

## MINDFUL PARENTING: In Search of the Happy Family

**“When the Navajo child asked her mother for counsel on a particular question, her mother said “Put it in your holy middle and sleep on it.” Charlotte Kasl, “If the Buddha Married”**

In my Melbourne Psychology practice I have observed with growing concern the distress of parents who are trying to keep pace with the Western idea of having it all and doing it all “NOW”. This idea has been perpetuated by a sophisticated and ever more psychologically aware advertising and marketing world who prey on our emotions to get sales.

If our children are old enough to watch television, they are being continually bombarded by images of their peers with the latest designer gear, technology and attitudes which perpetuate the myth that **Having = Happy**. However, extensive research has shown that true happiness is achieved if we have meaning in our lives and if we feel connected to something larger than ourselves (extended family; community; religion etc). A graphic illustration of this is that research has demonstrated that a 14 year old orphaned prostitute in Mumbai scored higher on the Happiness Scale than an office worker in the US . This was because the money she earned supported her orphaned siblings in an outlying village and whom she visited twice a year where she was welcomed and her connection with her family and village was celebrated. How many of us yearn for what we don’t have and despair of what we do have.

If our children are old enough to be in school, the competition to keep up with their peers increases their desire to be “the same as” their friends and not to feel left out of the crowd. This idea is innate, as we are born with a need to be accepted by our group. This is hardwired into our physiology and dates back to cave man days when being rejected and expelled by the group meant certain death. So, psychologically aware marketers play on our emotions and our need to be “the same”. In reality, however, owning “stuff” only creates more desire to own more “stuff” as next year or even next week what we have is superseded by other brands, newer technology, more sophisticated ideas (witness the number of garage sales in your suburb). .

Busy, often overworked and stressed parents often present in my consulting room complaining of exhaustion and a family who they sometimes see as out of control. Often, after investigation, what it boils down to is a family who feels isolated from their community, without enough inter-generational support and out of touch with what children actually benefit from. Extended family often lives on the other side of town as young families, eager to live in their own home, have had to sacrifice family support to buy into an area they can afford. It is only in the last generation that “Parenting Support Groups” have sprung up in Western society to fill in the gaps traditionally filled by tribes, then by extended family and neighbours.

With more and more families relying on Day Care to replace extended family for child minding when both parents are working, families can feel isolated and desperate to provide the best they can for their new families.

For thousands of years, Buddhists have known and understood the “power of now”. Buddhists have practised and taught Mindfulness Meditation and now at last the Western world is beginning to understand its benefits. Mindfulness Meditation allows us to be in the moment, not worrying about

what we said yesterday or fearful of something in the future that has not yet happened and probably never will. Mindfulness also allows us to really “BE” with our children, our partners, our friends and most importantly, with ourselves.

Becoming Mindful does not mean that you need to go to a cave in the mountains and practise stillness and non-thinking for hours on end. It can be as simple as when you are driving the car practise Mindfulness, be in the moment and DRIVE THE CAR. Don’t think about what’s for dinner, when you will have time to call that friend or pay the bills. Get in the car, watch yourself turn on the ignition, do up your seatbelt, check the rear view mirror, release the handbrake, turn on your indicator, turn OFF the music and DRIVE. Watch where you’re going, notice the other cars, the feel of your body on the seat, your hands on the wheel, the traffic. “BE” in the car. How often do you get to your destination and think “I don’t even remember driving here?” We all do it, it is because we are doing the opposite of being Mindful, we are being Mind-less.

With our children, if they want us to play with them, sit with them, read with them, how many of us feel exasperated, both because it may be an inconvenient time, but also because we are just plain exhausted from all the “Doing” and not enough of the “Being”.

With your children, 10 minutes at a time of actually really “Being” with them, that is focussing on them, truly listening to what they are saying and engaging with them often has the bonus effect of calming children down and creating a new and positive pattern of inter-relating in the family. Dynamics in a family can be turned around very quickly for the positive if children feel heard and understood. Often in our busyness to get the house looking right, our chores done, our work finished for the day, childrens’ bedtime can often be upon us before we have spent any meaningful time with them at all.

Dr Daniel Siegel in his book “The Mindful Brain” states that brain science studies have shown that daily mindfulness practices include a number of profound ways in which we can become healthier and happier –

1. Ability to regulate the body
2. Ability to regulate moods
3. Fear extinction
4. Attuned Communication
5. Ability to be flexible
6. Ability to be empathic
7. Capacity for insight
8. 8. Morality
9. Intuition and the ability to use intuition to inform reason

Mindfulness practises are really about “being” instead of “doing”. We all have to do things to get through our daily lives, our work, our obligations. When was the last time you took time out for yourself to read a book, have a bath, pick a flower for yourself? Our children learn from watching what we do, not from what we say. When we can truly give ourselves the time to be in the moment, we are giving our children the greatest gift of all.

Some ideas for cultivating Mindfulness for your family:

- Take time to practise Mindfulness around your children to help them grow up feeling noticed, heard and understood
- Look deeply to learn who your children are rather than projecting your hopes, fears and expectations on to them
- Use Mindfulness to discover what you can learn from each new situation and with your children – are you making unrealistic demands on life and your family or can you accept the inevitable imperfections of life?
- Listen to your children without judging – allow them to talk things through; let them feel understood; concentrate on feelings and allow them to solve their own problems
- Whenever you find the time, even if it is one or two minutes, breathe – watch your breath
- Remember, no matter how intense your current emotional state is, it will pass. Find opportunities to share this with your children
- Strive to accept imperfection in yourself and your others (including your children)
- The way we speak fuels the atmosphere of the home
- Remember your children are learning from watching your relationship
- Pause before you speak

Adapted from “Buddhism for Mothers” Sarah Naphali

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## **Bibliography**

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