

Review Article**Mindfulness in Parenting and its implications**

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Abstract

Background: Parenting is one of the most challenging and stressful jobs. At the same time, its significance lies in the influence it has on the life of the one being parented. Various cognitive and behavioral models teach us how to control and modify behavior of children but do not regard the inner experience of parenting. Such models often reduce children to mere guinea pigs, ignoring their sensitive hearts and minds. This is the place where mindfulness can bridge the gap and make us more sensitive and appreciative of children's inner experience.

Aim: In this paper, we define and discuss the concept of mindfulness and its application to parenting.

Methods: We outline the skills of mindfulness and how these practices can help in positive changes for parents and their children. Finally, we discuss the evidence to support the application of mindfulness as an intervention to better the parent-child relationship, and recommend future directions for research and discussion.

Results and conclusions: Mindfulness can help parents learn being purposefully aware of their own experience of parenting. Mindfulness can teach parents to nourish their children in an optimal manner so that their children, and they themselves can realize their full potential.

Key words: mindfulness, parenting, effectiveness

Introduction – what is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is an ancient concept, often linked with Buddhist meditation practices. It is a simple, but very relevant concept that has been defined in many different ways over the years by different authors. Definition by Kabat—Zinn [1] describes it succinctly:

“Mindfulness is the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.”

In this view, mindfulness promotes a long lasting sense of well-being which lies in simply being with whatever is happening in the present moment, with recognition that it will pass and be replaced by a new experience in the next moment [1, 2]. Western psychological texts have described mindfulness as *“a receptive attention to and awareness of present events and experience”* that permits full awareness of what is happening in the moment [3]. Simply described, mindfulness is choosing and learning to control our focus of attention. However, our attention holds objects for a short time but our affective and cognitive responses continue even in the absence of object. These primary and automatic judgments (“good” or “bad”) along with our biases, may cause a distortion in our own reality. Mindful awareness helps to overcome these distortions and permits for choosing how we respond to internal and external experiences [4]. Moreover, controlling this automaticity through mindful processing of experience allows for self-regulation in goal pursuits [5]. Five basic mindfulness skills are believed to be related to other psychological processes [4, 6]. Duncan et al [4] describe these in a simple manner as follows:

1. Acting with awareness: This is the opposite of dissociation/absent mindedness.
2. Observing: It is the intentional focusing of attention on stimuli.
3. Describing: It means describing experiences with words.

4. Non-reactivity to inner experience: This involves decentering from mental events and allowing thoughts to be “just thoughts” or affect to be “just feelings” instead of over-identifying with them.
5. Non-judging of inner experience: This involves self-regulation of reactivity to mental events, including social information processing.

Mindfulness practices and related interventions have been found to be promising in many areas including chronic physical illness, depression and stress coping [7-10].

Application of Mindfulness in parenting

The first discussion on mindfulness in parenting was published by Kabat – Zinn [1]. This pioneering work described three pillars of mindful parenting: sovereignty, acceptance, and empathy. Sovereignty means recognizing the child’s “*true nature*” by looking beyond just the child’s behavior. Acceptance is defined as “*an attempt to come to terms with the nature of things,*” within the parent, child, or a situation. Empathy is described as compassion or understanding with the other. It is suggested that daily mindfulness can help in keeping up with a child’s changing developmental needs [1]. In a ground-breaking work, Dumas [11] suggested mindfulness training as a mechanism whereby parents might “consider their own and their child’s behavior nonjudgmentally, to distance themselves from negative emotions, and to develop parenting goals that are accompanied by motivated action plans.” Mindful parenting has been described as a fundamental parenting skill [12, 13] and parenting can be made more efficacious by incorporating practices of everyday mindfulness in the context of the parent training [14]. This allows parents to fundamentally shift their awareness and view their parenting experience “now” within the context of the long term relationship they have with their child. At the same time they can attend to the child's needs, while exercising self-regulation and wise choices in their actions [4].

Mindfulness principles allow for us to make distinctions between parenting goals and motivations that are egoistic (self/parent oriented) and those that are child and relationship oriented [15]. According to Duncan et al [4], “when parents desire primarily to feel in control of their child (a parent oriented goal) without carefully taking their child's needs, wants and feelings into perspective (i.e. they are not child oriented), they are not being relationship oriented.”

Mindful parenting model

Duncan et al [4] have described a mindful parenting model that suggests that parents who can remain aware and accepting of their child's needs through using mindfulness practices, can create a family atmosphere that allows more “enduring satisfaction and enjoyment” in the parent child relationship.

It encompasses five dimensions of mindful parenting relevant to the parent child relationship:

- 1. Listening with full attention**

Parents are encouraged to listen to their child with full attention i.e. being receptive of the child's cues, be it the cries of infancy or facial expressions and body language later in life. This will allow parents to perceive their child's needs and feelings more accurately and will further reduce conflict.

- 2. Nonjudgmental acceptance of self and child**

This encourages parents to be nonjudgmental and unbiased when it comes to their children and avoid having unrealistic expectations from their child which may adversely affect their behavior [16]. At the same time, it allows parents to set clear standards and expectations for the child's behavior which are culturally and developmentally appropriate. Parents should also accept the fact that growing up in today's world is a challenge in itself and is bound to create struggles in the parent-child relationship.

3. **Emotional awareness of self and child**

Parent should make conscious choices about how to respond to their children rather than letting automatic cognitive processes often ignited by strong emotions to take over. Thus parents can make an effort to decenter themselves (by realizing that feelings are just feelings). This will allow them to be fully be with their child.

4. **Self- regulation in parenting relationship**

The model proposes that parents exercise self-regulation in their interactions with their children, that is, pausing before reacting in order to be more mindful. Parents who are tolerant of their child's display of emotion and don't respond to the child's negative affect with their own negative emotions raise more emotionally stable and socially competent individuals [17]. Also, parents should teach children how to express their feelings to make them more self-regulating as well [18].

5. **Compassion for self and child**

Mindful parenting also includes projecting empathy and compassion for one's child to alleviate the child's distress. At the same time, parents need to exercise self-compassion to avoid self-blame and be more forgiving them. Further effective and competent parents interact with their children in a more development -positive manner [19].

How does it work?

Mindfulness can be used to target parent - child relationships primarily due to its effect on attention. Bögel et al [9] has hypothesized that mindfulness-based parenting interventions may exert their effects by targeting six domains:

1. **Parental stress**

Mindfulness training is believed to decrease parental stress, thereby improving parenting. Parenting is adversely affected by stress as parents who are under stress can be less warm, rejecting and controlling towards their children [20, 21].

2. Parental preoccupation resulting from parental and/or child psychopathology

Mindfulness may be effective in breaking the cycle of negative cognitions associated with mental disorders of both parents (such as depression, anxiety, OCD and stress disorders) and children (ADHD, Autism Spectrum Disorder) and help in focusing the attention in an unbiased and nonjudgmental way toward the child [9].

3. Parental executive functioning

Mindfulness techniques teach individuals to slow down their reactions and to be aware of their intention before acting. In mindfulness parenting programs, parents are taught to take a “breathing space” (i.e. to attend to their own breathing) before responding to difficult child behaviors that may trigger impulsive reactions, thus reducing parental reactivity [9].

4. Repeating dysfunctional schemes and habits

Parents, in a subconscious way, are assumed to repeat dysfunctional parenting patterns that they have been exposed to while growing up [22]. Mindfulness and particularly being mindful during and about emotionally stressful or painful parent–child interactions may prevent and stop intergenerational transmission of dysfunctional upbringing patterns [9].

5. Self-nourishing attention

Being a parent involves a shift of attention and resources from the self towards one’s child, and therefore reduces self-nourishing attention. Taking care of oneself while taking care of one’s child may be a prerequisite for good parenting. Kabat-Zinn [1] noted that when parents’ inner resources become depleted, they have to find effective

ways to replenish them, without doing so at the expense of their children. Mindfulness promotes self-nourishing attention or self-compassion and thus improves parenting [9, 23].

6. Marital functioning and co-parenting

Mindful parenting interventions are hypothesized to help reduce interparental conflicts by lowering partners' emotional reactivity to each other and increasing couples' flexibility and reducing criticism and rigidity [9]. Mindfulness is also thought to improve co-parenting, which is defined as "ability of parents to support and not disqualify the partner in the presence of the child, whether the partner is present or not" [24].

Applications of Mindful parenting

Mindfulness practice has been shown to result in better mental health outcomes in children as well as parents in a variety of contexts. The Mindfulness-enhanced Strengthening Families Program (MSFP) has been shown to improve parents' (particularly fathers') emotional awareness of their adolescents [25]. In pregnant women, the Mindfulness Based Childbirth and Parenting (MBCP) course was shown to improve the mother's relationship with her newborn [26]. A study of 105 fathers of children aged 6-18 with intellectual disabilities (moderate to severe), showed that fathers with higher levels of mindfulness were more likely to engage in child related activities [14].

Mindfulness has been shown to reduce symptoms of depression in parents taking care of children both with and without special needs. Beer et al demonstrated that higher levels of mindfulness were associated with less parent distress in families of children with autism spectrum disorder [27]. A reduction in children's symptoms as well as parental stress with mindfulness interventions was seen in families of children with ADHD as well [28]. Another clinic based study showed that high levels of mindfulness was associated with

authoritative style of parenting in mothers. They showed appropriate conflict management and parents were less likely to view their children as problematic. In contrast, mothers who showed low levels of mindfulness adopted an authoritarian style of parenting and showed harsh responses to conflict [29].

Challenges and recommendations

Mindfulness requires the unlearning of conditioned responses and cognitive biases which requires insight and practice. This presents a challenge for patients with a lack of insight or motivation to practice constant emotional self-regulation. To maintain affection in a relationship without reacting requires discipline and constant effort [4]. It has been suggested that adding a physical component to mindfulness training, such as yoga or breath control, may help enforce behavior change [30].

While studies of mindful parenting based interventions have shown promise, more work is needed. A recent review noted that the majority of investigations into mindful parenting are in mothers of high socioeconomic status and education [31]. In the Indian context, studies on mindful parenting are lacking. However, mindfulness based stress reduction intervention showed promise in rural women dealing with the grief of stillbirth. While the subjects displayed enthusiasm and acceptance, limited autonomy and resources were observed as barriers to implementation [32]. More such studies are needed to adapt mindful parenting to diverse cultural and social contexts.

In caring for children with disabilities, there's evidence to support the use of mindfulness parenting tools by nurses [33]. As nurses play an essential role in care-giving through all stages, this holds promise and warrants further research. Only after filling the gaps in knowledge can we reach consensus on the "dose" i.e. the optimal duration/frequency of sessions and modes of delivery in order to affect change.

Conclusion

Parenting is influenced by stressors from both inside the home (e.g. marital discord) and outside (e.g. demands from the workplace). These factors may impede parents from parenting in the way that they deem ideal. Moreover, parenting goals those are set by the parents give way to frustration when they are not met. Mindfulness in parenting can help parents achieve these goals in spite of the stress they may be experiencing and avoid over-reacting to the daily strains in the parent-child relationship. Thus they can effectively parent and discipline their children while fostering positivity, warmth and love in the relationship they have with their children and between themselves. Mindfulness in parenting holds promise as an intervention for the betterment of the parent-child relationship. We hope that it can be adapted in the sociocultural context of parenting, in order to realize its full potential.

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