

Mindfulness and Parenting

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The buzz word “Mindfulness” seems to be everywhere these days. A widely accepted definition of the word is given to us by John Kabat –Zinn, “Mindfulness is awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally.” The concept revolves around the fact that if we can slow down and really pay attention we can actually get more enjoyment out of life.

How many times have we missed half of a conversation with our child because we were also looking at emails on our phone?

How many times have we made a quick judgment or assumption about what our child did before we knew any facts at all?

Practicing mindfulness regularly can help with these situations and more.

Practicing Mindfulness can help you regulate your emotions, feel less stressed, improve attention, and minimize rumination (Arkowitz & Lillenfield: Farb et al., 2010 Raes & Williams, 2010; Slagter et al., 2007) There have been studies that have proven the effectiveness of mindfulness in treating depression and even physical or medical issues (Arkowitz & Lillenfield 2014). Studies have shown a decrease in the amygdala, which is the part of the brain responsible for the stress response and an increase in the hippocampus, the part of the brain responsible for emotion regulation. (Holzel et al., 2011).

How can you start to practice?

Start with 5 minutes each day, with a goal of getting to 20 minutes daily. Choose to focus on one thing, noticing your other thoughts but don't attach to them. For example, count your breaths 1... 2... and when a thought pops in like “did I remember to...?” just notice it, let it go and get back to counting 1... 2... If you need something more challenging to hold your attention, try naming foods that start with each letter of the alphabet.

How can practicing lead to more effective parenting?

Parent – Child interactions are often based in automatic patterns. Being more a mindful can help you notice these patterns. A couple of ways to start:

1. *Pay close attention and listen carefully to children during moment-to-moment parenting interactions.* At times we run on automatic pilot. This sometimes keeps us stuck in patterns that don't work for us.
2. *Practice a Non-judgmental acceptance towards your child and yourself.* Whether a child or parent, we all make mistakes. We all have times when we have behaved in ways we are not proud of. It is time to accept those moments and use them to learn from and move on.
3. *Purposefully modulate emotional reactivity to child behaviors.* At times, it is helpful to be mindful of using our own skills to remain calm and change our reactions to our child in order to change their patterns of behaviors.
4. *Identify qualities you admire in your child.* Everyone can use some reinforcement and a boost in self -esteem. Sometimes it is helpful to pay attention to what is going right!

One way to start practicing today it is to institute a daily gratitude practice at the dinner table. Have each family member share something they are grateful for that day or compliment another family member.

For some other ideas check out:

- *Mindfulness Activities for Families* via HeartMindOnline.org
- *Eight Ways to Bring Mindfulness Into Your Family* via ParentToolKit.com
- Additional information for parents on the Green Chimneys website via greenchimneys.org/clinical-resources

Arkowitz, H. & Lilienfeld, S. (2014). "Is Mindfulness Good Medicine?" *Scientific American*, 5(25), pp. 74-75

Be, R., Akiva, T., Arel, S., & Roeser, R.W. (2012). Mindfulness training effects for parents and educators of children with special needs *Developmental Psychology*, Advance online publication. doi: 10.1037/a0027537

Holzel, B., Carmody, J., Vangel, C., Verramsetti, S., Gard, T., & Lazar, S. (2011). Mindfulness practice leads to increases in regional brain gray matter density. *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging*, 191(1), 36-43. doi: 10.1016/j.pscychresns.2010.08.006

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