



sunfield

CENTER FOR AUTISM, ADHD, AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH
300 N. Fifth Ave., Suite 210 • Ann Arbor, MI 48104
www.sunfieldcenter.com • 734.222.9277

The Problem of Automatic Reactions in Parent-Child Interactions and How Mindful Parenting Can Help

By: [Abbey Herringshaw, Karina G. Campos, Psy.D., Rachel Christensen & Suzi Naguib, Psy.D.](#)



A small argument has become a full-scale blowout. Again. Imagine that you, as many parents do, have just asked your child to clean his or her room. Your child ignores your request or simply says, “No.” You are not surprised by this response, and may respond angrily, “Why is this always such a struggle? Why do you never do what I ask?” The child is expecting this response, and has his or her own retort ready to launch. And so it begins...

Automatic reactions in parent-child interactions. A cycle of automatic reactions between parents and children tends to occur when challenging situations arise. These

reactions often play out with little conscious awareness and can be very resistant to change. By consistently drawing upon the same behaviors used in the past, both a parent and child may tend to react more strongly than what is warranted in the situation at hand. This can lead to repeated, overly negative parent-child interactions, often resulting in both parties feeling frustrated or even resentful. Mindful parenting has been shown to help break these cycles while helping to create more positive parent-child interactions.

What is mindfulness? Mindfulness is described as paying full attention and having a nonjudgmental awareness of what is happening in the present moment. Being mindful of situations increases awareness of thoughts and feelings and allows an individual to appreciate that what is happening in the current moment will pass and subsequently be replaced by the next moment. This awareness also enables one to be more flexible and accepting of the events that unfold around them and helps one to make clear-headed decisions, even in heated and emotionally charged moments. Individuals who practice cultivating mindful awareness report experiencing decreased depression, anxiety, and relationship stress (Duncan, Coatsworth & Greenberg, 2009).

What is mindful parenting? Mindful parenting incorporates mindfulness into everyday interactions to help build secure attachments and allow parents to engage in a more calm and consistent manner with their children. Duncan et al. (2009) proposed a model of mindful parenting that draws from empirical research about mindfulness-based interventions. It consists of five main steps:

- 1. Listening with full attention.** A parent is advised to pay complete attention, not only to the content of a conversation with his or her child, but also to the child’s voice, facial expressions, and body signals. This allows a parent to develop a more accurate understanding of his or her child’s behaviors and emotional needs in order to improve communication and avoid conflict.
- 2. Non-judgmental acceptance of the self and child.** It is recommended that parents be fully accepting of their child’s strengths and weaknesses. By acknowledging and accepting these attributes, parents are able to set clear expectations and standards for their child that are neither below nor above the child’s capabilities.

3. **Emotional awareness of the self and child.** Strong emotions can trigger automatic evaluations of a situation, which in turn can lead to automatic behavior responses. By carefully attending to and identifying the emotions that are occurring both in oneself as the parent and in one's child, a parent is able to make decisions about how and when to respond, instead of reacting automatically to the situation.
4. **Self-regulation in the parenting relationship.** Parents often experience strong emotions when interacting with their children, and these emotions can be difficult to manage and restrain. Mindful parenting recommends pausing before reacting in such situations. By doing this, a parent can practice improved self-regulation, which can lead to increased awareness of thoughts and feelings, and therefore better control over reactions.
5. **Compassion for the self and child.** Parents are advised to strive to be more compassionate towards themselves and their children. Being compassionate with oneself can decrease self-blame regarding one's parenting difficulties. It can also reduce the concern that many parents experience that others may be judging their parenting behaviors and/or their children's behavior in social settings.

What are the benefits of mindful parenting?

Mindful parenting can help increase enjoyment in the parent child relationship and contribute to greater trust, increased positive interactions, and less parental stress (Duncan et al., 2009). Furthermore, mindful parenting can also be beneficial for parents of children who have developmental, emotional and/or behavioral difficulties. Singh et al. (2006) found that using mindful parenting techniques with children diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder can have positive effects, including decreased aggression and noncompliance as well as increased satisfaction in the parent child relationship.



For more information about Sunfield Center for Autism, ADHD and Behavioral Health, please visit our website at sunfieldcenter.com or call us at (734) 222-9277.

References:

- Dumas, J. E. (2005). Mindfulness-based parent training: Strategies to lessen the grip of automaticity in families with disruptive children. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, 34, 779–791.
- Duncan, L. G., Coatsworth, J., & Greenberg, M. T. (2009). A model of mindful parenting: Implications for parent–child relationships and prevention research. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 12, 255-270.
- Singh, N. N., Lancioni, G. E., Winton, A. S. W., Fisher, B. C., Wahler, R. G., McAleavey, K., et al. (2006). Mindful parenting decreases aggression, noncompliance, and self-injury in children with autism. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 14, 169–177.

Recommended Readings:

- [Everyday Blessings: The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting by Myla Kabat-Zinn and Jon Kabat-Zinn](#)
- [The Mindful Child: How to Help Your Kid Manage Stress and Become Happier, Kinder, and More Compassionate by Susan K Greenland](#)