

Becoming a Mindful Parent[†]

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[†] Prepared for Parent Support Services of British Columbia, June 2011

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Introduction

Where do we get our ideas about how to raise children? Most of us do not get any formal training in parenting. We pick it up along the way. We may read about how to parent but, if you look at a few books on the topic, you'll soon find out just how much the experts on parenting differ in their opinions about what goes into good parenting. Most of us pick up our parenting skills on the fly, influenced by what we remember about the way we were parented as children, and by the way we have seen other parents relate to their children in everyday life or in the media.

Mindful parenting requires a more considered approach. We need to watch our children and be curious about what they need to thrive. We also need to watch ourselves and reflect on the way we parent so that we can avoid "knee-jerk parenting." In order to be able to stand back and look at the way we parent, we need to be prepared to look at ourselves, our thoughts, feelings and actions, be aware of how our parenting affects us, and be curious about what it is in our experience that leads us to behave in a particular way as a parent, especially when we know that we are not at our best.

Mindful parents¹

Mindful parents are parents who think about their parenting and reflect on what they do, so that they can make informed decisions about the way they parent and, if they choose, change how they parent.

Mindful parenting:

- Encourages us to closely examine the processes by which we think, feel and behave as a parent
- Helps us become aware of our mental processes (thoughts and feelings) as we parent and moves us beyond the reactive loops in which we all have a tendency to get trapped
- Enables us to get ourselves off the autopilot of ingrained behaviours and habitual responses that are so often the make-up of everyday parenting
- Makes it possible to "name and tame" the emotions we frequently experience while parenting rather than being overwhelmed by them.

Looking at the way we think, feel and behave as parents

If we were lucky and had good-enough parents, some of the ways they parented us will find their way into the way that we parent. If we were unlucky, and if we have taken the trouble to think about it, we will probably have vowed never to treat our children the way our parents sometimes treated us. However, in spite of our best intentions, sometimes the very ways of our parents that we vowed to avoid, find their way into our own parenting. In order to choose the best from our own recollection of being parented, and avoid those aspects of parenting we have experienced but do not wish our children to experience, we need to reflect on our own childhood memories.

¹ These ideas about mindful parenting have been prompted by Dan Siegel's writing especially, *Parenting from the inside out: How a deeper self-understanding can help you raise children who thrive*.

So we begin our parenting with a mishmash of ideas that we have acquired through our own experience of how we were parented, and from other examples we have been introduced to either in everyday life or through the media. When we parent well, we will know we are doing a good job because our relationship with our children is easy going, their demands and our responses are balanced, their angry protests and our frustrations about parenting are short lived, and most of the time, our children are happy, lively, curious and accepting of their parents and their home, and we feel that we know what we are doing.

When we are struggling with our parenting, we will feel that all is not well. Our relationships with our children will seem strained, their needs and demands will be greater than our patience to attend to them, their misbehaviour, sulks, temper tantrums and other difficult behaviour will seem endless, our children may seem distracted, more hyperactive or, conversely, more lethargic than usual, and less interested in what is going on around them. It would be helpful to be curious about the times we are struggling in our parent-child relationship. If we can figure out what is happening, we may be able to change what usually happens so that we lessen or end the struggle. The exercise below may provide an opportunity to explore what is happening in the parent-child relationship and suggest what changes might make a difference.

Exercise 1

- 1)
 - (a) In your journal, list 3 different occasions when you liked the way you parented your child.
 - (b) Think about each of these occasions and record what you liked about the way you parented on each occasion.
- 2)
 - (a) Think back to one occasion when you did not like the way you parented. Remember it carefully and visualize it. What do you see in your mind's eye?
 - (b) What was it about your parenting then that you'd like to change?
 - (c) What happened in you just before the parenting you would like to change? How did you feel? What did you think?
 - (d) Think about what happened again and decide what you would do differently if you could wind back the clock.
 - (e) Record in your journal what you would have done differently.
 - (f) Write a message to yourself in your journal about what to do differently and how to do it differently on a similar occasion in the future.

The more that we can be aware of our thoughts, feelings and actions as parents, the more likely we will be able to parent as we would wish and choose, and the less likely we are to be trapped in old habits: habits which might not even be of our own making because they are hand-me-downs. We may have picked up parenting habits from our own parents, other parents or the media. Exercises like the one above can help us to become more mindful parents.

Becoming aware of our feelings and thought processes as we parent

Everyone, wherever they grow up, no matter what their circumstances, experiences a range of basic emotions: joy, trust, fear, surprise, sadness, disgust, anger and anticipation. These basic emotions in various combinations² provide the basis for eight advanced human emotions that are often referred to as feelings: optimism, love, submission, awe, disappointment, remorse, contempt and aggressiveness. We experience many variations of these basic emotions, some of which we may find difficult to experience. If we attempt to avoid discomfort when we are in touch with emotions that trouble us, we may not be fully present when our child experiences an emotion that we associate with difficulty. Worse, we may try to shut down our child's emotion because it is too uncomfortable for us to experience.

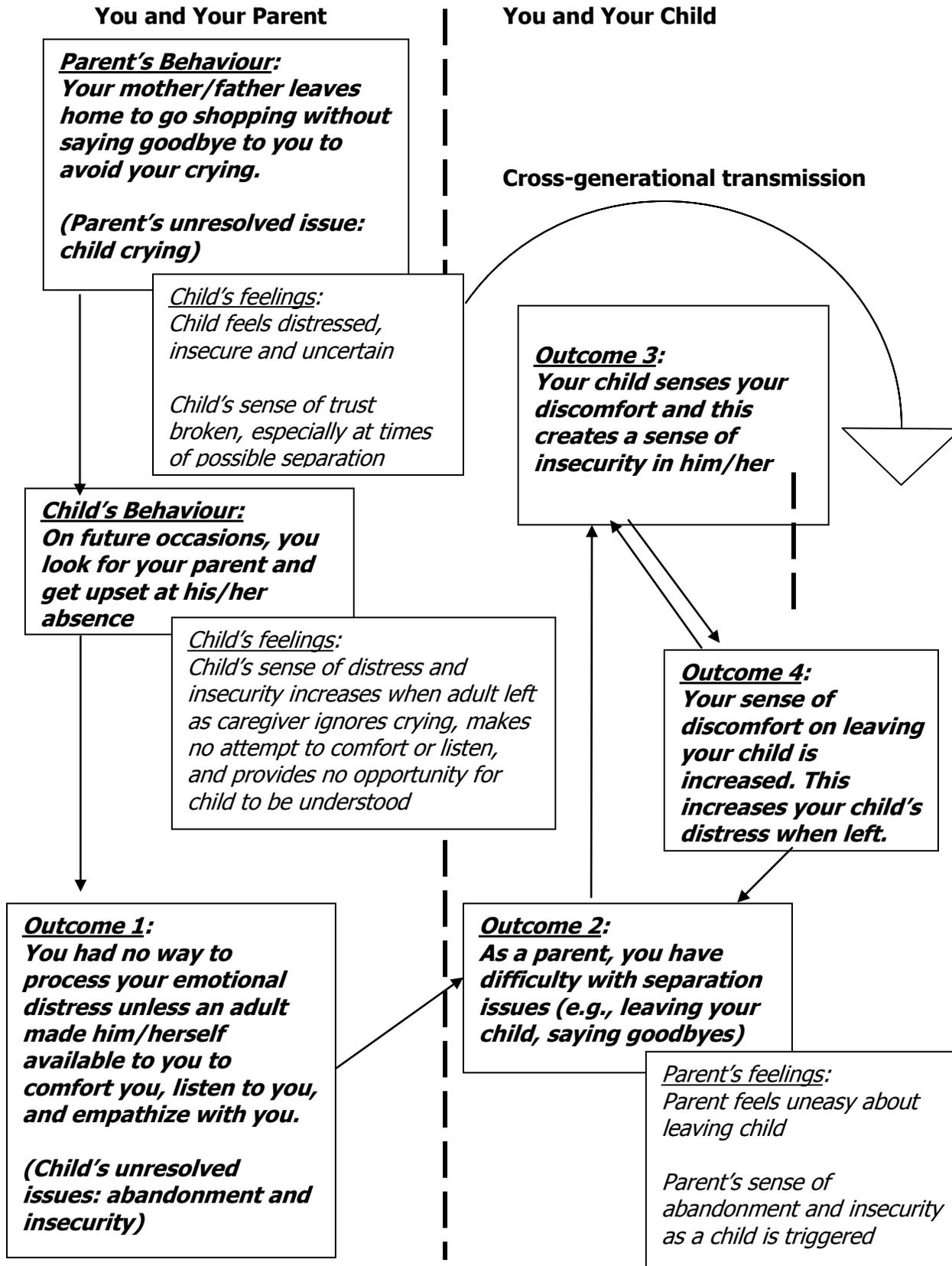
When we become parents, we are likely to experience memories and feelings that we have not experienced before. Being in relationship with our own child puts us in touch with memories and feelings from our childhood. Experiences we had as a child that we have not fully processed may resurface as unresolved issues that influence how we parent. If these unresolved issues are triggered, our responses toward our children are likely to be reactive and show up as strong emotional reactions, impulsive behaviours, distortions in our perception, or unusual sensations in our bodies. If we do not recognize them for what they are and actively work to resolve them and overcome their influence, we shall be stuck in a state that leads to knee-jerk parenting.

***Issues that are rooted in our past impact our present reality and directly affect the way we experience and interact with our children even when we are not aware of their origins.
Dan Siegel, Parenting from the inside out (p. 13).***

When we know more about these blasts from the past (memories, sensations and feelings that are uncomfortable and we have not attended to), we can become more aware of them. At first, it will be enough to take notice of them and be curious about them as they affect us in the present. Then, we may want to explore them more carefully to find out where they come from, and how we can attend to them so that they do not prevent us from being the person we want to be, from being the parent we want to be. Having identified the memory, sensation or feeling we might begin by asking whether we can remember specific events, occasions or times in our life when these memories, sensations or feelings were present.

2. For example, Optimism results from the combination of Anticipation and Joy. Love = Joy + Trust; Submission = Trust + Fear; Awe = Fear + Surprise; Disappointment = Surprise + Sadness; Remorse = Sadness + Disgust; Contempt = Disgust + Anger; Aggressiveness = Anger + Anticipation.

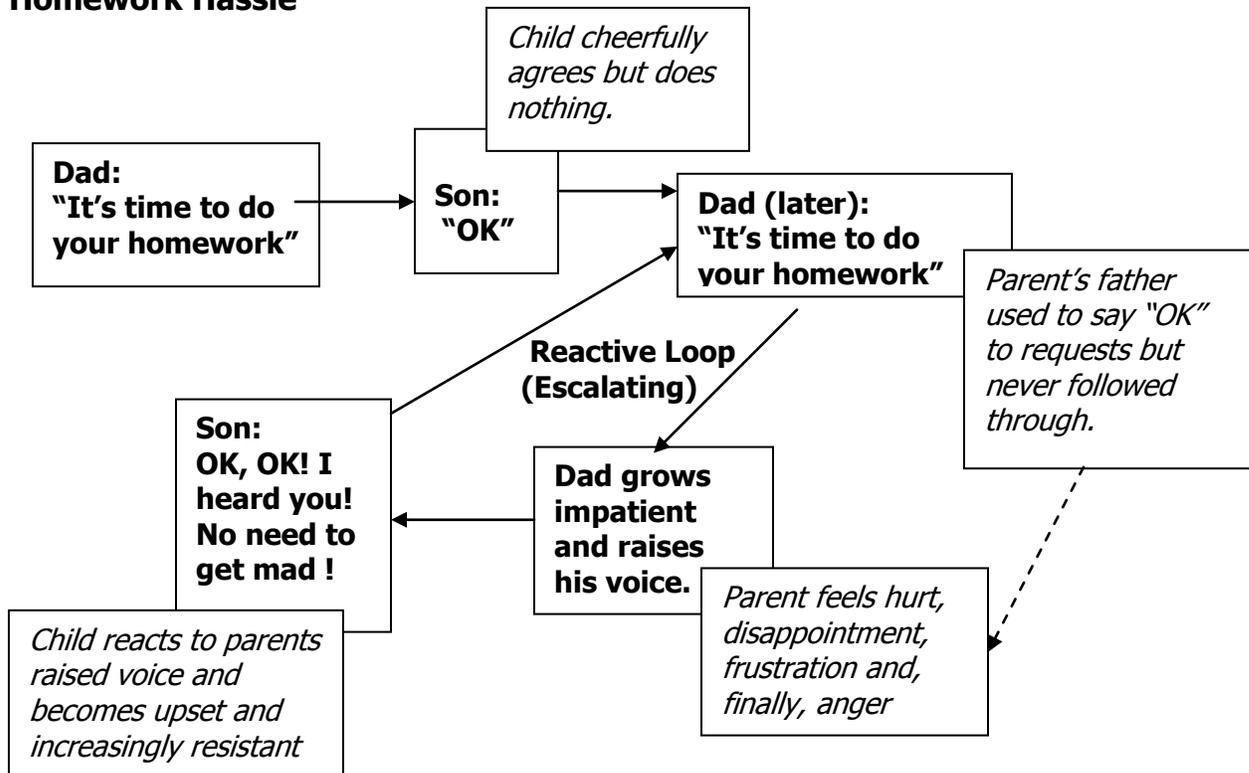
How We Were Parented Affects How We Parent: An Example



Moving beyond reactive loops

A reactive loop occurs when one person (e.g., a child) behaves in a way that triggers another person (e.g., a parent) in such a way that the emotional reaction of the person who is triggered overwhelms his or her ability to act mindfully. This upsets the first person (the child) that, in turn, increases the reactivity of the second person (the parent). Interactions of this kind invariably escalate into painful, drawn-out exchanges that have no benefit but result in unhappiness for both parties. You may be familiar with the scenario of the example below.

Homework Hassle



How might this father-son interaction have gone differently? There's nothing unreasonable about Dad telling his son to do his homework. However, if Dad knows that there is a history of his son procrastinating over homework, he might have handled it a little differently. For example, just saying, "It is time to do your homework" provides information but does not make any request about taking action. As an alternative, Dad might have said, "When are you going to do your homework?" This would have encouraged a discussion between father and son about when the homework would get done. Hopefully, Dad would get a commitment from his son about when he would do his homework and then, at that time, made sure that the homework got done.

If Dad, from past experience, knew that getting his son to do homework was going to be a struggle, he might have prepared himself so that he, the parent, would be less likely to be reactive. Just being aware that there might be a struggle would be a start. As well, he might have thought about some way to encourage his son to get the homework done. For example, he might have said, "When you've finished your

homework, we'll go to the park and kick a ball around." Or he might have said, "I've got some paperwork to do – we can sit together and do our homework." We need to be creative about finding effective ways to encourage our children to do things that may be important but they are less than enthusiastic about doing.

Exercise 2

1) Think about a reactive loop, which involves you and a family member, that frequently occurs in your family. In your journal, plot what happens, suggest what is happening under the surface to create the difficult interactions that occur.

2) How could you script the interaction differently to overcome the reactive loop? What would you have to do differently?

3) In your journal, draw a diagram or write a message to yourself about what you will do to break the reactive loop the next time it happens.

(Use the example above ("Homework Hassle") to remind you about the different parts of the reactive loop and the steps you need to take to overcome it.)

Getting off the autopilot of ingrained behaviours and habitual responses

Do you have some doubts about whether you can change your habits and your patterns of behaviour? Have you heard adults say, "I'm too old to learn new ways?" Have you ever started thinking like this? Many believe that once they are adults, they cannot change much about themselves. Just how fixed in our ways are we once we get to adulthood?

Our children grow and develop, and it is obvious how much they change over time. We accept that a child's body, brain and nervous system rapidly changes as they mature, learn more about the world and develop new skills. This process of change is called plasticity. Until recently, it was generally believed that plasticity of the nervous system is limited after maturity. However, recent findings from neuroscience demonstrate that we can create mental and emotional changes that are transformational at the physical level of the brain (i.e., we can re-sculpt our neural pathways) throughout our lives. The more often we behave in a particular way, the more frequently we activate particular neural pathways in the nervous system and contribute to these pathways becoming established: "Neurons that fire together wire together." This is as true for new behaviour as it is for old habits. We just have to work hard at establishing the new circuitry.

Apart from bringing a positive attitude to the way we conduct ourselves in our everyday lives, recognizing that "it's never too late to learn" is a statement that is supported by recent findings in neuroscience. We don't have to be trapped by old habits and unhelpful patterns of behaviour, including emotional behaviour. If something is not working, we can change it. If we choose to, and work at it, we can change our behaviour as adults and as parents if what is happening when we relate to our children is not helping them or us.

Naming and taming the emotions that obstruct mindful parenting

Do you remember the last time that you got upset as a parent, lost your cool, reacted angrily to something your child said or did and, in retrospect, were not happy about and would have liked it to have been different?

I remember an occasion when I lost it. It was around my son's bedtime. I was putting him to bed that night. Although I was tired, I was pleased about the way my son got ready for bed, and I had enjoyed reading him a bedtime story. He asked for another story and I had read another. I said goodnight. As I closed the door, he said he was thirsty. Feeling annoyed but not expressing it openly, I got him a small drink of water and said goodnight, again. Now it was time for me to do what I wanted to do. I sat down, opened a book and, before I'd read the first sentence, my son called, "D-a-a-a-a-a-d!" Now, quite angry, I clumped upstairs and in a grumpy voice said, "What is it now?" Sensing that I was angry, my son must have decided that enough was enough and said, "Oh, its alright, it doesn't matter!" Instead of accepting his acquiescence, I stepped further into the situation and in an even angrier voice said, "Well, you got me up here, what do you want?" My son, sensing that I was really angry now, went quiet, looked scared and settled down for sleep. I left the room in a huff. On the one hand, I had achieved my objective: to get my son to settle down for sleep. On the other hand, he had gone to bed scared of the way his dad was behaving. Clearly, this is not the sort of parenting I would have wished for my son.

What had happened? My son didn't want to settle down to sleep. There was nothing new about that. However, he would usually, look at a book until he fell asleep and not call out for attention. On that night there must have been something going on that, given the chance, he might have talked about. However, because of my reactivity, I never got to find out. What was my reactivity about? I was tired, which meant that my patience was wearing thin (something I could have anticipated). I had some reading to do for a course I was taking that had to be done for the morning (my attention was not fully on parenting). I had read him a second story thinking that, in the long run, this would get me to my reading more quickly (my plan didn't work). I felt things were not working out – it was not fair! (an incident long ago at school had made me very sensitive about fairness). I might have been influenced by one of the rules I learned as a child; that when things go wrong, people get angry. My father was usually patient with me. However, he would go from being patient to being angry quite quickly. While my change to anger was more gradual, my style of anger was not so different from my father's.

What could I have done differently? It's easier to see in hindsight what could have been different. However, it is only by taking the time to review the difficult times and think about what might have been different that we can become more mindful, in the moment, in order to avoid reactive, "knee-jerk parenting." There are many ways that I might have handled that bedtime differently. I could have been:

1. More in touch with how I was feeling so that I could have been aware of my tiredness and better able to take account of it, reminding myself to not let it distract me from my priority: preparing my son for bed.

2. More in touch with my son's feelings so that I could have been better able to distinguish between procrastinating about going to bed and, perhaps, his looking for time to talk about something that was important to him at the time.
3. More focused on the priority I was engaged in rather than allowing my attention to be split between what I was doing and what I had to do after my son was settled.
4. More settled and more in touch with my son, so that my anger was not part of what was happening in the relationship with him.
5. Clearer about the messages I was sending my son. I had read a second story and he may have thought I was open for more time together.
6. More insightful about the way that some of my sensitive issues were being triggered, so that I could have reminded myself that at least some of what was happening was to do with my unfinished business.
7. I could have talked to my son and told him that, when we had said goodnight, I needed some undisturbed time (children can sometimes surprise you with their ability to be considerate).

You can probably think of more things I might have done differently.

Recollecting what happened, writing about it, looking for connections with past experience, and recording other ways you might have handled the situation are steps towards naming and taming the emotions that obstruct mindful parenting.

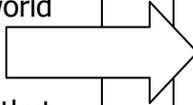
Exercise 3

- 1) Recall the last time you lost your cool as a parent.
- 2) What happened? How did you allow yourself to get caught up in it?
- 3) Write in your journal about your experience the way I have written about putting my son to bed and think about what else was going on for you when you lost your cool.
- 4) Write about the possible connections with your past experience that may have contributed to the difficult time you had parenting on that occasion.
- 5) Think about alternative ways you might have acted (see my list above). Record them and write a message to yourself about how you might act in future, as the parent you would choose to be, if a similar occasion arose.

Review

If we are able to:

- Understand how we remember and construct a picture of ourselves as part of the world we grew up in relation to the world in which we now live
- Reflect on our own lives so that we begin to appreciate how our present experiences, including our emotions and perceptions, are impacted by the past
- Free ourselves from the constraints of the past
- Deepen our ability to understand our emotional experience



Then we will be able to:

- Offer our children the spontaneous and connecting relationship that enables them to thrive
- Make sense of how the past impacts on our lives in the present
- Relate more empathically with our children and promote their own self-understanding and healthy development
- Parent in the way we choose (rather than parent in a way chosen for us by the unexamined legacy of experiences from our own family and other sources).