

Mindful Parenting

A Lifelong Practice



Contributed by:

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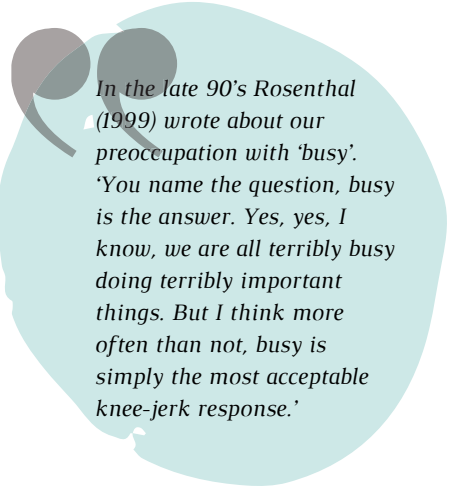
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What is mindful parenting?

If you are here, chances are that you have already read up about how to parent with empathy and respect. You understand the benefits of it and are looking to put theory into practice. Or you have already started down this path and are facilitating powerful conversations and interactions with your child. Wherever you may be on this journey, we'd like to say that we are proud of you. Your journey as a 'mindful' parent will not just enrich you personally but will lay the foundation to a beautiful relationship with your child and nurture your children to be kind, respectful and competent individuals.

That said, let's start with the question-what is 'mindful parenting'? We think it is much more than a philosophy. It is a way of being, stemming from a deep rooted respect for your child and for yourself. It is a journey that you set off together with your child, where you develop an awareness of your own feelings, actions and words and that of your child's. The journey therefore starts with you. If you remember what it was like to take flights (we know it's been a while!), the safety instructions tell us to wear our oxygen masks first before putting it on for our children. The journey towards being a mindful parent is pretty much like that. You are your child's and your own role model.

'Mindful parenting' as a term however tends to be jargonised. With the recent rise of mindfulness in schooling and our mainstream lives, it feels like we can just about prefix existing behaviour with the word mindfulness and all will be well.



In the late 90's Rosenthal (1999) wrote about our preoccupation with 'busy'. 'You name the question, busy is the answer. Yes, yes, I know, we are all terribly busy doing terribly important things. But I think more often than not, busy is simply the most acceptable knee-jerk response.'

However, that is far from the truth. In order to best explore what mindful parenting is, let's begin by exploring what is not. It is not parenting with the 'busy' badge on display for the world (& your children) to see. It is not occupying yourself and your children to be the best at every sport, to be number one at every class, or to always seek for more. It is not filling each weekend with an influx of events and activities. Keeping them 'busy' isn't the answer or solution.

On the contrary, mindful parenting is the opposite to keeping your children 'busy'. Mindful parenting requires you, as parents, to stop doing and start being with your children. In today's fast paced, digital world, this is easier said than done. However by leveraging a few ideas from research, we can find ways to slow down and be in the present with your children whilst still getting all of the 'busy' done.

As parents, you can juggle between work, household chores, taking care of the needs of your family and the wellbeing of your children amongst other factors. In essence, mindful parenting is about fully immersing yourself in each moment and experiencing life with your children, it is about practicing attunement and emotional connection. It is about accepting ideas, thoughts and feelings and choosing positivity and sustainable responses.

It is about enjoying the privilege of being a parent

In order to do the above, you need to be able to be comfortable with yourself and be aware of yourself. To do that, we have to ask- how often do we spend time with ourselves? Not with our devices, but with our thoughts?

How to practice mindfulness?

1 Be seated
Find a quiet and calm spot to sit and be in serenity.

2 Set a time limit
For beginners, you can start with a short duration of 5 to 10 minutes.

3 Be aware of your body
Sit or kneel in a comfortable position. Relax your body and release any tension.

4 Focus on your breathing
Focus on your breath as you inhale and exhale through your nose and mouth.

5 Be attentive
Be aware of getting distracted and your mind wandering. Return the focus to your breath.

6 Be kind to yourself
Don't be too hard on yourself and enjoy the process.

How do we begin?

The art of mindful parenting begins from mindfulness- your overall mental wellbeing. Practising mindfulness works on the quality of being present and fully engaged with whatever we're doing at the moment. Mindful parenting allows for the development of two key psychological ideas that benefit effective parenting. The first idea develops parental and child attunement, and the second supports both parent and children in handling emotions through acceptance before response.

Attunement



Shifting parental focus from yourselves, or from what you expect your children to be and instead tuning into who they are right now, is one of the first steps to developing a greater sense of emotional connection. Psychiatrist Daniel Siegel argues that mindfully tuning into the needs and emotions of our children, we can in fact develop not only their attachment but their relationship in general.

Sometimes we are disappointed when we do not see our own expectations being fulfilled in our children's behaviour, interests or academic results. It is important to be able to distinguish our expectations from that of our children's. To be aware of our own feelings and emotions especially during situations when we are in conflict with our children.

“Tuning in to our children promotes a healthy, secure attachment, which in turn leads to better relationships with others and maximising intellectual potential” (Siegal, 2010). When we have attunement, either interpersonally or internally, we become more balanced and regulated (Siegal, 2010).

Acceptance before Response

Like any skill, mindful parenting requires effort and persistence. In some ways developing the ability to accept emotions and thoughts before acting on them is like learning an instrument for the first time. Each day, each hour that you practice it, the better and more skilled you become.

'Awareness training is skill building; practice in which the instrument is your mind'
(Stielgel, 2010).



In the context of mindful parenting, awareness leads to understanding emotions and feelings before choosing a response. When you are not aware and present in the moment, you tend to get frustrated easily, impulsively speak your mind and/or jump in and solve problems too quickly for the good of it. We tend to respond when we should in fact listen. During stressful situations, our brain perceives a threat and sends a signal to the amygdala that makes us act before thinking. The flight, fright or freeze response is typical in such situations. A conflict with our children such as a tantrum can also cause our brain's alarm system to get triggered. Through personal mindfulness practice, you can start to create a 'gap' between stimulus and response. As parents, this 'gap' gives you more time to choose a constructive pathway. Not only does this help us to resolve situations effectively and meaningfully with sustainable results but it also models behaviour in our children.

'By slowing down your mind and developing awareness, mindfulness practice will help you work more skillfully with your thoughts, feelings and reactions, and create a "gap" where genuine choice and freedom arise'
(Crisp, 2006).

When is mindful parenting most effective?

Be a mindful adult:

The first step to mindful parenting is being a mindful adult. It starts with personal practise. Begin by carving out 5 minutes a day to focus on developing your mindful breathing and attention. Treat yourself with self-compassion as it takes time and stamina to develop. Try using a guided meditation app like smilingmind.com.au or the free sessions on the UCLA website uclahealth.org/marc/mindful-meditations. As you start your own mindful practice, you will be better able to attune to your child and balance your response to the inevitable ups and downs of parenting.



Consider mindful movement:

Raising children mindfully is not all about silent meditations. Mindful exercise is a great way to develop attunement and awareness whilst being healthy. Simple ways to achieve this may include taking the time to notice the smells, sights and architecture on a local walk. Take time to stop and smell the roses!



Create a 'nothing' space:

Put 'busy' aside for a while and just be. Set an intention to be present and responsive. Perhaps start a new conversation, go out to the playground, have a milkshake together etc. Allow an experience to evolve, rather than script it.



Breathe, breathe, breathe - then respond:

When fatigued from work and tired from daily life, develop a 'cognitive switch' to take a few, mindful breaths before interacting with your children. As adults it is our responsibility to model behaviours like patience, perspective and maturity to our children



Finally, enjoy:

Children grow up so fast. Take photos. Remind them of their competence. Share experiences. Be kind to them and yourself. Remind yourself what a privilege and honour it is to be a parent and don't forget to laugh.



What are the benefits of raising a child who is mindful and emotionally aware?

Your child's emotional intelligence paves the way for their growth and development. It begins in early childhood and helps them handle their feelings, impacting their lifelong happiness and wellbeing.

An emotionally healthy child can recognise feelings and be mindful

They can portray empathy and kindness, putting themselves in others' shoes

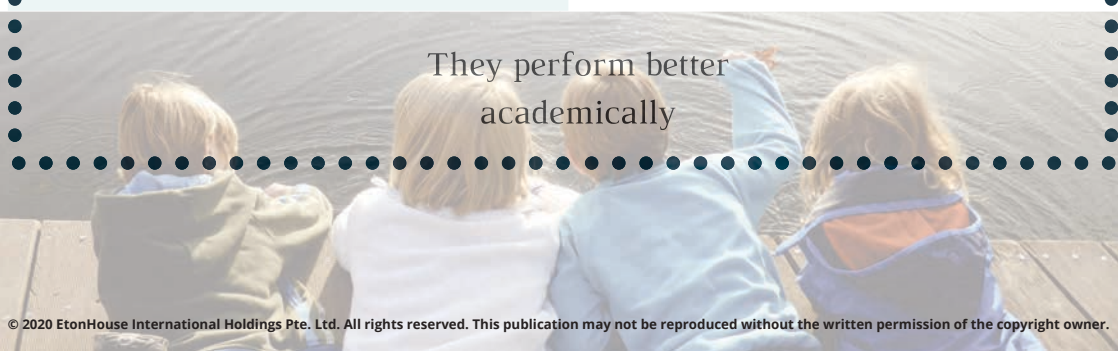
They are better able to manage anger and frustrations, reducing tantrum episodes and whining

They can calmly express things, making it easier to understand them

It makes them physically healthier as they can care for themselves

They develop better social skills and communication

They perform better academically



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Mindful parenting is a lifelong journey, you learn things about yourself and your children as you go along. Do not be too hard on yourself and take each moment with positivity. Here are some recommended mindfulness apps that will be useful along the way.

Headspace



Smiling Mind



Stop Think Breathe Kids



Happify



Instilling resilience in your child

Children may have to deal with issues like bullying, low self-esteem and other struggles. The ability to persevere through these challenges arises from resilience and optimism, which are skills that can be learnt.

Tools to develop a greater sense of optimism & resilience.

The Resilience Robot

Works on control and helps children adopt a positive and realistic outlook.

Can't Control

Can Control

Positive Actions

- When faced with a challenge, list the variables that can't be controlled and list them down.
- Take a deep breath and consider options that are within control.
- Plan two specific and measurable positive actions that can be taken to improve the situation.

The Three Ps

The Three Ps works well for children and can be easily adapted into classroom practices. When faced with a challenge or failure, we want to be able to allow children to answer no, intelligently, to the following three questions.

- 1 Is it permanent?
- 2 Is it pervasive?
- 3 Is it personal?

By asking children to reflect on events and argue that it doesn't meet these criteria supports them to move on and take positive action in a more optimistic, sustainable manner.

AUTHORS



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ABOUT ETONHOUSE



The EtonHouse International Education Group is headquartered in Singapore with more than 120 international schools spread across 12 countries, including 10 International Baccalaureate (IB) schools. The EtonHouse Group also runs E-Bridge, which is part of the Singapore government's Anchor Operator (AOP) Scheme that operates affordable Pre-Schools in Singapore, and Middleton International School – an affordable through train international school. For almost 3 decades, EtonHouse has been at the forefront of international education offering innovative pre-schools and K-12 schools across Asia.

The Group runs several primary and secondary schools offering the International Baccalaureate PYP, MYP, DP and IGCSE programmes. The Group is deeply committed to research and professional development and excellence in educational practice. It has an in-house research and professional development centre that provides continuous training and pedagogical support to its teaching staff.

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