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Mindfulness 201: Bringing Mindfulness to Parenting

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Summary: This fact sheet will help you learn 1) why mindfulness is so powerfully helpful as a parent; 2) ways to be more mindful each day; 3) ways to help your children develop mindfulness.

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness means paying attention to what's happening right now. When you practice mindfulness, you turn your attention to your thoughts, emotions, body sensations and experience in the present moment. While doing this, you do your best to accept what happens, without labelling it as 'good', 'bad', or anything else. This can help you feel calmer and respond in more helpful ways.

How can I be a more mindful parent?

It's not always easy to keep our minds in the present moment. Our attention often gets pulled away by many things. So we end up not giving our full attention to what we're doing or the people we're with. We may dwell in the past, worry about the future or get distracted by our smartphones. Our minds jump from one thing to the next. Mindfulness teachers say this is our 'monkey mind'. It's like our mind is filled with monkeys, all jumping, chattering and screeching to get our attention. We can tame our 'monkey minds', but it takes practice. Here are some things to work on:

Listen with your full attention. Try to:

- Give your full attention to your child or teen.
- Listen with more than your ears. Facial expressions, tone of voice and body language are also very important.
- Notice what happens when you judge what your child or teen tells you, or when you give advice without being asked for it.

Accept yourself and your child or teen. Try to:

- Accept your children as they are, without judging their feelings, abilities, qualities or behaviour.
- Reflect on your hopes and desires for your children: are you wishing them to be different than they are?
- Bring your expectations in line with your child ot teen's age and abilities. Do they have distinct needs?
- Think about what makes your child or teen unique.
- Accept and understand your child's feelings, even the difficult ones, like anger.
- Accept yourself and your own feelings without judgment. You don't need to be perfect. Just good enough :-)

In fact, it’s important for children to see that everyone makes mistakes, that there are ways to fix mistakes, solve problems and work through conflicts

Take a moment. Try to:

- Pause and take a breath before you react to something that upsets you. This will help you to calm yourself, so you can respond more thoughtfully.
- Notice how your body feels when you’re upset.
- Be calm and patient when your child is angry, crying or upset. Help your child to name, and talk about their feelings.
- Consider how your child or teen feels when you react without thinking.

Be kind. Try to:

- Be kind and forgiving to yourself when you make mistakes. Try to focus on your efforts instead. Parenting isn’t easy, and every parent messes up sometimes.
- Be warm and affectionate with your child or teen.
- Respond to your child’s behaviour with understanding and compassion. This is even more important when your child’s behaviour is frustrating.
- See things from your child or teen’s point of view.

Everyday mindfulness

There are many ways to bring mindfulness to everyday life.

- Give the gift of your full attention. Truly ‘be there’ when you are with your child or teen. device away. Notice when your thoughts wander, and gently guide your attention back to the present moment with your children.

- Take advantage of chances to connect. Cuddle, read or walk together. Make meals, work on hobbies, crafts, or chores. Play outside or bring out a board game.

- Bring your ‘best self’. Do your best to manage your stress in positive ways, so that you bring your best to your family.

- Beware of multi-tasking. Try to focus on doing one thing at a time, more often. We are actually more productive and less stressed when we turn our attention to just one activity. Help your children to do the same. For example:
    - At mealtimes, focus on the food and the people around the table. Leave all devices in another room, and don’t have the TV on in the background.
    - As much as possible, have children and youth do school work without music or devices. For youth who feel they need some sound while they work, try classical music or sounds from nature (water running, birdsong).
    - Take a walk outside without headphones.

- Limit screen time. Too much time in front of computers, TVs and devices squeezes out time for important things, like active play, hobbies and connecting with others face to face. Some video games, or too much time playing them, can overload the senses.

- Focus on feelings. Help your children to notice and name their feelings. Help them understand that all feelings come and go. And they sometimes change quickly. Show that all emotions are OK, and that a feeling is not ‘who they are’.

Helping children become more mindful

There are many ways to help children focus their attention on the present moment.

- Connect the mind and body. Instead of just watching, give children and youth chances to be active players: singing, dancing, playing music, drawing, painting, or building.

- Enjoy the great outdoors. Being outside near trees, lakes or rivers is always calming. Watch the sun rise and set, Stare at the clouds, moon and stars. Help children tune in to their senses: ask about what they see, hear and smell.

- Awaken the senses and get dirty. Play with finger paint, water, sand, clay, mud and dirt. Plant seeds and watch them grow into flowers and vegetables.

Mindful parenting in action

You've had a busy day at work, and now have to catch up on email at home. Your kids are playing close by.

Their voices start to rise. Now they're yelling at each other. By the time you get up from your chair, your 3 year old is crying, because your 5 year old has pushed him over.

You feel your anger rising - why can't they get along? Why do they always seem to do this when you're really busy and already stressed? You're about to start yelling too.

Then... you take a moment. And a deep breath. You notice your angry and frustrated feelings. You notice that you also resent having to bring work home. And you remember that your kids are still pretty young, and just learning to work out conflicts and deal with their own frustration.

You take another breath, and say, as calmly as you can:

- "Whoa! What's going on here?"

After giving both kids a chance to explain, helping them to speak calmly, you show thow you've really understood them by repeating what they've told you:

- "I see. So Ari wanted to help, but you were afraid he'd break the house you were building. You've worked really hard on it. But Ari really wanted to play too. He got angry, and pushed your house over. Then you got angry, and pushed Ari over. Everybody's pretty upset and frustrated. It's OK to feel upset. But it's not OK to break people's houses, or to push people over. Let's take a minute to calm down together."

You sit on the sofa with one on each side of you, and have a little cuddle. When everyone's calmer, you say:

- "OK - so let's figure out what to do when Ben wants to build by himself, but Ari wants to help him."

You listen, and help each child express himself calmly to the other. You try to help them them come up with a solution, instead of solving the problem for them. And you don't force them to play together, "be nice', or apologize.

And if you lose your temper at times - be kind and forgiving to yourself. You're human, and parenting is the toughest job there is. Take a deep breath, and start again :-)

References

Burke, C. A. (2010). Mindfulness-based approaches with children and adolescents: A preliminary review of current research in an emergent field. Journal of Child and Family Studies, 19, 133-144. doi: 10.1007/s10826-009-9282-x

Duncan LG, Coatsworth JD, Greenberg MT (2009). A Model of Mindful Parenting: Implications for Parent-Child Relationships and Prevention Research, Clin Child Fam Psychol Rev, 12:255-270.

Websites for More Information

MindMasters 2: Skills that last a lifetime Free, simple and fun activities for children 4-9 years, to help children learn

ways to calm themselves, manage emotions and become more mindful.
http://www.cheo.on.ca/en/MindMasters2

American Mindfulness Research Association – online database for mindfulness research publications
www.goamra.org

BC Association for Living Mindfully – a non-profit society dedicated to education, research and advocacy around the benefits of mindfulness
www.bcalm.ca

Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society
www.umassmed.edu/cfm

Mindfulness for Teens – online guided meditations and resources
www.mindfulnessforteens.com

UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center – online resources and free guided meditations
www.marc.ucla.edu http://franticworld.com/free-meditations-from-mindfulness/

Books for Parents

Mindfulness for Beginners: Reclaiming the Present Moment—and Your Life, by Jon Kabat-Zinn Everyday Blessings: The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting, by Myla and Jon Kabat-Zinn.

Planting Seeds: Practicing Mindfulness with Children, by Thich Nhat Hanh.

Parenting from the Inside Out: How a Deeper Self-Understanding Can Help You Raise Children Who Thrive, by Daniel Siegel and Mary Hartzell

Sitting Still Like a Frog: Mindfulness Exercises for Kids (and Their Parents), by Eline Snel, Jon Kabat-Zinn and Myla Kabat-Zinn

The Mindful Child: How to Help Your Kid Manage Stress and Become Happier, Kinder, and More Compassionate, by Susan Greenland

Books for Children

A Handful of Quiet: Happiness in Four Pebbles, Thich Nhat Hanh.

Sitting Still Like a Frog: Mindfulness Exercises for Kids (and their Parents)
by Eline Snel. Simple mindfulness practices to help your child deal with anxiety, concentration, and difficult emotions.

I Am Yoga by Susan Verde. As a young girl practices various yoga poses, she imagines herself as different things and how she fits into the world.

Good Morning Yoga: A Pose-by-pose Wake-up Story by Miriam Gates. A series of simple, calming, and mindful poses for welcoming the natural world as day begins.

Good Night Yoga: A Pose-by-pose Wake-up Story by Miriam Gates. A series of simple, calming, and mindful poses for saying good night to the natural world at bedtime.

Breathe by Scott Magoon. A young whale enjoys its first day of independence.

When Lions Roar by Robie Harris. Loud, scary noises frighten a child until quiet and calmness return.

Authors

Developed by Dr. Meshal Sultan (Psychiatrist) and the members of the Mental Health Promotion Committee at CHEO, including Michael Cheng (Psychiatrist); Ann Kerridge (Social Worker); Elaine Trigg (Child/Youth Care Worker); Steve Du- mouchel (Child/Youth Care Worker); Michel Poirier (Social Worker); Phil Ritchie (Psychologist); Jennifer Boggett (Occupational Therapist) and Corrine Langill (RN, Health Promotion Specialist). Plain language editing and design by Corrine Langill.

Special thanks to Eva Schacherl (writer), Marjorie Robb (Psychiatrist, CHEO), Harpreet Grewal (Family Health Specialist, Ottawa Public Health) and Valerie Repta (Social Worker, Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre).

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