



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Susan Farley
VP of Development and Engagement
susan.farley@gcjfcs.org
727-479-1800

Gulf Coast JFCS's Good Afternoon Friends & Amigos (GAFA) Program Uses Mindfulness, Yoga to Help Students

How GAFA has adapted to COVID-19 to meet the needs of the families they serve

Lizeth pushes aside the basket of wooden blocks on the floor and lays down her pink yoga mat. It's the mat she received from the Good Afternoon Friends and Amigos (GAFA) program at her elementary school.

Lizeth is one of 60 children enrolled in the [Gulf Coast Jewish Family and Community Services](#) (Gulf Coast JFCS) after-school GAFA program. The program provides tutoring and homework assistance as well as mindfulness and yoga, for bilingual students from kindergarten to third grade at two Hillsborough county schools – Reddick Elementary in Wimauma and Robinson Elementary in Plant City, serving 30 children at each school. This upcoming school year will be the fourth year for the program, which was funded through a grant from the Children's Board of Hillsborough County.

"The program is just one of several programs we have to help children in Tampa Bay," says Sandra Braham, CEO and president at Gulf Coast JFCS. The program was established to help needy families who face challenges such as food insecurity and housing but goes beyond that. "What's different about this program is the focus on social and emotional learning including the incorporation of mindfulness and yoga principles, creating a holistic and unique approach to learning," she said.

Utilizing the [Second Step](#) curriculum, the program helps with social-emotional learning in areas of focus such as self-regulation, communicating respectfully, identifying feelings and speaking clearly. There is a focus on positive self-talk, affirmations, yoga and balancing techniques and breathing. They use mindfulness lessons as a transition tool between free play to core lesson.

"Assisting children in making the connection of Breath, Body, Brain through the practices of mindfulness, breathing, and yoga participants enhance their social and emotional skills for learning, they are able to enhance their overall wellness, and access their own inner resources to assist with self-

regulation, focus, body awareness and thought patterns and problem solving” said Mary Torres, program director.

Before COVID-19, the children met five times a week after school on school property. Now, GAFA has transitioned to support families virtually and assisted with structuring their home learning environments.

“While we are all required to keep a safe social distance from one another, we are continuing to connect with our students and families to maintain a sense of community,” said Torres. “Through it all GAFA continues to provide for families by motivating children to learn, assisting children with managing their emotions, and providing families with social support,” said Torres.

They adapted the program to meet the needs of schools and families when schools moved to virtual learning by lending tablets for student learning and ensuring families understood information on receiving school provided technology and access to the internet. GAFA Program Specialists and tutors made sure children were connected, assisting with setting up internet services and researching and referring families to essential resources on an ongoing basis.

They also made sure the yoga continued, moving in-person programs to online with education-based games and 3-5-minute mindfulness exercises and keeping the weekly yoga session. Some of the key program curriculum includes: Eyes Watching, Ears Listening, Voices Quiet and Body Still to Belly Breathing, Mindful Listening, Compassionate Voices, Balancing Bodies, and Curious Minds. In addition to breathing and poses, the Yoga lessons incorporate social emotional stories that add a little bit of literacy, connecting cognition through reading comprehension and expanding vocabulary. Each student was provided with a breathing ball and a yoga mat for their at-home lessons as well as other supplies like crayons, pencils and coloring pages created by the program to reinforce key lesson messages, reading books, and snacks.

This summer, staff has continued with periodic check-ins with families, weekly online yoga sessions, mailers of supplies, and working with each family to ensure they understand the school choice decision of in-person versus virtual learning for the fall.

“We continue to collaborate in assisting children with understanding and completing home learning assignments by offering one on one web tutoring, and small virtual classes focusing on social emotional regulation and keeping children active by continuing weekly mindfulness skill building and yoga classes,” said Torres.

They are now preparing for fall, creating program options depending on whether school learning will be in-person, virtual or hybrid – assessing options like creating groups of 15 at each school to keep class sizes smaller and moving to virtual Friday lessons.

ABOUT GULF COAST JFCS: Gulf Coast Jewish Family and Community Services (Gulf Coast JFCS) supports diverse individuals and families of all backgrounds through its numerous programs, across 40 Florida counties. Agency values are rooted in the Jewish tradition and include repairing the world, welcoming the stranger, peace, freedom, compassion, charity, respect and truth. Learn more about Gulf Coast JFCS at www.gcjfcc.org.

#####