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PART 3

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PRESENT PARENTING

Raising kids isn't easy—but engaging in some mindful practices can help you stay calm, centered and ready to take on whatever challenges may come.



By Andrea Pyros

Being a parent is filled with moments of incredible warmth and meaning, like watching your child take her first steps or snuggling up for a mega-hug. But it's also filled with challenges big and small, from dealing with a temperamental toddler to coping with a moody tween. Having a mindful outlook not only allows you to appreciate the highs, it can also help you better manage the lows—making for a calmer you and a more peaceful them.

“We all know parenting is challenging, unsettling and uncertain,” says Mark Bertin, M.D., a developmental pediatrician and the author of *How Children Thrive*. “Mindfulness gives us the resilience to approach our families more skillfully.”

And our go-go-go, constantly plugged-in lifestyle isn't making the demands of modern parenting any easier. “Today we have the same stressors we've always had, but because of technology, we also have to be constantly accessible to work, jobs and family, and our attention is pulled in all different directions,” notes Kristen Race, Ph.D., the author of *Mindful Parenting* and founder of Mindful Life, an organization that trains both adults and children in mindfulness.

In fact, it seems we're working more than ever while our kids are also constantly shuffling from one extracurricular activity to another. And many of us are coping with the challenges of having elderly parents to care for on top of everything else. “There is a lot more to juggle than a generation ago,” Race says.

This hyper-hectic lifestyle puts us into a constant “slightly stressed” state, which isn't good for us—or our kids. “That fight, flight or freeze state in our brain is triggered every time we get a text or an e-mail, or we're stuck in traffic or late for a meeting, or we see the news on TV,” says Race. Being stressed also means we're not using the part of our brain—the prefrontal cortex—that helps with decision-making, problem-solving or impulse control, all incredibly important skills we need for parenting. Instead, we become distracted, frazzled, withdrawn or highly reactive with our kids.

The solution to all of this stress might be found in engaging in elements of mindfulness, Race says. When you are more mindful, you tend to feel calmer and at ease, and more likely to recognize the positive events in your day, like how excited the dog is to see you when you come home, or how your 10-year-old reaches for your hand as

Whether you have a temperamental toddler or a moody tween, mindful practices can make you a more patient parent.





you walk through the parking lot. It also allows you to take time to react in a positive way toward your children, like complimenting her for getting ready for school on time or making her bed without being asked. “When we are mindful, we are more intentional about soaking in the joy,” Race says, adding that “our kids do better too” when they see us more centered and calm.

It’s never too late to integrate a more mindful approach for yourself or your family. Read on for how to make mindfulness a regular part of your parenting style.

DO A DAILY “WORKOUT”

Dedicate at least a few minutes each day to formally practicing mindfulness. “I define mindfulness as paying attention to the present moment in systematic ways, and that is what a formal mindful practice is; sitting in a chair for five minutes in the morning and paying attention to your breathing. When your mind wanders, you bring it back to your breathing, so you are strengthening your prefrontal cortex,” says Race. “Through meditation, a listening practice, a body scan—all of these skills strengthen

Fix your focus on what your kids are doing so you can fully enjoy the time you spend together.

this region of the brain.”

Think of it like going to the gym, Bertin adds. “Bringing your awareness back to the moment, breathing deeply and gathering your attention are all practices we can do during the day to build our mindfulness muscles.” And the more you engage in mindful practices, the easier it will be to call on them even during stressful times. “The traits that we are developing while practicing mindfulness begin to spill over into everyday life.”

REALLY BE THERE

We know it’s tough to be on every minute you’re with your kids, but make an effort to really pay attention to the time you spend with them. That means, first and foremost, putting down your phone or placing it on silent mode so you’re not distracted. Then fix your focus on what your kids are doing. “Kids notice when you give them your full attention, not just putting down your phone, but really

being there, not ruminating about work,” says Bertin. Bring your awareness to when you’re together, whether you’re reading a story, eating or even washing dishes. If your mind starts to wander with worries about the past or future, bring it back to the here and now—just like in your meditation practice.

DEAL WITH THE HARD STUFF

Sure, it’s one thing to enjoy a baby smiling back at you or to take a calming breath when the house is still and quiet, but what happens when your toddler refuses to put on her shoes and you’re late for work, or your tween tells you you’re the worst? When these inevitable moments occur, Bertin suggests a STOP approach: Stop. Take a deep breath. Observe what is going on around you and what is going on internally. Pick how to proceed.

Taking this pause gives you time to avoid the stress reaction and stay calm. “When you’re in the midst of a power struggle or running late or someone cannot find their jacket, pause; you take a slow, deep breath or two, and then you choose the response that leads to the most posi-

tive outcome. It allows you to put some thought into the situation, instead of saying something you might regret. Whether you have a 2-year-old or a 16-year-old, it's always going to be beneficial to be thoughtful instead of reactive," Race says.

HUG IT OUT

Depending on how old your child is, there are different in-the-moment practices you can deploy during stressful moments to help everyone. For younger children, Race suggests the "three-breath hug." When your child is upset and overwrought, offer him a hug and take three deep breaths together. At first he may not be able to take those three calming breaths with you, but you're slowly working to teach him that he can use his breath to regulate his emotions—and it will certainly help you take a minute to catch your breath and settle yourself.

Older kids may require different strategies. If your elementary school kid is venting about an annoying classmate, help her focus on the positive. Ask her "Who was a good friend to you today?" If you're faced with an upset

or angry tween or teen, calm yourself first, because that sense of calm will provide comfort and safety to them, even if they don't act like it. And make sure you're not being triggered by old scripts or habits. Respond to the situation at hand, not the time three years ago when they were two hours late coming home from a party. Then, as Race says, "Pause, breathe, respond with intention—that's PBR! PBR! PBR!"

MAKE IT A FAMILY AFFAIR

When you are together, such as during a meal or a drive, ask each member of the household to share three good things that happened during their day. Schedule consistent time together and do your best to be fully focused during those moments. There's a trickle-down effect that can occur from these mindful practices, says Bertin. "When we take the time to take care of ourselves and are more settled, that influences everything around us. The depth of the practice is realizing that when we develop these traits in ourselves, that changes everything for our kids and, in subtle ways, even beyond that."

Child's Play: Raising a Mindful Kid

FOSTER THEIR EQ

Help your child build emotional intelligence even at a young age. "Let's say one child pushes another to get by. First, take a breath to calm yourself; then name their emotions and give them a different script for how to handle a situation," advises Beth Anspach, a conscious discipline certified instructor. "You might calmly say, 'You seem frustrated. You wanted a turn. It's hard to wait. Say 'excuse me.'"

BREATHE IN Ask your preschooler to place

her favorite stuffed animal on her belly and rock it to sleep. "This is a simple way for little ones to focus on their bodies and breathing," says Bertin.

PROBLEM-SOLVE

With older kids, work together to brainstorm solutions to problems in a mindful way. If they're upset about a situation with a friend, nonjudgmentally repeat back what they're saying until they settle down.

CEDE CONTROL

"With teens, you put the skills back on to them," says Anspach. "If they're angry or scared, say to them, 'You seem really upset about this, what would be helpful for you to know right now?' Leave the ball

in their court if you can." It's also okay to give them permission to table whatever is going on until they're calmer, she adds. Once they get back from their guitar playing/bike riding/manga drawing, they may have ideas on what they'd like to do next. Let them have their emotions and feelings, and give them the space to figure things out with you there as a support system and resource. Ultimately, "the goal is to work ourselves out of a job as a parent," Anspach advises.

