

## Mindfulness for Real Parents

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What is a mindful parent in today's busy society? Our busy lives do not offer much time and space to "cultivate mindfulness." I am using the term mindfulness to describe the ability to reflect on one's own state of mind and to create an inner image of another person's state of mind (Siegel, 2007). This includes taking time to reflect on our experience of awareness, thoughts, and feelings; to practice being in the moment rather than pulled into the past or future. It means cultivating our capacity to observe ourselves and others, learning to pause and consider options, rather than simply react. How can busy parents pursue mindfulness to build a thoughtful relationship with their children? Many parents are working long hours, feeling the stress of a disconnected culture, and struggling to raise healthy and safe kids. Beginning something new, even something as seemingly simple as a new pattern of thought, can seem overwhelming, especially if it isn't clear how increased mindfulness will provide quick relief.



Let's start with the assumption that most parents want to help their children grow up to be healthy and resilient. We know that these good intentions do not always translate into good behaviors. Sometimes it's just the ebb and flow of our "good enough" parenting skills. Other times parents just don't know the path to create a healthy and happy environment, or they don't have the emotional or physical resources to pursue it. Even under the best of circumstances, childhood is not just a safe and comforting place for children. All children experience some anxiety, fear, and insecurity (Freiberg, 1959/1987).

We know, and a decade of research supports, that the quality of childhood sets the foundation for adolescent and adult development (Brazelton & Greenspan, 2000; Cozolino, 2006; Siegel, 1999, 2007). It is through the loving, secure, and contingent support of a primary adult that children develop the ability to calm their anxieties and overcome their fears. The experience of feeling secure and safe (or well regulated) as an infant and toddler literally builds the neural circuitry for self-regulation through the lifespan by connecting the middle prefrontal areas to the limbic regions. Without these integrative relationships with supportive adults, a child's burden is doubled by the lack of a safe harbor and the difficulty in building an internal buffer for the inevitable stresses of life. For parents who struggle in this area, the research suggests that mindfulness practices create a similar kind of middle prefrontal to limbic integration in adult brains, helping them to offer a secure base for their children (Davidson, Jackson, & Kalin, 2000).

The way brain structure is passed from parent to child makes it clear that parents also need a place to feel supported so they can grow and thrive (Siegel & Hartzell, 2003). We might begin to ask how we can create sanctuaries for parents where they can find peace and support in their lives, so they are more likely to develop the resources to create it for their children. Resilient communities help to build resilient families (Brazelton & Greenspan, 2000), a truth that suggests a change in priorities on a large scale.

One possible sanctuary even in the push and shove of today's society is a dedicated time for

mindfulness practice. For many people, a breathing practice will quickly bring a sense of calm as neural integration is fostered. However, when there is a lot of unresolved grief and fear, personal reflection can raise a great deal of pain that needs healing. This requires a special kind of longer-term support. The support of a kind and mindful friend may help parents, as well as a therapeutic relationship that incorporates both an understanding of the brain and the practice of mindfulness. Even in moments when we do not have solutions for their suffering, we therapists can offer the solace of connection. At that moment, we are also modeling (and they are internalizing) the kind of relationship that will help relieve their children's suffering. We can listen with compassion to their pain, and offer them repair and reconnection. Parents need a safe place to build compassion and love for the self. This takes patience and kindness, and often the companionship of an attuned other. Only when we adults learn to care for ourselves and love ourselves, can we consistently care for and love others (Hanh, 2007).



This is the kind of connection we want children to feel from their parents. We want them to feel held, literally and figuratively (Field, 2001). When parents attune to children, they are able to put themselves in their children's shoes and let them know that they understand. Attunement is a deep connection between people where people feel seen, understood, and known by one another (Siegel, 2007). This kind of connection is the basis of our ability to form intimate relationships. Attuning with our own selves may also be at the heart of personal well-being.

It may be helpful to reflect on our own experiences with our families, past and present. How easy is it to stay mindful and reflective in the midst of a typical day? There is often competition for resources and differing needs in the moment. How do we reconnect with our family members after disconnection? Honest reflection on our own

struggles and triumphs can pave the way for authentic empathy (and possibly a sense of humor) when we work with parents.

There are many ways to increase mindfulness: meditation, yoga, art, dance, music, poetry, self-reflection, writing, and connection with like-minded parents in the community. Some of these lend themselves to practicing with our children, like the mother and son enjoying a meditative moment together. Learning about ourselves and reflecting on our strengths and weaknesses can help us to be more present with ourselves when caring for our children. This increase in awareness makes us less likely to project our fears and insecurities onto them, allowing us to more accurately see their feelings and needs. Mindful caretakers are more likely to be thoughtful in their conversations, teaching, and approaches to discipline (Kabat-Zinn & Kabat-Zinn, 1997; Siegel & Hartzell, 2003).

Personally, over the past year, I have worked to create a space for meditation. I wanted to give it more of a priority in my life. So with good intentions, and research to back it up, I began to study with a meditation teacher. I started to take time to meditate (even if briefly). However, I have two young children, so it depends on babysitters, soccer games, visiting guests, health, and school activities. Does this sound like taking time for meditation and reflection? Sometimes I have doubted it. Doesn't meditation require commitment and focus?

As I reflect, while writing this piece, I'm feeling more generous with myself about it. Maybe meditation "distractions" and life conflicts can be a form of meditation, too. Maybe I can be mindful of all feelings and experiences, whether I am sitting still or not. I am becoming aware that the goal is not to eliminate the struggle, but to stay aware of it. Perhaps that is the essence of a

dedicated practice—to stay with it. Mindfulness can be found in the small spaces, in repair, and in our moment-to-moment interactions. Just being connected to and accepting my family, with all our imperfections, can be a mindful act. It depends on my state of mind. Am I in the moment or am I

somewhere else? Am I holding onto judgments or observing with compassion? When I am in the moment and accepting, this can be a form of mindfulness. I feel this is true. But, if not, I'll let it just be what it is, for now, and wish the best to all parents.

For the past 20 years, **Dr. Kathy Scherer** has been providing services to individuals and families in Austin, Texas. In particular, she provides family education on the parent-child relationship with a focus on emotional and neurological development to promote secure attachment. These educational forums have been provided in a variety of settings, including churches, pre-schools, community centers, and higher education institutions. She has completed specialized training with the Brazelton Touchpoints Institute and is a Touchpoints trainer in the Austin area. She is the Co-chair (and co-founder) of a multidisciplinary collaboration in Austin (Austin IN Connection) made up of therapists, doctors, nurses, researchers, and teachers organized to facilitate the development of emotional health in children and positive emotional attachments in families and the community. You can reach Kathy at [kmscherer@sbcglobal.net](mailto:kmscherer@sbcglobal.net).



When we come into the present, we begin to feel the life around us again, but we also encounter whatever we have been avoiding. We must have the courage to face whatever is present --our pain, our desires, our grief, our loss, our secret hopes, our love--everything that moves us most deeply.

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