Mindfulness 201: Bringing mindfulness to parenting

This fact sheet will help you:
• Understand how mindfulness can help parents
• Learn ways to become more mindful each day
• Help children to become more mindful
• Find books and other resources on mindfulness

What is mindfulness?
Mindfulness means paying attention to what’s happening right now. When you practice mindfulness, you turn your attention to your thoughts, emotions, body sensations and experience in the present moment. While doing this, you do your best to accept what happens, without labelling it as ‘good’, ‘bad’, or anything else. This can help you feel calmer and respond in more helpful ways.

How can I be a more mindful parent?
It’s not always easy to keep our minds in the present moment. Our attention often gets pulled away by many things. So we end up not giving our full attention to what we’re doing or the people we’re with. We may dwell in the past, worry about the future or get distracted by our smartphones. Our minds jump from one thing to the next. Mindfulness teachers say this is our ‘monkey mind’. It’s like our mind is filled with monkeys, all jumping, chattering and screeching to get our attention. We can tame our ‘monkey minds’, but it takes practice. Here are some things to work on:

♥ Listen with your full attention
Try to:
• Give your full attention to your child or teen.
• Listen with more than your ears. Facial expressions, tone of voice and body language are also very important.
• Notice what happens when you judge what your child or teen tells you, or when you give advice without being asked for it.

♥ Accept yourself and your child or teen
Try to:
• Accept your children as they are, without judging their feelings, abilities, qualities or behaviour.
• Reflect on your hopes and desires for your children: are you wishing them to be different than they are?
• Bring your expectations in line with your child or teen’s age and abilities. Do they have distinct needs?
• Think about what makes your child or teen unique.
• Accept and understand your child’s feelings, even the difficult ones, like anger. This doesn’t mean that you are always OK with how they behave. But you can accept how your child feels, even when you’re not happy with how your child behaves.
• Accept yourself and your own feelings without judgment. You don’t need to be perfect. Just good enough 😊 In fact, it’s important for children to see that everyone makes mistakes, that there are ways to fix mistakes, solve problems and work through conflicts.
Be aware of your emotions and your children’s emotions

Try to:
• Name what you’re thinking and feeling. Notice both comfortable and uncomfortable feelings.
• Remember that thoughts and feelings aren’t ‘facts’, and that they often pass quickly.
• Be aware of thoughts or feelings that seem to come automatically when you’re upset.
• Imagine what your child or teen is feeling.
• Notice how your moods and your child’s moods influence each other.

Be kind

Try to:
• Be kind and forgiving to yourself when you make mistakes. Try to focus on your efforts instead.
  Parenting isn’t easy, and every parent messes up sometimes.
• Be warm and affectionate with your child or teen.
• Respond to your child’s behaviour with understanding and compassion. This is even more important when your child’s behaviour is frustrating.
• See things from your child or teen’s point of view.

Take a moment

Try to:
• Pause and take a breath before you react to something that upsets you. This will help you to calm yourself, so you can respond more thoughtfully.
• Notice how your body feels when you’re upset.
• Be calm and patient when your child is angry, crying or upset. Help your child to name, and talk about their feelings.
• Consider how your child or teen feels when you react without thinking.

Everyday mindfulness

There are many ways to bring mindfulness to everyday life.

Give the gift of your full attention. Truly ‘be there’ when you are with your child or teen. Put your device away. Notice when your thoughts wander, and gently guide your attention back to the present moment with your children.

Take advantage of chances to connect. Cuddle, read or walk together. Make meals, work on hobbies, crafts, or chores. Play outside or bring out a board game.

Bring your ‘best self’. Do your best to manage your stress in positive ways, so that you bring your best to your family.

Beware of multi-tasking. Try to focus on doing one thing at a time, more often. We are actually more productive and less stressed when we turn our attention to just one activity. Help your children to do the same. For example:
• At mealtimes, focus on the food and the people around the table. Leave all devices in another room, and don’t have the TV on in the background.
• As much as possible, have children and youth do school work without music or devices. For youth who feel they need some sound while they work, try classical music or sounds from nature (water running, birdsong).
• Take a walk outside without headphones.

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Don’t account for every minute. Make sure children and youth have time for free play and make-believe. They need time to think, to dream, and to create. And being too busy with organized activities can get tiring and stressful. Children don’t need to be occupied all of the time. Take a drive without them playing with devices or watching a DVD.

Limit screen time. Too much time in front of computers, TVs and devices squeezes out time for important things, like active play, hobbies and connecting with others face to face. Some video games, or too much time playing them, can overload the senses.

Focus on feelings. Help your children to notice and name their feelings. Help them understand that all feelings come and go. And they sometimes change quickly. Show that all emotions are OK, and that a feeling is not ‘who they are’.

Check our ‘Helpful resources’ section for a web link to children’s books about emotions and related topics.

Helping children become more mindful
There are many ways to help children focus their attention on the present moment.

Connect the mind and body. Instead of just watching, give children and youth chances to be active players: singing, dancing, playing music, drawing, painting, or building.

Enjoy the great outdoors. Being outside near trees, lakes or rivers is always calming. Watch the sun rise and set, Stare at the clouds, moon and stars. Help children tune in to their senses: ask about what they see, hear and smell.

Awaken the senses and get dirty. Play with finger paint, water, sand, clay, mud and dirt. Plant seeds and watch them grow into flowers and vegetables.
Mindful parenting in action

You’ve had a busy day at work, and now have to catch up on email at home. Your kids are playing close by. Their voices start to rise. Now they’re yelling at each other. By the time you get up from your chair, your 3 year old is crying, because your 5 year old has pushed him over. You feel your anger rising - why can’t they get along? Why do they always seem to do this when you’re really busy and already stressed? You’re about to start yelling too.

Then... you take a moment. And a deep breath. You notice your angry and frustrated feelings. You notice that you also resent having to bring work home. And you remember that your kids are still pretty young, and just learning to work out conflicts and deal with their own frustration.

You take another deep breath, and say, as calmly as you can:

“What’s going on here?”

After giving both kids a chance to explain, helping them to speak calmly, you show that you’ve really understood by repeating what they’ve told you:

“I see. So Ari wanted to help, but you were afraid he’d break the house you were building. You’ve worked really hard on it. But Ari really wanted to play too. He got angry, and pushed your house over. Then you got angry, and pushed Ari over. Everybody’s pretty upset and frustrated. It’s OK to feel upset. But it’s not OK to break people’s houses, or to push people over. Let’s take a minute to calm down together.”

You sit on the sofa with one on each side of you, and have a little cuddle. When everyone’s calmer, you say:

“OK-so let’s figure out what to do when Ben wants to build by himself, but Ari wants to help him.”

You listen, and help each child express himself calmly to the other. You try to help them them come up with a solution, instead of solving the problem for them. And you don’t force them to play together, “be nice”, or apologize.

And if you lose your temper at times - be kind and forgiving to yourself. You’re human, and parenting is the toughest job there is. Take a deep breath, and start again 😊
Websites

MindMasters 2: Skills that last a lifetime - Free, simple and fun activities for children 4-9 years, to help children learn ways to calm themselves, manage emotions and become more mindful.  http://www.cheo.on.ca/en/MindMasters2

American Mindfulness Research Association - online database for mindfulness research publications  www.goamra.org

BC Association for Living Mindfully - a non-profit society dedicated to education, research and advocacy around the benefits of mindfulness  www.bcalm.ca

Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society  www.umassmed.edu/cfm

Mindfulness for Teens - online guided meditations and resources  www.mindfulnessforteens.com

UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center - online resources and free guided meditations  www.marc.ucla.edu

http://franticworld.com/free-meditations-from-mindfulness/

Books for Parents

Mindfulness for Beginners: Reclaiming the Present Moment—and Your Life, by Jon Kabat-Zinn

Everyday Blessings: The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting, by Myla and Jon Kabat-Zinn.

Planting Seeds: Practicing Mindfulness with Children, by Thich Nhat Hanh.

Parenting from the Inside Out: How a Deeper Self-Understanding Can Help You Raise Children Who Thrive, by Daniel Siegel and Mary Hartzell

Sitting Still Like a Frog: Mindfulness Exercises for Kids (and Their Parents), by Eline Snel, Jon Kabat-Zinn and Myla Kabat-Zinn

The Mindful Child: How to Help Your Kid Manage Stress and Become Happier, Kinder, and More Compassionate, by Susan Greenland

Books for Children

Librarians from the Ottawa Public Library created this list of books about feelings, relationships, yoga and mindfulness.  http://www.cheo.on.ca/uploads/Mental%20Health/MM2-booklist-en.pdf

A Handful of Quiet: Happiness in Four Pebbles, Thich Nhat Hanh.
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Disclaimer
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Finding help in Ottawa

In a crisis?  Child, Youth and Family Crisis Line for Eastern Ontario, 613-260-2360 or toll-free, 1-877-377-7775

Looking for mental health help? www.eMentalHealth.ca is a bilingual directory of mental health services and resources for Ottawa, Eastern Ontario and Canada.

- Kids Help Phone 1-800-668-6868 or www.kidshelpphone.ca
- Youth Services Bureau, for ages 12-20, 613-562-3004  www.ysb.on.ca
- Family Service Centre of Ottawa, 613-725-3601, www.familyservicesottawa.org
- Jewish Family Services, 613-722-2225, www.jfsottawa.com
- The Children’s Hospital of Eastern Ontario and the Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre (by physician’s referral), 613-737-7600 ext. 2496. For more information on our programs, www.cheo.on.ca
- Ottawa Public Health Information Line, 613-580-6744
- To find a Psychologist in Ottawa: Call the Ottawa Academy of Psychology referral service, 613-235-2529. Listing many, but not all, Ottawa psychologists.

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- Kids Help Phone 1-800-668-6868 or www.kidshelpphone.ca
- Renfrew County: Phoenix Centre for Children, Youth and Families, with offices in Renfrew and Pembroke. 613-735-2374 or toll-free 1-800-465-1870, www.renc.igs.net/~phoenix
- Lanark County: Open Doors for Lanark Children and Youth, with offices in Carleton Place, Smiths Falls and Perth. 613-283-8260, www.openddoors.on.ca
- Cornwall and area: Child and Youth Counselling Services (CYCS)- (Cornwall Community Hospital) provides assessment, therapy, and counseling. Services provided in English. Office in Cornwall 613-932-1558, limited outreach services in Winchester office.
- To find a psychologist anywhere in Ontario: College of Psychologists of Ontario, 1-800-489-8388, www.cpo.on.ca