

## Mindful Parent, Happy Parent

Traditional parenting programs are routinely proven to be inadequate in changing set behaviours in children. In fact it is becoming increasingly understood that relying solely on methods of control such as reward and punishment teaches children that they are loved and accepted only when they please us or impress us. This can lead to a lack of self-acceptance and a slow erosion of their self-worth. It can also contribute to a lack of parent-child connection, and an increase in stress and frustration.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, founding director of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center and author of several books including *Mindful Parenting*, agrees that unconscious parenting can have long-term negative consequences for children. He describes unconscious parenting as responding only to surface behaviours without paying attention to what a child is feeling. As adults we provide emotional regulation for children and we often fail at this by personalizing our child's behaviour and reacting accordingly. We engage in unnecessary power struggles when we assume that a child's tone is more about us than it is about them. When we tirelessly socialize children with "no" "no" "no" as a conditioned response we heighten their sensitivity to our disapproval. Children begin to learn that their acceptance is based on certain conditions, when in reality their most basic need is to be loved and accepted unconditionally.

Mindfulness essentially refers to an awareness of present experience with acceptance. Mindful parenting involves non-judgmental and focused listening, the cultivation of emotional awareness and the ability to self-regulate. If this sounds overly idealistic consider the fact that we are all born with these abilities, but tend to lose sight of them as we age. As children we had a natural ability to live in the moment. Have you ever wondered how a child can possibly get as much or even more enjoyment out of being read the same story for the forty-fourth time? It has to do with their innate capacity to experience the present moment. As adults we routinely disengage from the present while interacting with our children, often focusing our awareness on past behaviours or into future of to do lists. The goal of mindful parenting is to live in the present moment and fully engage with our child.

In *Mindful Parenting* Kabat-Zinn writes that the wonderful gift of mindfulness in parenting is the ability to pause in the moment and ask, "What am I feeling?" and "What is this like from my child's point of view?" When we do this we often notice things we didn't allow ourselves to see before because we were caught up in the limitations of unconscious or reactive parenting. Following are some basic ways to further develop the natural ability to be a mindful parent.

First of all practice cultivating awareness and acceptance of your own experience, including your thoughts, emotions and bodily sensations. Your own inner stability is essential. If you learn to accept distress, your child can accept distress. Keep in mind the saying that “whatever you resist persists”. In attempts to avoid unpleasant situations or emotions we often behave in ways that provide short-term relief, but that are incongruent with long-term values we want our children to learn. We all want our children to grow into mature, independent individuals who are capable of handling the challenges that life will present them. This means that as parents we have to become more aware of tension as it builds within us, and learn to live with what arises without losing our balance. Mindfulness allows us to take a breath. It creates a gap between an unpleasant emotion or thought and our subsequent action. Responding skillfully as a parent requires the ability to create this gap.

The next time you find yourself saying “no” to your child, bring your awareness to the present moment. Although “no” is often necessary, many times it is a reactive response when we are preoccupied or stressed and has very little to do with the substance of the request. Stop whatever you are doing for a moment and pay attention to your breath. Drawing deeper and slower breaths will calm your body and clear your mind. Tell your child you were quick to say “no” and that you would like more information. Then invite them to make their request again and explain their reasons. Notice what happens within you, including any negative thoughts or impulses to interrupt. Ride out the urge to react as you attend to your child and any need they might be expressing. A mindful and mature response is one that can be delivered with love and kindness. Your child may still be disappointed if they hear a “no”, but your mindful attention will contribute positively to their growth and development.

There will undoubtedly be times when you regret an unconscious or mindless reaction to your child’s behaviour. Kabat-Zinn emphasizes the value of apologizing when you have betrayed a child’s trust, no matter how small or insignificant it may appear. An apology demonstrates that you have thought about the problem and that you are capable of seeing it more clearly, perhaps even from your child’s point of view. Apologies are healing and when given thoughtfully and with integrity they help to build stronger relationships.

In the end, the goal of mindful parenting is to live fully and joyfully. The added benefits to the health and well-being of yourself and your loved ones are unlimited.