

Mindfulness for Parents and Families

Introduction

Perhaps it is not surprising that the pioneer in the field of mindful parenting is the one and the same Jon Kabat-Zinn who developed Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction ([MBSR](#)). In 1997, Kabat-Zinn, together with his wife Myla, a childbirth educator, who are themselves the parents of three children, published [Everyday Blessings: The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting](#), (Hyperion Books, 1998). Their book, about which Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*, exclaimed “At last an emotionally intelligent guide for parents,” set the stage for the interest in the uses of mindfulness in the context of families. Since that time, the applications of mindfulness in family life have gradually grown, with programs being developed in various contexts. Today there is the beginning of a body of research literature focused on family-related mindfulness interventions, as well.

Boegels, Lehtonen, and Restifo look at the growing use of mindfulness in parenting programs as an effective strategy for both the treatment and prevention of childhood mental disorders. Noting the current shortage of good research on how mindful parenting might actually work. They propose six possible mechanisms as follows:

- (1) reducing parental stress and resulting parental reactivity;
- (2) reducing parental preoccupation resulting from parental and/or child psychopathology;
- (3) improving parental executive functioning in impulsive parents;
- (4) breaking the cycle of intergenerational transmission of dysfunctional parenting schemas and habits;
- (5) increasing self-nourishing attention; improving marital functioning and co-parenting.

(Boegels, S., Lehtonen, A., and Restifo, K. (2010) [Mindful Parenting in Mental Health Care](#).)

Reviewing the available literature, the authors conclude that it is still too early to draw conclusions regarding how mindfulness positively affects parenting and call for more and larger studies. However their preliminary analysis seems to suggest that there is already some support for mechanisms 1, 2, and 6 above.

Below we will look at the research on how mindfulness interventions can be impactful within families in several ways. These include the special relationship during pregnancy and following birth between mother and child, the effects of mindfulness on parenting, improved relationships between parents, and the role of mindfulness as a shared experience including all members of the family.

Prenatal Mindfulness

Several studies have been recently conducted where mindfulness was taught to expecting mothers or mother/father pairs. In the first such study Vieten and Astin found that the 31 mothers trained in mindfulness experienced 20–25% less anxiety during their final months of pregnancy than those in the control group. (Vieten, C. and Astin, J. (2008) [Effects of a mindfulness-based intervention during pregnancy on prenatal stress and mood: the results of a pilot study](#).) In the second 2010 study, Duncan and Bardacke followed 27 expectant mother/father pairs who participated in a program called Mindfulness-Based Childbirth and Parenting. Again the quantitative results revealed statistically significant reductions in pre-birth anxiety and increases in both mindfulness and positive affect. Qualitative reports from the subjects showed benefits during the early period of parenthood as well. Such results suggest that mindfulness training for expectant mothers could possibly improve attachment outcomes for their children. (Duncan, L. and Bardacke, N. (2010) [Mindfulness-based childbirth and parenting education: promoting family mindfulness during the perinatal period](#).)

Mindfulness and Attachment Theory

In fact, recently attention has turned to the relationship between mindfulness and attachment theory. In their 2012 article “Attachment Theory and Mindfulness,” Snyder, Shapiro, and Treleaven explore this topic. Attachment theory has shown that our early life experiences, especially with our most intimate caregiver, shape our expectations of relationships in the future. We learn how to relate to the world through our relationship with our primary caregiver. The style of relationship we learn depends largely on the ability of our caregiver to attune to us. If attunement is strong, a child will develop a secure way of being in the world. However if the caregiver is not so capable of attunement, various insecure attachment styles may be the result. The attachment, or relationship, style we develop in infancy stays with us and influences our ongoing life experience. Research suggests that while secure attachment results in cheerful, socially well-adjusted children, those with insecure styles are more likely to be unhappy, socially alienated, and have difficulty responding to adversity. The attachment style a child acquires in their early years from their own caregivers tends then to be the style they themselves employ later as parents and thus pass on to their own children. Attachment styles thus tend to be handed down from generation to generation. Snyder, R., Shapiro, S., and Treleaven, D. (2012) [Attachment and mindfulness](#).)

Yet the good news is that it is possible later in life to reverse an insecure attachment style. According to [Daniel Siegel](#), an expert on the neurobiology of mindfulness, one factor that promotes this shift is self-understanding, something that is a central benefit of mindfulness practice. Through the cultivation of mindful introspection, it is possible to develop increased self knowledge, compassion for oneself and deepened self-acceptance, a process that could be called self-attunement or “earned security,” leading to a healing of a parent's own attachment wounds and a more secure attachment style going forward, one that she/he is then able to impart to her/his

own children. (Siegel, D. (2007) [The Mindful Brain](#), p. 204ff.)

In fact, as Siegel notes, the neurophysiological effects of mindfulness practice are similar to that of secure attachment. (Siegel, D, [The Mindful Brain](#), p. 132.) Because becoming a parent is a challenging time when a new parent's own attachment styles become particularly obvious, it is also a time when mindful awareness can heighten self-knowledge leading towards the transformation of attachment style. A more self-attuned parent is more likely to effectively attune to a young child leading to a more secure attachment style for the child as well.

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Here again we see evidence of self-attunement or Siegel's notion of “earned security,” a shift in attachment style that can have a positive effect on parenting. (Pruitt, I. and McCollum, E. (2010) [Voices of experienced meditators: The Impact of meditation practice on intimate relationships.](#))

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The authors conducted research on their program with a total of 32 “self-referred, non-clinical” families, 24 of whom received the mindfulness training program and 8 of whom were waitlisted to provide a control group. Saltzman and Goldin measured five areas: attention, emotional reactivity and regulation, anxiety, depression, and metacognitive functioning. Compared with the waitlist group, both parents and children showed improvement in their ability to “direct their attention in the face of distractions that usually induce conflict” (p. 155). Parents showed mood improvements in both depression and anxiety while children did not. Both age groups showed increased metacognitive capacity, especially in the areas of self-judgment and self-compassion. While both parents and

children showed decreased emotional reactivity the change was stronger for the parents than for the children. The intervention taught mindfulness in both formal practices, such as mindfulness of breathing, and in informal everyday activities, such as brushing one's teeth. Analysis of the impact of these two distinct aspects of mindfulness practice revealed that formal practice was the strongest factor in improving attention while informal practice was more critical when it came to reducing depressive symptoms.

Mindfulness in the Context of Family Therapy

So far there is little literature on the uses of mindfulness in the context of family therapy. The one resource available currently is a book chapter by Quintilliani that consists of a case study of mindfulness-based family therapy with a family dealing with a combination of stress, anxiety and chronic pain. He describes his integration of such mindfulness practices as mindful breathing, the body scan etc., into family therapy sessions, and reports a reduction in overall family stress, clearer roles, better boundaries, increased family harmony and more effective family rituals. There were also reductions in symptoms for individual family members with, overeating issues, chronic pain, and ADD. (Quintilliani, A. "A family case study on mindfulness-based family therapy for chronic co-occurring disorders: Chronic stress, chronic anxiety, chronic pain," in Atwood, J. and Gallo, C. (eds.) (2009) [Family Therapy and Chronic Illness](#))

Where We Stand

While the research to date is promising, there is the need for extensive additional research into the potential of family-based mindfulness interventions to heal family dysfunction as well as to improve the lives of healthy families.

Programs

Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, CA, a Buddhist meditation center offers a [Family Program](#) which incorporates the teaching of mindfulness in a Buddhist context to children, adolescents, and their parents, Their program involves classes, daylongs, and, each summer, their annual Family Retreat.

Lesley Grant, a pioneering Waldorf-inspired educator in San Anselmo, CA, has developed a community-based family mindfulness program, [Marin Mindfulness Cooperative](#), that incorporates early childhood education together with mindfulness classes for parents and their older children. To learn more about Grant's program visit her website at

Resources for Mindful Parenting

[The Mindful Parent](#) website.

The Garrison Institute report "[Mindful Parenting: Conceptualization and Measurement](#)" on the current status of mindful parenting. The Garrison Institute describes itself as follows: "Founded in 2003, the Garrison Institute is a non-profit, non-sectarian organization exploring the intersection of contemplation and engaged action in the world." They focus on both social and environmental issues.

Myla and Jon Kabat-Zinn's "[12 Exercises for Mindful Parenting](#)."

Psychology Today blog by Jonathan Kaplan, PhD: "[Urban Mindfulness- Letting Go of Expectations: A Lesson in Mindful Parenting](#)"

Julia Kantor, MFT, describes her own experience of [being in a mindful parenting group](#) and its impact on her family culture.

Books

[Parenting Your Anxious Child with Mindfulness and Acceptance](#), by Christopher McCurry, PhD.

[Parenting Your Stressed Child: 10 Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Practices](#), by Michelle Bailey, MD

[Mindful Parenting: Meditations, Verses, and Visualizations for a More Joyful Life](#), by Scott Rogers.

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The authors conducted research on their program with a total of 32 "self-referred, non-clinical" families, 24 of whom received the mindfulness training program and 8 of whom were waitlisted to provide a control group. Saltzman and Goldin measured five areas: attention, emotional reactivity and regulation, anxiety, depression, and metacognitive functioning. Compared with the waitlist group, both parents and children showed improvement in their ability to "direct their attention in the face of distractions that usually induce conflict" (p. 155). Parents showed mood improvements in both depression and anxiety while children did not. Both age groups showed increased metacognitive capacity, especially in the areas of self-judgment and self-compassion. While both parents and children showed decreased emotional reactivity the change was stronger for the parents than for the children. The intervention taught mindfulness in both formal practices, such as mindfulness of breathing, and in informal everyday activities, such as brushing one's teeth. Analysis of the impact of these two distinct aspects of mindfulness practice revealed that formal practice was the strongest factor in improving attention while informal practice was more critical when it came to reducing depressive symptoms.

Mindfulness in the Context of Family Therapy

So far there is little literature on the uses of mindfulness in the context of family therapy. The one resource available currently is a book chapter by Quintilliani that consists of a case study of mindfulness-based family therapy with a family dealing with a combination of stress, anxiety and chronic pain. He describes his integration of such mindfulness practices as mindful breathing, the body scan etc., into family therapy sessions, and reports a reduction in overall family stress, clearer roles, better boundaries, increased family harmony and more effective family rituals. There were also reductions in symptoms for individual family members with, overeating issues, chronic pain, and ADD. (Quintilliani, A. "A family case study on mindfulness-based family therapy for chronic co-occurring disorders: Chronic stress, chronic anxiety, chronic pain," in Atwood, J. and Gallo, C. (eds.) (2009) [Family Therapy and Chronic Illness](#))

Where We Stand

While the research to date is promising, there is the need for extensive additional research into the potential of family-based mindfulness interventions to heal family dysfunction as well as to improve the lives of healthy families.

Programs

Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, CA, a Buddhist meditation center offers a [Family Program](#) which incorporates the teaching of mindfulness in a Buddhist context to children, adolescents, and their parents, Their program involves classes, daylongs, and, each summer, their annual Family Retreat.

Lesley Grant, a pioneering Waldorf-inspired educator in San Anselmo, CA, has developed a community-based family mindfulness program, [Marin Mindfulness Cooperative](#), that incorporates early childhood education together with mindfulness classes for parents and their older children. To learn more about Grant's program visit her website at

Resources for Mindful Parenting

[The Mindful Parent](#) website.

The Garrison Institute report "[Mindful Parenting: Conceptualization and Measurement](#)" on the current status of mindful parenting. The Garrison Institute describes itself as follows: "Founded in 2003, the Garrison Institute is a non-profit, non-sectarian organization exploring the intersection of contemplation and engaged action in the world." They focus on both social and environmental issues.

Myla and Jon Kabat-Zinn's "[12 Exercises for Mindful Parenting](#)."

Psychology Today blog by Jonathan Kaplan, PhD: "[Urban Mindfulness- Letting Go of Expectations: A Lesson in Mindful Parenting](#)"

Julia Kantor, MFT, describes her own experience of [being in a mindful parenting group](#) and its impact on her family culture.

Books

[Parenting Your Anxious Child with Mindfulness and Acceptance](#), by Christopher McCurry, PhD.

[Parenting Your Stressed Child: 10 Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Practices](#), by Michelle Bailey, MD

[Mindful Parenting: Meditations, Verses, and Visualizations for a More Joyful Life](#), by Scott Rogers.