

Mindful Parenting – Presence, Not Perfection

Planting the Seeds of Love and Kindness

Introduction

"Mindfulness means to pay attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and without judgment."

Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D.
Full Catastrophe Living

"Mindfulness means to be aware of our inner and outer experience without confusing the two."

Susan
Kaiser-Greenland
The Mindful Child

"There are only two days in the year that nothing can be done. One is called yesterday and the other is called tomorrow, so today is the right day to love, believe, do and mostly live."

Dalai Lama

Welcome

Welcome to this Mindful Parenting series. Raising children can be one of the most challenging responsibilities in our lives. At times, it can be difficult and exhausting, and at other times, rewarding and fulfilling. Sometimes we become so busy that instead of enjoying our children, parenting is reduced to just one of the many tasks on our endless "to-do" list.

Mindfulness is a way of engaging your life with clarity and compassion. At its simplest, it can be defined as the ability to "pay attention." With children in your care, you may feel like you are too busy to pay attention, or that you are unable to concentrate. The good news is that all of us were born with the ability to pay attention, but like any muscle that goes unused, our attention can grow weak. With the practice of mindfulness, we strengthen our "muscle" of attention so that we can be present to each moment of our lives—*especially those parenting moments!*

Warmly,
Cheryl Blackington

Intentions for Series:

Each week will be composed of material to learn main ideas, mindfulness and self-compassion practices, and parenting practices. Home practice will help reinforce the ideas being taught and practiced in class.

Introduction to Mindfulness
Regulating Emotions: Learning to Ride the Waves



Class One: What is Mindfulness?



“In essence, mindfulness is about wakefulness. Our minds are such that we are often more asleep than awake to the unique beauty and possibilities of each present moment as it unfolds. While it is the nature of our mind to go on automatic pilot and lose touch with the only time we actually have to live, to grow, to feel, and to love, it also holds the deep innate capacity to help us awaken to our moments and use them to advantage for ourselves, for others, and for the world we inhabit. Just as a garden requires attending to if we hope to cultivate flowers and not have it be overrun with weeds, mindfulness also requires regular cultivating. We call the cultivating of our own mind to bring it wakefulness meditation. The beauty of it is that

we carry this garden with us, wherever we go, wherever we are, whenever we remember.”

Jon Kabat-Zinn – *Wherever You Go, There You Are*

Cartoon from the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Program Workbook, University of Minnesota, Center for Spirituality and Healing, 2012, p. 9.

First class Intentions

- What is Mindfulness?
- Beginner's Mind
- Using Our Senses
- Raisin Activity
- Learning How to Meditate
- Parenting Practices: Connection is Key

Mindful Parenting or Autopilot

We spend much of our day on autopilot, or mindlessly performing tasks we have done so many times that we are not even aware we are doing it. For example, we might be taking a shower and washing our hair when suddenly, we cannot remember if we put cream rinse on. With mindfulness, we practice being in the present moment, one moment at a time, paying attention to all of our senses. This allows us to be more present and to see more clearly what is around us and unfolding. This allows us to be present for our loved ones, and also for ourselves. We can begin to see our feelings and needs, as well as the feelings and needs of those we love.



Mindfulness is helpful for *anyone*, including parents! Here are just a few of the benefits:

- Increased sense of calm and happiness
- Seeing with more clarity
- Responding vs. reacting
- Gaining emotional regulation
- Learning to let go of troubling thoughts

The Brain and the Stress Response

Amygdala: Our security guard. Fight, flight, fold, freeze responses.

Hippocampus: Like a file cabinet that houses memories. It becomes disengaged when the amygdala is activated, aka “flipping our lid.”

Prefrontal Cortex: CEO of our brain. The planning center and place of higher-level thinking skills. It is also overridden by the amygdala when the amygdala is activated.

Grounding Practices

As we have noticed, so often we leave our body and spend time in our mind. This feels like a natural way of being because we have not learned how to stay in our body. We practice mindfulness with all of our senses: taste, touch, sight, listening, and movement, because this is how we stay present in our bodies. When we notice we are carried away with thoughts and worries and strong emotions, we can always come back to our primary experiences—our senses. This practice helps calm us and allows us to respond rather than react.

Body scans are traditional practices, and I highly recommend that you use the guided body scan meditation in the MetaFi app to practice on a daily basis. Just before bed is a great time to do this, as it helps us relax. In this mindful parenting class, we will also practice quick, short grounding exercises such as those listed below. These practices help calm your amygdala and allow you to access your wise self.

- Feel your feet... wiggle toes...breathe, take a time out...
- Move, shake, bounce, walk!
- Engage with physical sensations.
- Stop and breathe.

Parenting Practices

Raisin Activity: Seeing my child through a new lens

If you were to take away the labels that you have assigned your child, how would you describe him/her?

Our mind is naturally drawn to see what's wrong (negativity bias) which has helped us survive as a species. However, this way of seeing is not always helpful. As we reflect on this exercise of seeing a child in a new way, how would it be helpful to let go of past behaviors, labels, upsets, or our own childhood experiences?

This week, spend some time observing your child with beginner's eyes when they do not notice you. What do you see, hear, experience? Please write your observations on the Practice Record Form.

Connect with yourself first; pause, breathe, ground. Then connect with your child. Work on physical connection and presence this week. Below are some practices you can try out this week.

- Make soft eye contact with your child.
- Parallel Park: sit on the same level as your child and next to them.
- Be aware of their facial expressions or tone of voice.
- Sing or hum a song.
- Sit quietly with them.
- Listen to them.
- Join in their play.
- BE WITH THEM FULLY.

Home Practice

Directions: Below are a variety of practice options. If this list seems overwhelming, select one or two from the list that you can commit to practicing every day.

1. **Create a schedule for practice.** It is often easier to practice at the same time each day. Schedule in your practice just as you would any other appointment or commitment.
2. **Mindful Parenting: “Child as Raisin”** Observe your child with full attention, as if you are seeing him or her for the first time, or as if you have come down from Mars and have never seen such a creature before, as we did in the raisin exercise. Choose a moment when your child is not aware that you are watching him or her. You may also take time to look at a recent photo of your child. Record your experience on the Practice Record Form, so that we can discuss it in the next session.
3. **Body Scan:** Try the body scan several times before we meet again. See if you can remain open to whatever experience you have, noticing and letting go of judgments or expectations when they arise.
4. **Mindful Breathing:** Try 5 minutes each day. Experiment with the time of day and the place.
5. **Grounding Activity:**
Choose a practice that will help you come back into your body, giving you a chance to calm so that you can respond to your loved ones, rather than react. This is a process that takes consistent practice. Take baby steps!
 - Feel your feet... wiggle toes...breathe...take a time out...
 - Move, shake, bounce, walk!
 - Engage with physical sensations.
 - Stop and breathe.
6. **Parenting Practices:** Experiment with the practices of making eye contact, parallel parking, noticing facial expressions and tone of voice, singing or humming. See how it goes!

Additional Comments:

changes in our child's behavior and miss opportunities to respond in new or creative ways. Our interactions can become automatic and repetitive, with less room for growth and change.

We may also have trouble seeing ourselves with a beginner's mind, instead judging ourselves based on our entire parenting history or our partner's or child's view of us. Or we may view our partner in a rigid way, not seeing him or her fully.

Seeing our child, ourselves, and our partner with the mind of a beginner opens the door a crack for the possibility of change, in every moment. When we see something new in our child, something unexpected, out of character, or fresh, we offer him or her the gift of experiencing them more fully and giving them the space they need to grow and change.

Adapted from Mindful Parenting: A Guide for Mental Health Practitioners. By Susan Bögels and Kathleen Restifo (Springer, 2013).

Mindful Parenting Is:

1. Greater awareness of a child's unique nature, feelings, and needs.
2. A greater ability to be present and listen with full attention.
3. Recognizing and accepting things as they are in each moment, whether pleasant or unpleasant. Turning towards the unpleasant.
4. Recognizing one's own reactive impulses and learning to respond more appropriately and imaginatively, with greater clarity and kindness.

Establishing Family Core Values

Goals	Core Values
Goals can be achieved.	Core values are things we believe in.
Goals are destinations.	Core values point the direction you want to go in. <i>Examples:</i> Education, being a good friend, honesty, doing your best, telling the truth

Regulating Emotions: Learning to Ride the Waves

Raising children is one of the most intense and challenging responsibilities in our lives. At times, it can be difficult and exhausting, and at other times richly rewarding and fulfilling. Sometimes we may become so busy in our lives that the richness of raising children becomes reduced to managing children and the family, instead of simply being with our children and family. When this happens, parenting can become just one of many tasks on our endless “to-do” list, and we lose touch with our experience of being in the moment with our children and families.

One of the biggest challenges in modern family life is dealing with stress. Stress has a negative effect on our parenting. When we are tense or stressed, we may be less attentive to our children and to how we relate to our children. When we feel stressed, we may react more impulsively to our children; for example, becoming more easily angered and short-tempered with them, or worrying about them instead of having faith in their potential for growth.

Unfortunately, when we feel stressed, we react with our automatic survival patterns, which are evolutionarily hardwired, automatic, and fast—and which occur out of our awareness. This fast response is *a short route* in the brain, located in the brainstem. The brainstem helps regulate aspects of alertness and bodily functions such as breathing and heart rate. The brainstem, combined with the limbic area, is also responsible for our fight-flight-freeze-fold response. This short route in the brain does not involve the prefrontal cortex, which is important for paying attention. A survival response, such as fighting, is functional in situations of real danger, as it is fast (e.g., grabbing your child’s arm forcefully when he dashes out into traffic), but is ineffectual and potentially destructive for the parent-child relationship in cases where there is no real or immediate danger.

Stress can also have a very negative effect on our relationship with our partner. When stressed, couples may have the tendency to work against each other instead of supporting each other. They may also forget to make time for each other, to give each other attention, or to simply be with each other. And of course, problems in the couple relationship have a direct negative impact on parenting. When partners don’t feel supported by each other, they may react by becoming more irritable towards their children or withdrawing from their children. Alternatively, they may become too close to their children, so that children don’t have the emotional space they need to grow.

Negative experiences from our own childhood can also have a negative effect on our parenting

style. Without realizing it, we may react to our own children in the way that our parents reacted to us as children. We may find ourselves going down the same negative path with our children, despite our good intentions, because it's the most well-worn path in our brains, and we repeat it automatically when under stress.

In Mindful Parenting, we learn to focus our attention to be more in the “here and now” and to shift to the “being mode” instead of the “doing mode” while parenting. Learning to focus our attention in this way can help us to deal better with stress in ourselves, in raising our children, in our relationship with our partner, and in our family. This can have many positive effects on parenting and on our contact with our children. We can be more present for the joys of parenting, as well as the difficulties. We can become more empathic towards ourselves and our children. When we parent with fuller awareness, we also slow down our automatic reactions. This gives us a chance to use the “longer route in the brain” – that is, to activate our frontal cortex, which helps us to pay attention, organize, plan, and see things from multiple perspectives, instead of our automatic fast route via the limbic system.

Training our awareness can also help us become more aware of our own negative automatic reactions stemming from difficult experiences in our youth. With that awareness, we are less likely to react in these automatic ways towards our children, partner, or family. When we become aware of these automatic reactions, we can choose to respond differently, in more effective ways. Finally, Mindful Parenting can help transform the quality of our relationship with our child.

Intentions For Session on Regulating Emotions

- Learn to find balance and calm for the parent AND ALSO help your child regulate
- Learn mindfulness and self-compassion practices that will help support you
- Identify common triggers and ways to meet them
- Add meditation and parenting practices
- Address tantrums and meltdowns with do-overs

Opening Meditation: One for Me and One for You

Breathe: Feel the sensation of breathing in and out. Notice how the breath nourishes and relaxes your body. Let your breath find its own natural rhythm, like the waves on the sea.

In breath focus: Enjoying the sensation of breathing in. If you like, you can add a compassionate word to your in breath, such as “kindness,” “connectedness,” or “belonging.”

Out breath focus: Call to mind someone to whom you would like to send warmth and goodwill. Visualize this person. Shift your attention to your out breath, and send this person compassion.

Next breathe in for you, and out for your loved one. Breathing in...breathing out...

Mindfulness Builds Resilience

- Builds integration between the right and left hemispheres.
- Helps children work through all of their emotions.
- Teaches children how to take care of themselves when they have strong emotions.
- Allows choices as natural consequences.
- Uses your core values and skills as an anchor.

Your Child's Behavior is Giving You Information

Signals the needs of safety, basic needs	Signals the need for satisfaction	Signals the need for connection, comfort	Enjoy with me
Anger Anxiety Helplessness Fear	Frustration Boredom Disappointment	Resentment Loneliness Hurt Inadequacy Sadness	Happiness Joy

Reflection

Leftovers from Our Own Childhood

- Unresolved issues from childhood are hot buttons for us.
- What were some messages you received as a child that have left you with angst?
- How does this affect your parenting today?

Reflection

Meditation Practice: RAIN

Use this practice to find comfort with your feelings and your child's feelings. You can work through these steps with a beginner's mind, with curiosity, being open to whatever you may find. You can use this meditation for yourself and your child. Each step can be viewed through your lens, and then your child's.

Recognize: Notice the feeling that is present. Name it to tame it.

Allow: Make space for the feeling. Accept the feeling; turn towards the feeling.

Investigate: Notice sensations in your body (heat, tenseness, mouth, jaw, stomach, chest).

Nurture: Identify your needs.

Practice and Write

Think of a common issue that you have with your child. Rather than using your judging mind, open with curiosity.

R: Recognize the feeling. Name it to tame it. Anger is here...Sadness is here...

A: Allow the feeling. Be with it.

I: Investigate with curiosity. Notice sensations in the body.

N: Nurture. What is needed? Soothing words, a break, a hug, rest, food...

Reflections:

Parenting Practices: Noticing and Preparing for Common Triggers

Some common triggers can fall into the acronym HALT: hungry, angry, lonely, and tired. When we are able to identify them, we can bring attention to these needs and try our best to meet them before they become a problem.

What do you notice about your children? What triggers them? How can you meet that need?

Reflections

Parenting Practices: Using Brain Science to Promote Success

	Child's Behavior	Parent Response
Upstairs Brain	Child is choosing behavior to get what he/she wants.	Firm, clear, consistent boundaries.
Downstairs Brain	Child has flipped their lid and cannot control their emotions.	Comfort, connect, soothe. Followed up by words to connect to the upstairs brain. Name it to tame it... "You wanted..."

Parenting Practices: Transitions

Other common problem areas are transitions, such as when it is time for the morning routine, or time to stop playing, brush teeth, and get ready for bed. Here are some techniques to try out in these transitions. We are trying to build a connection using right brain techniques and then following through with requests using words (left brain).

- Building connection: Make eye contact, get on the same level as your child, be mindful of your facial expression, notice the tone of your voice.
- Two by Two: Two feet on the ground and no more than two feet away.
- Parallel Park: Come and sit next to the child at play...then make a request.
- Build a routine: Such as getting out the door in the morning—make it the same every day.
- Hum a song: Connects with the brain.

Notes/Reflections:

Parenting Practices: Self-Compassion Practices

These practices can help meet our needs. Naming our reality is helpful. It connects us to our left brain, our wiser self. Soothing touch connects us to our right brain and as the name implies to our physical senses. These practices can be used anytime, anywhere, by anybody! They are useful to model for our children.

A Moment for Me	Soothing Touch
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● This is hard. Frustration is here.● All parents feel this way at times! I am not alone.● What do I need?	When we make physical contact through a soothing gesture, a hormone called oxytocin (“the feel good hormone”) is released. It can elicit feelings of love, trust, and relaxation

	and reduce stress responses. Hand on heart, self-hug
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Parenting Practices: The Do-Over

A **do-over** simply means we try to recognize when our actions and/or attitude are veering down an unhelpful path, and we request a “**do-over.**”

If the “do-over” involves actions toward another person, it is important to ask the other person for a “do-over” **when they are ready**. We try to practice taking responsibility for the actions that created the need for a “do-over” and to apologize appropriately.

Example: “I am sorry for yelling at you. I should not have treated you that way. When you are ready, can we have a do-over?”

The “do-over” is a tangible way to encourage kids to practice mindfulness because they know they can always, always, always begin again.

Reflections

Closing

Mindfulness Bibliography – Books, Resources, Apps and Podcasts

Books related to mindfulness for children/youth:

- A Handful of Quiet, Happiness in Four Pebbles by Thich Nhat Hanh
- Anh's Anger by Gail Silver Plum - Plum Blossom books
- Is Nothing Something? by Thich Nhat Hanh, Plum Blossom Books
- Master of Mindfulness: How to Be Your Own Superhero in Times of Stress – Laurie Grossman et al, New Harbinger Publications
- Moody Cow Learns Compassion by Kerry Lee MacLean (Mindful Monkey, Happy Panda)
- Moody Cow Meditates - Kerry Lee MacLean, Wisdom Press
- Peaceful Piggy Meditation - Kerry Lee MacLean, Albert Whitman and Co.
- Sitting Still Like a Frog, Mindfulness Exercises for Kids (and their parents), Eline Snel, Shambala
- Steps and Stones, Gail Silver, Plum Blossom Books (featuring Anh again!)
- What Does it Mean to be Present? by Rana DiOrio, Little Pickle Press
- Zen Shorts, Zen Ties, The Three Questions, Jon J Muth, Scholastic

Books for adults on mindful parenting, children/youth (resources for teachers/parents):

- Simplicity Parenting by Kim John Payne
- Soul of Discipline by Kim John Payne
- Being at Your Best When Your Kids Are at Their Worst by Dr. Kim John Payne
- Dr. Kim John Payne: Simplicity Parenting website, podcast
- Buddha's Brain by Rick Hanson with Richard Mendius
- Building Emotional Intelligence by Linda Lantieri
- Everyday Blessings by Jon and Myla Kabat-Zinn

- Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm, and Confidence by Rick Hanson
- Mindful Movements by Thich Nhat Hanh, Parallax Press
- Mindfulness Meditations for Teens by Bodhipaksa
- Mindful Parenting by Kristen Race, MacMillan
- Mindful Parenting in a Messy World podcast
- The Mindful Teen Dr. Dzung Vo – and related website: <http://mindfulnessforteens.com/>
- **No Drama Discipline by Dan Siegel MD**
- Planting Seeds: Practising Mindfulness with Children Thich Nhat Hanh, Plum Blossom Books
- Still Quiet Place for Teens by Amy Saltzman
- The Mindful Child by Susan Kaiser Greenland, Free Press
- Mindful Games by Susan Kaiser Greenland
- The Whole-Brain Child by Daniel J. Siegel, M.D, and Tina Payne Bryson, PH.D.
- **Wherever You Go, There You Are by Jon Kabat-Zinn**
- Your Fantastic Elastic Brain by Dr. JoAnn Deak and Sarah Ackerley