



Mindfulness, Parenthood, and Relationships

Yaffa Maritz, Listening Mothers

Mindfulness was defined by the "father" of the Mindfulness Movement in the United States, Jon Kabat Zinn, as "awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally." "It's about knowing what is on your mind."

Analysis of recent research data showed that parents who reported more mindful parenting engaged in more positive and less negative parenting behavior, which was then linked to more positive behavior in their kids--meaning less anxiety, depression, and acting out." To bring mindful attention and awareness into your interactions with your child really seems to set the stage for you to be a good parent," says Justin Parent, lead author of this [study](#), which was done at the University of Vermont.

Sounds simple enough? It may sound simple but we know how hard it is to follow, especially because in our very busy life we are often engaged in the "Trance of Reactivity," as one of the mindfulness teachers, Tara Brach, wisely named it. It's like we are all riding a bike--the more stressed we feel, the faster we pedal.

Parents are all craving to be the best parents they can be, but often they end up feeling "not good enough." So for us at the Community of Mindful Parenting, we often speak of the two wings of the bird of wellbeing:

1. Mindfulness: Awareness, being present, seeing what is actually happening right now without judgment (as Zinn defined it long time ago).
2. Heart-fullness: Holding what we see with compassion, tenderness, and love.

We engage parents in practice that includes "both wings of the bird," and we call this practice "**Compassion to Go.**" We see this practice as portable, user-friendly, and available at any time and any place. It doesn't require special time, a special occasion, or special tools--just an intention to practice that is aligned with our natural goal to be happy.

So what are the key factors to mindful parenting? We follow the acronym STOP:

S--STOP. Learn to pause. The key element that will turn reactivity to mindful responsiveness is the ability to pause, just stop anything you are doing, and BE.

T--Take a deep breath. Breathing is very important as it calms our nervous system and slows us down. Take few deep breaths and perhaps give yourself a soothing touch by putting your hand on your heart, or hold your palms together.

O--Observe: Notice your feelings. What are the triggers? Notice your body. Any stress? Notice your mind. What thoughts rush through your head? Just notice and let it be held in awareness and kindness (nonjudgmental approach). If you start experiencing again the "trance of reactivity," perhaps you can use soothing words as well as soothing touch to calm yourself down. What words you like to hear when you are under stress? Say them to yourself.

P--Proceed: Respond to the situation from a place of wisdom and compassion. When our nervous system is calm, our wisdom and intuition kick in. Part of the response when it comes to others, like your children, is to engage calmly in conversation, in deep listening (even if we disagree with what's being said), led by curiosity and open-mindedness and respect. When the response calls for setting limits, we use the same principles: compassion, respect, understanding, and firmness that is informed by LOVE. Remember the saying from Carl Rogers, "When someone really hears you without passing judgment on you, without trying to take responsibility for you, without trying to mold you, it feels damn good."

These skills potentially help preserve the parent-child relationship, while also providing positive role modeling of how to handle difficult situations and how to successfully regulate and manage emotions. Mindfulness training like this has been demonstrated to impact emotion regulation at both the neural level and at the cognitive level. ([Goldin and Gross, 2010](#); [Modinos, Ormel, & Aleman, 2010](#)). If practiced regularly, these skills can apply to all difficult situations. We often say that mindfulness and COMPASSION are related; the more we practice, the more benefit we will reap.

Practicing the STOP method will be just as useful when it comes to couple relationships during stressful moments as when it comes to dealing with children or other stressful situations. But of course, couple relationships, like any other relationships (but more so at this critical period of life), need lots of nurturing to thrive. Time needs to be set aside for making meaningful connection and revitalizing the relationship. We know from brain studies that our minds are like Velcro to negative emotions and like Teflon to positive ones (see the work of [Rick Hanson](#) on this topic). In order for relationships to thrive, we need to expand and take in the good, setting the intention to see the cup half full, practice gratitude regularly for all that goes well, share our positive thoughts and feelings with our partner, and forgive ourselves and our partners for not being perfect. In other words, using the Compassion to Go practice.

Dr. Robert Epstein wrote an article [What Makes Good Parent?](#), in which he reports on a study of 2,000 parents that was to determine which skills are most important to bringing up healthy, happy, and successful kids. The outcome: Giving love and affection tops the list. But then comes the big surprise: Managing stress and having a good relationship with the other parent are more helpful than some child-focused behaviors.

But we were not surprised! What we model in our everyday interactions-- our intentions, our attitudes, our measure of awareness and compassion, the way we regulate our emotions, manage our stress, the way we treat ourselves, our kids, our spouses-- all will have impact on our wellbeing and our kids' wellbeing and happiness.



Yaffa Maritz is co-founder and clinical director of [Listening Mothers](#), a research-based parenting program. She is founder and director of the [Community of Mindful Parenting](#). Yaffa was born and trained in Israel as a clinical psychologist. She is also a licensed mental health counselor with advanced training in infant mental health. She is an advocate for the well-being of children and their families and serves on several local and national boards that promote this agenda, including the Governor's Commission for Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention.

Yaffa believes that by supporting parents and creating nurturing communities for them, we can set the foundation for the positive growth of children's social, emotional, and mental health.



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