE® Calculator works**: https://giftingsense.org/how-it-works/

5. **View a DIMS SCORE® report**, which is a shareable summary of all the math and thinking a young person completes when calculating a DIMS – DOES IT MAKE SENSE?® SCORE: https://giftingsense.org/dims-score-result/5jh7t3xa/?print=yes

6. **Read Gifting Sense's answers to all 17 of U Chicago's "Questions to Pose"**, to help parents and community members understand if a financial education program is high-quality and unbiased: https://giftingsense.org/answering-chicagos-questions-to-pose/

7. **Learn more about "product market fit"**: https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/how-to-find-product-market-fit which explains why the DIMS SCORE® Calculator must be helping people.

8. Additional testimonials, as well as awards and media mentions can be found on the **Press & Recognition** page of GiftingSense.org: https://giftingsense.org/press-recognition/

9. Learn about the **Money Awareness & Inclusion Awards**: https://www.maiawards.org/

10. View **Next Gen Personal Finance's 2024 "Gifting Game Plan" Holiday Interactive**: https://www.ngpf.org/curriculum/consumer-skills/?type=activities&activityId=550&rl=1&redirected=true employing the DIMS SCORE® Calculator.

11. View **Next Gen Personal Finance's 2022 Blog Post** on the DIMS SCORE® Calculator: https://www.ngpf.org/blog/interactive/interactive-gifting-sense-gets-young-people-to-think-before-they-buy/

12. Learn who trusts Gifting Sense in the answer to our 4th most **Frequently Asked Question**: https://giftingsense.org/faq/

13. See the MAIA submission to the **UK Houses of Parliament** here: https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7174886701977210880

14. **Scarcity.** Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir https://www.goodreads.com/en/book/show/17286670-scarcity

15. Read the **Gifting Sense® blog post on Scarcity**: https://giftingsense.org/the-real-cost-of-scarcity/

16. **“Skill not Will”** Learn more about Dr. Stuart Ablon’s work which culminates in the idea that collaborative problem solving allows children to develop the skills required to behave in a desired manner because young people typically lack the skill, versus the will, to behave as we might like. https://www.goodreads.com/author/list/6789178.J_Stuart_Ablon,

17. Further explore why we state that **childhood financial legacy is not destiny** in this Gifting Sense® blog post: https://giftingsense.org/legacy-doesnt-have-to-be-destiny/

18. **Preview a Gifting Sense® workshop on Nearpod** (Learning Management System) here: https://app.nearpod.com/?pin=4C46EDCB299C5A3A1FB63811DA54FD67-1&&utm_source=link

19. Additional insight into how mindful spending lessons serve students, schools and families can be found in the answers to our **Frequently Asked Questions**: https://giftingsense.org/faq/

Postscript

This paper was written as a submission to the 2025 Stanford Financial Education Symposium (formerly known as The Cherry Blossom Festival) in response to their request for papers assessing the effectiveness of financial education and its impact on financial behavior and other outcomes.

I am a retired Sovereign Risk Analyst who has been teaching school-age children how to think before they buy for a decade. I founded an award-winning early financial education nonprofit named Gifting Sense. Our primary innovation, a mindful spending tool called the DIMS - DOES IT MAKE SENSE?® SCORE Calculator has been embraced by students, parents, and educators from Maryland to Malaysia.

My sincere wish is that readers will see what I see: a future where none of today's youth ever lament that no one ever taught them about money and the elimination of financial illiteracy that can accompany that.

Very Sincerely and With Kind regards, Karen Holland

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