

Stress-free home life?

Although 'quality time' might be a cliché, an increasing number of parents feel that they really do want to slow down and connect with their children.

Eve Menezes Cunningham investigates the concept of Mindful Parenting

A recent study on 'Mindful Parenting' found that it reduced aggression, self-harm and non-compliance in children with autism – and best of all the concept is not at odds with any other parenting methods. Mindful Parenting evolved from the Mindfulness movement as a way for parents to bring more awareness into their hectic family lives by being grounded in the present moment.


The method has its celebrity followers too. In *Burnt Toast*, Desperate Housewives' Teri Hatcher talks about Mindful Parenting as a simple and practical way of reframing everyday frustrations. She learned to slow down enough to enjoy her daughter's pleasure in learning to tie her own shoelaces, instead of rushing her or taking over.

The movement is certainly gaining momentum too. Scott Rogers, author of *Mindful Parenting*, is Director of the Institute for Mindfulness Studies in Miami, Florida and founder of www.TheMindfulParent.org website and community. He has two daughters, Millie (9) and Rose (7) and his focus is on "making Mindful Parenting accessible to people who aren't necessarily interested in or aware of Mindfulness practice already."

Mindful Parenting doesn't contradict any more conventional advice, it just enables parents to remember what they already know and keep their cool. Scott says, "Imagine yourself, as a parent, being in a room of knowledge. This room has round walls with writing of everything you know. When you're in the centre, you're in just the right spot to see it all clearly. But in life, you get thrown from one side to another. When you're not centred, you can only see the bit of information that looms in front of you. Then what's on the other side is not clear either. By bringing yourself back to the centre, your intuitive wisdom comes into play."

Stepping back

Eluned Gold is a teacher of Mindfulness Based Approaches for The Centre of Mindfulness Research and Practice at Bangor University in North Wales. She is also a senior psychotherapy worker for Foster Care Associates. >>



"Slow down. Relax about what you think you need to do to be a good parent. Your kids need YOU, not extra activities... Don't get your kids started on that super-kid track of taking five kinds of lessons when they're five years old"



So what exactly is 'Mindful Parenting'?

It's based on the buddhist concept of 'Mindfulness', which is all about aiming for 'non-judgemental awareness' of yourself and those around you. To make the idea easier to grasp, especially in the context of bringing up children, you might think of the opposite being 'unconscious parenting', which is what most of us probably do - the spontaneous gut reaction to our children's behaviour, which usually results in us flying off the handle and everyone getting seriously stressed.

The message is that your child shouldn't be seen as something that gets in the way of your other activities - there is no more important activity! Try to see things from your child's viewpoint... and what it's like for them having you as a parent. The goal is a mutually respectful relationship - so, for instance, don't be afraid to apologise to your child if you were wrong, or let them down.

There are still parental restrictions and boundaries - it's not about being over-indulgent or weak - but we shouldn't just be controlling for the sake of it. Ideally, all rules can be enforced calmly.

Top tips to try with your children



* **Maya Frost (far left, with family):** “Slow down. Relax about what you think you need to do to be a good parent. Your kids need YOU, not extra activities. Talk more as a family. Unplug things. Have fun dinners together. Don’t get your kids started on that super-kid track of taking five kinds of lessons when they are five years old. Don’t buy too much. If at all possible, live near your children’s school so they can walk. Choose to live simply and your life will be infinitely richer and more meaningful. It’s also more fun when everyone is happier!”

* **Eluned Gold:** “You can do active things like yoga with children or ‘mindful walking’, even if you can’t find time to sit and meditate. But make some time, even 20 minutes, to sit alone. Get to a class if possible and get a CD. It helps enormously if you’ve got a group around you to support you. Encourage your friends to take it up – and talk about it.”

Eluned has three grown children and has been practising Mindfulness for 10 years. She says the main benefits are “not reacting so quickly and being able to take a step back – even though they’re grown up.

“When children do things that aren’t what we’d hope, Mindfulness helps parents recognise that they’re not doing it just to be annoying,” she continues. “So if a child runs through the house with muddy shoes just when your mother-in-law is due to arrive, instead of thinking the child is selfish or naughty, if you’re Mindful, you can catch the thought and think that the child might be excited or may need the loo.” This kind of thought process means you can deal with things more calmly and kindly.

Maya Frost, owner of Real-World Mindfulness Training and mother of four grown-up daughters (see above), adds: “My kids don’t meditate or talk about Mindfulness in any particular way, but they are very clear about what matters to them. We really kept things simple and pared down and that made all the difference. If you’ve got four teenage girls, life can get pretty complicated.”

Kinder for all

Mindful Parenting won’t be for everyone, but the parents I spoke to were glad they opened their minds and got over their prejudices. Eluned remembers reading a blog about Mindful Parenting which she thought “was quite sickly sweet. This might put some people off. It’s not a cure-all; but Mindfulness gets you in touch with reality – whether that’s good or bad. Every parent makes mistakes and has regrets. Mindfulness helps us be kind to ourselves and that helps us be kinder with our children. It’s not easy. It takes discipline.”

Martina Barlow is foster mother to two teenage boys, and is also mother to Gavin (23), Tazmyn (9), and Zasha (4). She did Eluned’s course but admits, “the first time I heard of it, I thought it sounded weird. But you have to give it a chance. I’m not at all into alternative stuff, but it has an



“Mindfulness helps us be kind to ourselves and that helps us be kinder with our children. It’s not easy. It takes discipline.”

Eluned Gold

immediate effect and can make every part of your life more pleasurable. At first, my children thought I’d lost the plot; but they appreciate the effects.”

Maya can’t think of any situations where Mindful Parenting shouldn’t be used, but says: “Every parent needs to come up with their own approach. You don’t have to do exercises or meditation, or even use a special language. The important thing is to simply pay attention to each other. Attention is love. Remembering that can help us slow down and focus on our child when we’re feeling frazzled or tempted to keep things busier than they need be.”

Banish stress

Martina did the eight-week course in Bangor just a few months ago, and it’s already been helpful. “If I’m not stressed, everyone in the family benefits. One of my foster sons is very anxious so I’ve started teaching him techniques to use before going into a situation he finds stressful. To stay calm, I focus on my breathing then widen my perspective and hear all the noises around me before pulling my awareness back in. I can do it in the car to get over any stress from the journey. It helps me focus.”

Eluned points out that while benefits can be instant, the longer you practise, the deeper and richer it gets.

Helpful resources

BOOKS & WEBSITES

- * **Mindful Parenting** by Scott Rogers, Booklocker Inc, £10.95 (ISBN: 978-0977345502)
- * **Everyday Blessings: The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting** by Jon and Myla Kabat-Zinn, Hyperion Books \$16.99 (ISBN: 978-0786883141)
- * <http://themindfulparent.org/>
- * www.bangor.ac.uk/imscar/mindfulness
- * www.real-worldmindfulness.com