

# An Introduction to Mindful Parenting <sup>†</sup>

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## 1) Introduction

Who of us, as a parent, has not experienced our child talking to us, clearly wanting our attention, when we are busy doing something else? We might follow what they are saying as best we can for a while but then, whatever we are doing takes our attention and, instead of having a conversation with our child, we say something like, "Uh uh!" "Mmm!" "Oh!" "Really!" or "That's nice!" What's happened is that we've gone "on autopilot" and, without meaning to be inattentive, not really understood or appreciated what our child has said. As well as losing an opportunity to connect with our child, we may also have given our child the impression that what they have to tell us is not important enough for us to give it our full attention. Children learn fast – they will soon look for others to talk with or find other ways of getting our attention.

In hindsight, we might have recognized that it's not possible to listen and have a conversation at the same time as being busy. If we wanted to avoid going "on autopilot," we might have stopped what we were doing in order to listen attentively. Alternatively, we might have let our child know that we want to listen carefully to what they have to say, that we can't do this while we are busy, and that we'd like to finish what we are doing and then have some time together with them so that we can really listen to what they have to tell us. We need to let our children know that they are worthy of our full attention.

This illustration about lack of attention is an example of what might be called "knee-jerk parenting," when a parent reacts to a situation and doesn't really connect with what's going on. There are times when, as parents, we act in ways that surprise us, or we act as though we were in a dream, or we behave in ways we wish we had not. After these kinds of occasions, by way of explanation, we might say something like, "I wouldn't have done that if I'd thought about it!" Another way we could say this is, "I wouldn't have done that if I had been more mindful." And, without too much of a stretch, you can get an idea of what being a mindful parent is about.

## 2) The importance of making sense of your own childhood

"A chip off the old block" is a saying that suggests that children can be like their parents. Both genetically and in terms of learned behaviour, children acquire characteristics from their parents. Less well known is the finding that a child's security of attachment to parents (how secure the child feels in relationship with their own parents), which is the foundation for the child's development, is strongly connected to the parent's understanding of their own early life experiences.

***The way that you make sense of your childhood experiences has a profound effect on the way you parent your own children.<sup>1</sup>***

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<sup>1</sup> This and the following quotes in text boxes are from an excellent book written by Dan Siegel and Mary Hartzell entitled *Parenting from the inside out: How a deeper self-understanding can help you raise children who thrive*. New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2004. The ideas in this article are strongly influenced by this book and other writings by Dan Siegel.

What is the significance of early childhood experience and its relevance to parenting? Few of us would claim to have had a “perfect childhood.” For some it was much more imperfect than for others. However, a difficult childhood need not determine the rest of our lives and our ability to parent. Research in parent-child relations has demonstrated that even parents who have experienced traumatic childhoods can make sense of their lives and are able to have healthy relationships with their children.

If we make sense of our early-childhood experiences, we are not bound to recreate the same negative interactions with our own children. However, without self-understanding, it is likely that history will repeat itself, as negative patterns of family interaction are passed from one generation to the next.

***How we come to understand and process what happened to us in our childhoods is more important to our children’s development than what actually happened to us.***

Many factors including genetics, temperament, physical health and experience influence the development of the child’s personality. Parent-child relationships are one very important part of the early experience that shapes a child’s emerging personality. How we, as parents, reflect on our lives directly shapes the nature of the early attachment relationship that is so crucial to the child’s emotional intelligence, self-esteem, cognitive abilities and social skills.

David Smail,<sup>2</sup> a social psychologist, suggests just how vulnerable and open to lasting impression the young child is. He reminds us that the whole of early life experience is acquired in a state of ‘littleness’ and suggests that it is from this vantage point that most of us come to accept without question – often without noticing it – a world that is shaped and structured throughout by powers we have virtually no alternative but to obey. Smail considers the consequences of this vulnerability. He suggests that if our world during this state of ‘littleness’ is ‘positively’ charged, our whole experience may be built upon an essentially uncritical confidence in the ultimate goodness of the world. On the other hand, if we receive a ‘negatively’ charged shock through abandonment or isolation it may haunt us the rest of our lives. Children who have not experienced a secure relationship with a parent frequently struggle in their later lives with tendencies toward self-doubt, fearfulness, and vulnerability to anxiety and panic. In an effort to control these tendencies they may go to extremes to control the world around them in an attempt to feel secure.

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<sup>2</sup> David Smail *The Origins of Unhappiness*. London: Harper Collins, 1993: pp. 29, 26.

We cannot change the past and what happened to us as children but it is possible to change the way we think about what has happened in our lives and the effect it has on us. If we begin to understand and integrate our own childhood experiences, positive or negative, and accept them as part of our own ongoing life story, we can change how we view our past. And we can make a conscious decision to live our lives in the way we choose now, rather than automatically recreating patterns of the past. This will allow us to be selective in our parenting, choosing interactions with our children that are relevant to our specific parent-child relationship, rather than accepting, or reacting to, the taken-for-granted parenting style of another generation.

Being a parent is not just assuming the responsibility of caring for a new and developing life. Parenting also offers us the opportunity to grow as people because we experience an intimate parent-child relationship that connects us to the experiences of our own childhoods. Re-examining our own childhood offers opportunities for self-realisation, change and growth, as well as helping us to parent.

### 3) Basic principles

A mindful approach to parenting is based on the basic principles of personal, internal understanding and interpersonal connection. Siegel and Hartzell identify the contributing parts of this approach to parenting as:

- Mindfulness
- Lifelong learning
- Response flexibility
- Mindsight
- Joyful living

#### 3.1) Mindfulness

When we are mindful, we live in the present moment, we are aware of our own thoughts and feelings, and we are open to the thoughts and feelings of those around us. If we are able to stay present with clarity within ourselves, even when we are experiencing difficulty, we will be able to be fully present with others and to respect each person's individual experience.

When we are mindful as parents, when we are fully present, our children are able to fully experience themselves in the moment. Children learn about themselves by the way we communicate with them. If as parents we are preoccupied with the past or worrying about the future, although we are physically present with our children, we are mentally absent. Children need us to be fully present when we are specifically connecting with them.

***Being mindful, as parents, means having intention in our actions. With intention we purposefully choose our behaviour with our child's emotional well-being in mind.***

### 3.2) Life long learning

We all have leftover issues from childhood that, when addressed, will help us to live our lives more closely to the way we choose. Our children give us an opportunity to grow by challenging us to re-visit these unresolved issues from childhood. Adopting the perspective that we can learn throughout our life enables us to approach parenting with an open mind. If we can accept the challenge of parenting as a learning opportunity, we can continue to grow and develop throughout our lives.

Findings from Neuroscience inform us that the neurons in the brain continue to develop new connections throughout the lifespan. Curiosity, self-reflection and interpersonal relationships foster the ongoing growth of the brain. As we parent, we have the opportunity to learn as we reflect on our experiences, from the new and ever-evolving points of view we develop in interaction with our children. Parenting gives us the opportunity to create an attitude of openness in our children as we nurture their curiosity and support their ongoing explorations of the world. Parenting, as well as being about guiding our children in the world they are gradually being introduced to, is also about changes in the way we, as parents, see our world and relate to it. As parents we will change our children as we raise and teach them and, if we are fortunate, they will change us.

***The complex and often challenging interactions of parenting give us the opportunity to create new opportunities for the growth and development of our children and ourselves.***

### 3.3) Response flexibility

One of the biggest challenges of being a parent is being able to respond in flexible ways. Smail and Hartzell define response flexibility as:

. . . the ability of the mind to sort through a wide variety of mental processes, such as impulses, ideas and feelings, and come up with a thoughtful non-automatic response.<sup>3</sup>

“Knee jerk parenting,” the opposite of response flexibility, occurs when we react automatically, without thought to a parent-child interaction.

Response flexibility:

- Happens when we reflect and intentionally choose an appropriate direction of action
- Involves the capacity to be able to delay gratification and inhibit impulsive behaviours
- Forms the cornerstone of emotional maturity and compassionate relationships.

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<sup>3</sup> Siegel and Hartzell *ibid.* p. 8

We need to be very aware as parents that there are times and situations when our response flexibility may be impaired. For example, when we are tired, hungry, frustrated, disappointed or angry we can lose the ability to be reflective. At such times, we become limited in our capacity to choose how we behave. When we get caught up in our own emotions and lose our sense of perspective, we can no longer think clearly and are at high risk of overreacting and causing distress to our children.

As parents we may find it difficult to balance flexibility with the importance of maintaining structure in our child's life<sup>4</sup>. Children challenge us to remain flexible and to maintain structure. We can learn how to achieve the balance between flexibility and structure in our parenting, and nurture flexibility in our children, by modeling flexible behaviour in our own responses. When we are flexible in our parenting we have a choice about:

- How we act in particular circumstances
- What parent approach to adopt
- What values to support
- How we respond, being proactive rather than reactive
- How we contain our own wide range of emotions and to think through how we will respond after we consider our child's point of view

When parents have the ability to respond with flexibility to their children within a context of structure, it is more likely that their children will develop flexibility, as well as feeling the security that is so important to their optimum development.

### **3.4) Mindsight**

Siegel and Hartzell make what at first glance is a surprising statement about mindsight:

*Mindsight is the ability to perceive our own minds and the minds of others.*<sup>5</sup>

What do they mean by this? How can we see another's mind? To begin to understand how this might be possible we need to consider how our minds work. Our minds create representations of objects and ideas. For example, we can visualise in our mind our son dragging a chair over towards the shelf where the cookies are kept out of his reach. In our mind we can visualize the image of our son, the chair, the shelf and the cookie jar and the moment when he stands on the chair to reach into the cookie jar. Even though he may never have done this, we can construct symbols in our nervous systems containing information about these visualisations.

Mindsight depends on the ability of the mind to create mental symbols of the mind itself. This ability makes it possible for us to focus on the thoughts, feelings, perceptions, sensations, memories, beliefs, attitudes and intentions of others as well as of ourselves.

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<sup>4</sup> I have addressed the role of structure in a child's life in "The role of discipline in effective parenting."

<sup>5</sup> Siegel and Hartzell *ibid.* p. 9

These are the basic elements of the mind that we can perceive and use to understand our children and ourselves.

With an appreciation of mindsight we need not limit our focus to the surface level of our children's experience. We can go to the deeper level of their mind. Mindsight makes it possible to "see" the minds of our children through the basic signals we perceive as parents. What our children say, through the words they use, is only a part of how we come to understand them. Their nonverbal messages of eye contact, facial expression, tone of voice, gestures, body posture, and the timing and intensity of their responses are also important elements of communication that help us understand our children. It is these nonverbal messages, as well as what our children tell us, that enable us to "see" the minds of our children.

### **3.5) Joyful living**

When you take a walk with a young child, go at his pace, and attempt to see the world through his eyes, you get a sense of how open and tuned-in they are to everything that interests them. They wander from leaf to twig, to beetle, to stone, to tree-trunk to puddle, carefully examining everything that catches their attention. A walk with a child is less like a walk, more like a series of examinations, only proceeding from one to the next when curiosity is satisfied. In honour of the child's curiosity, and as a reminder about how we need to conduct ourselves, it might be helpful to say that we are going to explore, rather than going for a walk.

Enjoying these kind of times with our children, sharing in their awe of discovering what it means to be alive, to be a person in a wondrous world, is crucial for the development of the child's positive sense of self.

***Children need to be enjoyed and valued, not managed.***<sup>6</sup>

We can enjoy and value our children in many ways:

- When we are respectful and compassionate towards our children and ourselves, we often gain a fresh perspective that can enrich our enjoyment of life together.
- Remembering and reflecting on the experiences of day-to-day life creates a deep sense of feeling connected and understood.
- We can accept our children's invitations to slow down and appreciate the beauty and connection that life offers each day.
- We can delight in the opportunity to join with our children in the amazing experience of growing together.

Learning to share in the joy of living is at the heart of a rewarding parent-child relationship.

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<sup>6</sup> Smail and Hartzell p. 11

***When we become parents, we often see ourselves as our children's teachers, but we soon discover that our children are our teachers as well. Through this intimate relationship our past, present, and future take on new meaning as we share experiences and create memories that greatly enrich our lives together.***

### ***Questions to consider***

***A few questions to start you thinking about the way you were parented:***

- ***What are your earliest memories?***
- ***What do you remember about the way your mother/father parented you?***
- ***What are the good memories about the way your mother/father related to you?***
- ***What are the bad memories about the way your mother/father related to you?***
- ***What do you know about how your mother/father came to parent you the way that they did?***

*It would be helpful to start a Mindful Parenting Journal. Your answers to these questions and the memories you recall as you recollect your early childhood experiences would be a good place to start.*