



Mindful Parents, Resilient Children Parenting in a Rapidly Changing World



Families today live in a society that is rapidly changing, increasingly demanding, faster moving, overly stimulating, increasingly unpredictable, and financially insecure. In the midst of this, stress-related symptoms and conditions in adults and children alike have become common, and cross all socioeconomic lines. There is an increasing need for both children and parents to develop stress management skills, and cultivate qualities of resilience in order to thrive in our current culture, and to prevent illness.

Mindfulness-based programs have been used increasingly in the health care system in the management of stress-related conditions. Extensive research has shown the many health and psychological benefits of practicing mindful awareness. Neuroscience research is showing the positive effects on the functioning and structure of the brain of regularly practicing mindfulness. Mindfulness-based programs have more recently been developed for children, teens, parents and teachers and are increasingly being used as a preventative as well as a treatment intervention.

The practice of living mindfully involves the practice of deliberately paying attention and living as many of the moments of our lives as possible with caring and intentional non-judgmental awareness.

Parenting: often accompanied by multiple stressors

The practice of parenting is often accompanied by multiple stressors. Under stress, we tend to spend more of our waking hours functioning mindlessly, reacting in a habitual way, often ineffectively and contrary to our values. Mindful living is about being fully awake and aware of what is going on, rather than reacting unconsciously according to predetermined habits, patterns, and judgments.

Practicing mindful awareness while parenting enables us to actually see our thoughts, feelings and body sensations more clearly, and with acceptance and self-compassion, as we interact with our children. This further allows us to see our children more clearly. It helps us to be aware of what is really happening here and now, without getting caught up in judgments, ruminations, prior expectations, or worries about the future. This gives us a choice to respond to what is happening in the moment more calmly, empathically, compassionately, effectively, and more in keeping with our values, rather than reacting unconsciously, automatically and driven by our emotional state.

Self-compassion and parenting

The practice self-compassion is integral to mindful parenting, as we are more present to our children when we are not caught up in self-judgment. Self-judgment tends to result in exhausting our vital emotional energy either by defending ourselves, or in denial of our feelings and thoughts as they truly are, rendering us unaware of what we may unconsciously be passing on or projecting on to our children. The opportunity to effectively respond to our thoughts and feelings wisely, and act with the best interest of our children in mind, is lost if we are not able to accept and clearly see our thoughts and feelings with an attitude of curiosity and compassion. Furthermore, children who are raised with parents who act with compassion and self-compassion are more likely to cultivate this capacity in their relationship with themselves and with others.

Mindful parenting is not a collection of techniques of how-to- dos and what-to-dos. Rather it is a practice of a way to be with our children, that is seeing and accepting of ourselves, and our children as they are now, responding effectively, and encouraging of their further growth in a healthy, safe, peaceful, and fulfilled way. Parenting tasks such as teaching, guiding, disciplining, limit-setting, nurturing, and providing a safe and healthy environment, among others, continue to play a central role of parenting in the context of a mindful relationship in which the child feels heard, respected, seen and accepted. When a child's behaviour needs to be addressed for moral, safety or health reasons, this need could be responded to with clarity, calm, compassion and wisdom.

The practice of mindful parenting is not conditional on the emotional states or stress levels of ourselves or our children, nor does it depend on external circumstances. Whatever is going on in ourselves, our children and the world around us is the actual subject of mindful awareness, and therefore an opportunity to practice.

Listening attentively

Listening in an attentive way is a valuable and practical expression of our love for our child, and understanding our child's perspective is an effective tool of communication. This often requires slowing down. Unfortunately, it can feel like we are going against the cultural grain to value or to learn how to slow down, pay attention, single-task, delay gratification, and be kind and compassionate to ourselves and to others. For many of us, it seems more culturally congruent to show our love for our children by doing as much as we can as fast as we can to provide them with all of the experiences and opportunities we think they need to thrive in this rapidly changing society.

In reality, we just do not know. The world is changing quickly. This uncertainty leads to some parents feeling powerless, and less confident in their parenting, deferring to the "experts" and well-intended "enriching" activities and stimulation in an attempt to prepare their children for an uncertain future in this competitive and stressful culture. Ironically, this may lead to insufficient time and energy for the most valuable, (and cost-effective) resource parents have to offer their children to enhance their resilience in preparation for their future: regular unstructured, "unproductive" time with a mindfully present and attuned adult. Optimally, a child's life would have a fluid balance between productive, active "learning time", and rest and unstructured "play time". In either case our mindful presence and the mindful presence of their teachers and other significant adults in their lives would enhance any experience.

Mindful parenting becomes especially important with the challenges of raising a child with biological vulnerabilities such as symptoms consistent with diagnoses of attention deficit disorder, anxiety disorder, depression, autistic spectrum disorder, and learning exceptionalities, and under stressful circumstances such as chronic illness of a family member, divorce, exposure to domestic or neighbourhood violence, and poverty, to name a few.

Mindfulness and the developmental success of the child

The reliable presence of an adult who is attuned to the child, who is willing and able to consider the perspective of the child, who cares unconditionally about the child, and who is able to regulate their own emotions and attention in order to clearly see and respond wisely to whatever is happening, is extremely valuable to the optimal emotional, social, physical and cognitive development, and success of the child.

Recent findings in neuroscience research suggest that parenting our children mindfully provides them with a sense of security which fortifies their health and wellness, enhances their abilities to learn to their full potential in and out of school, potentiates their ability to regulate their emotions and attention and to make good decisions, fosters resilience in the face of any curve balls that life throws their way, and enables them to thrive and positively contribute in this fast-paced and uncertain world.

Parenting mindfully also deepens the relationship between parent and child, and provides parents with a more comfortable and joyful experience of raising their children.

Mindful parenting is a practice which is simple, but not easy, and most definitely worth the effort.

- *M. Lee Freedman, MD, CM FRCP(C)*
mlfreedman@mindfulnessseveryday.com