



Mindful Parenting

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Photos by Michelle Wells Photography

We live in a world that is ever so busy. A lot of this hustle and bustle has become necessary in order to keep up with everyday demands but I wonder sometimes what effect it is having on our children. The regular schedule of waking up, going to school, having supper, doing homework, getting to bed and preparing for the next day has become all too automatic.

The schedule is not necessarily the problem, in fact it is inevitable for most parents if they want to operate in this fast-paced world. I would like to address the importance of being mindfully present with our children throughout everyday activities instead of treating each activity as a means to an end.

What does it mean to be mindfully present? It is being present, not just physically but also mindfully. Mindfulness is a broad term that can be used in various settings.



“Being mindfully present is not about doing more as a parent but rather seizing the moment in our everyday opportunities. It is in these interactions that strong connections can be created.”

In its most general sense though, mindfulness is about waking up from a life on automatic, and being sensitive to novelty in our everyday experiences^[1]. It is a focused and conscious awareness on our everyday life.

Mindful presence is not necessarily measured by the length of time spent on an activity. One can be with one's child all day but not necessarily be mindfully present, just like one can spend an hour with one's child and be mindfully present. It is also



not necessarily measured by the kind of activity involved in but rather by the quality of the interaction, whether spoken or unspoken.

To bring mindfulness into our life we are required to mentally slow down and be aware of the particular activity in which we might be engaged in that moment. It could be driving, eating, walking, talking to someone or sitting in a meeting at work. The activity itself does not matter but rather our ability to, for even a moment, be mindful of what we are engaged in.

I often hear people saying that they have driven from one location to another without any recollection of the drive. Or that they drove out of their neighbourhood and were not able to remember whether or not they had closed the garage door. Such experiences are often interpreted as a memory failure but it can also simply be a lack of being conscious and aware of the activity as it is happening.

Often we are thinking of something else as we engage in our everyday activities and miss opportunities to see what is right in front of us, whether it is a closed garage door, or a split second expression on our child's face. The objective is not necessarily to be in constant mindfulness and be aware of every detail around us but rather to have the ability to go in that mind space, even if it is just for a minute.

I have found in my work that parents have all the right intentions but in the midst of all the daily activities it is easy to get pulled into the hustle and bustle of life and overlook the importance of simply being with our children. A lack of that mindful time with our children can create what seems like behaviour problems in our children (e.g., not listening or being easily angered), lack of motivation, emotional sensitivities and even worry/anxiety. These behaviours are often a call to slow down, be paid attention to and to truly be understood.

Before we can be mindful with our children we first need to learn to be mindful with ourselves. Do we slow down and check in with ourselves throughout the day? It can be as simple as pausing for a few seconds and take the time to consciously listen and notice the sounds around us. Such a simple act allows us, at least for that moment, to mindfully connect.

Being mindfully present with our children also focuses on being rather than doing more. Here are some ideas on how parents can simply BE without necessarily adding to their list of things to do but instead seizing the opportunities in their everyday life.

There are times when our children keep themselves busy by watching a favourite television show or playing with toys. It is a perfect opportunity for a parent to come and join their child in the activity she is involved in. Without interrupting or making a big entrance, just simply joining and sitting beside their child for thirty minutes while she watches a favourite show. Just simply sitting beside them and enjoying a time of no questions or demands. This is a wonderful way to also BE with our adolescents.

In the case of playing, parents can discreetly join their child's play by being curious or playing a role in their make-believe world. Children are often welcoming to such interactions. Reading time is also another way that we can just BE with our children. It can be done in such a way that it involves the child rather than rushing through the readings.

Another way to BE with our children and adolescents is to create an environment where there is a healthy balance between demanding and non-demanding interactions^[2]. A demanding interaction is where the child is asked and required to do something (e.g. go brush your teeth). A non-demanding interaction, on the other hand, is more inviting and provides more space than a demanding one would (e.g., let's go brush our teeth together as it is time to go to bed). Both kind of interactions are necessary. The problem comes when all our interactions, or the majority of them are only demanding. Repetitive and demanding interactions quickly create tension and block the channels of communication. Using a non-demanding interaction does not necessarily mean that children will immediately follow through and listen. Instead it creates, over time, healthier parent-child interactions and provides space for emotional expression, dialogue and continued communication. In other words, it creates an environment where our children can BE.

The role of the parent is to foster an environment where children can have the opportunity to BE. It is important to remember that when we join them in their activity we are entering their world and, in that moment, we are observers and participants, not trying to tell them how things should be done. Fostering such an environment in our children's everyday life can have many benefits, not only for the parent-child relationship but also in the children's emotional well-being.

Being mindfully present with our children is not about doing more as a parent but rather seizing the moment in our everyday opportunities. It is in our everyday, most simple and organic interactions that strong genuine connections can be created and experienced. **B**

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[1] Daniel J. Siegel – The Mindful Brain (2007)

[2] Adapted from the work of Gordon Neufeld

