Mindful Parenting: Strategies for parents of children with special needs

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Objectives

- Participants will have a general understanding of mindfulness
- Participants will understand some of the research base supporting mindfulness
- Participants will have some simple tools they could choose to apply in challenging situations with their children
What is mindfulness?

“Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.”

-Jon Kabat-Zinn
…but what does that mean, really?

Mindfulness means that we are aware of what is happening, as it is happening, without judgment.

Mind Full, or Mindful?
"Mindfulness is about being fully awake in our lives... We feel more alive. We also gain immediate access to our own powerful inner resources for insight, transformation, and healing."

- Jon Kabat-Zinn
What’s the evidence?

Research indicates mindfulness can help to:

- Decrease stress
- Improve immune system function
- Lower high blood pressure
- Improve quality of romantic and social relationships (including communication, acceptance, and general relationship satisfaction)
- Decrease symptoms of anxiety and depression
What’s the evidence?

- **Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction**
  - Jon Kabat-Zinn at University of Massachusetts School of Medicine
  - Decrease in pain and increased ability to cope with pain
  - Decrease in anxiety and panic-related symptoms
  - Decrease stress, increase positive coping, relaxation, and quality of life
  - Recognized as an evidence-based practice

- **Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy**
  - Prevent relapse in depressive symptoms
  - Decrease symptoms of anxiety
Mindful Parenting

- Acceptance of child and self as they are in this moment.
- “Whatever our children's difficulties, limitations, or problems, they are okay the way they are, they have what they need to grow, and we have what we need to provide for them and guide them.” (Bogels & Restifo, 2012)
Mindful Parenting

- Parenting skills are known to collapse under stress.

- Mindful parenting has been proven to:
  - Reduce parenting stress and parental reactivity to stress
  - Improve parenting and co-parenting
  - Reduce parental experiential avoidance
  - Reduce child behavior and emotional problems
  - Increase general mindfulness
  - Increase mindfulness with children
Parents may also...

- Respond less reactively to parenting stress
- Take better care of themselves
- Develop more empathy and compassion for themselves and their child
- Tolerate difficult emotions more easily (in self and child)
- Resolve conflict better/develop a stronger bond with child
Mindful Parenting

Change the question from 
"what's wrong with me? Why can't I handle this?"

to

"What do I need right now?" What kind of support would help me?"
Connecting the dots

- Recognizing signals of stress
  - Body sensations
  - Feelings
  - Thoughts
  - Action Tendencies
Connecting the dots

• Recognizing signals of stress
  ◦ Body sensations
    • Tension in the shoulders, heart beating fast, headache…
  ◦ Feelings
    • Angry, sad, frustrated, guilty, tired, burned out…
  ◦ Thoughts
    • “I can’t take this anymore,” “I can’t handle this,”
      “this ALWAYS happens”…
  ◦ Action tendencies
    • Yelling, getting angry at yourself, “I feel like…”
Connecting the dots

- Attempt to acknowledge *all* reactions, nonjudgmentally
- Create opportunity to feel and identify the reaction
- Pause and create space to control the reaction until we are aware of our bodily reaction and the accompanying thoughts/feelings.
Choosing mindfulness

Stimulus → Mindfulness → Response
Automatic Parenting

- Parenting without being fully present
- Acting/reacting without being fully present to what is *actually* occurring
- We cannot (and should not) eliminate automatic parenting, but should be aware of when it is occurring
“Falling awake”
Mindfulness opens the possibility of “being mode”
We can do the things that need to be done in being mode!
Goal is just to be with what is
Approach with curiosity and openness
Connecting with the body

- Connect with the body to return attention to the moment (shift from doing mode to being mode)
- Experience small pleasures in life by tuning into body
- Ground ourselves in our bodies to experience the situation fully and pause before reacting
  - makes the situation more likely to de-escalate
Connecting with the body

- If out of sync with body, how do we truly tune into our children?
- Breath as an anchor
Connecting with the body

- Automatic stress reactions
  - Fight
  - Flight
  - Freeze

- By recognizing signals of stress, we can identify and step out of automatic survival patterns when they are unhelpful or unnecessary
  - May be able to choose not to act
  - May be able to act in new ways that change the pattern
STOP

- **S** – *Stop* what you’re doing
- **T** – *Take* a deep breath
- **O** – *Observe* your experience (body sensations, thoughts, feelings, and action tendencies)
- **P** – *Proceed* with something that will support you in the moment
Perspective

- How would we treat a friend?

Reactions:
- Body sensations
- Feelings
- Thoughts
- Action Tendencies

Can you be a friend to yourself?
Self-compassion

- In moments of stress...
  - Bring kindness to self as you would to a friend
  - Not justifying/excusing “wrong” behavior/behavior you would like to change, but acknowledging that
    - You are human
    - We all make mistakes
    - We all have challenging interactions with loved ones
  - Not self-justification
    - Acknowledgment of pain/suffering, and allowing compassion instead of more pain
**RAIN**

- **R** – **Recognize** what is going on
- **A** – **Allow** the experience to be there, just as it is
- **I** – **Investigate** with kindness
- **N** – **Natural awareness** of what comes up
Self-compassion

Would you rather admit to fault when working for a...
Self-compassion

3 steps of self-compassion

- Awareness that this is a moment of suffering
  - Ouch! This hurts.
  - This is hard.

- Connecting with our common humanity
  - All parents have made mistakes.
  - I’m not alone.

- Self-kindness
  - May I be kind to myself.
  - May I forgive myself.
  - May I be patient and strong.

Gratitude

- Intentionally focusing attention on positive things that may otherwise get lost
  - What do I feel grateful for in my child?
  - What do I feel grateful for in myself as a parent?
3-minute breathing space

• Checking in (1 minute)
  ◦ Bring yourself into the present moment by deliberately adopting an erect and dignified position. Ask yourself: What is my experience right now? What thoughts are going through my mind? What feelings are here? What body sensations do I notice? What action tendencies am I aware of?

• Breathing (1 minute)
  ◦ Turn your full attention towards your breathing. Follow each breath all the way in...and all the way out...maybe also become aware of the pause between the in-breath and the out-breath. Use the breath to anchor you into the present and help you tune into a state of awareness and stillness.

• Expanding (1 minute)
  ◦ Now expand the field of awareness around your breathing so that it includes a sense of the body as a whole, your posture, and facial expression. A sense of this breathing body, in this moment of time, in this space.
A parting thought...

“Try looking at your mind as a wayward puppy that you are trying to paper train. You don't drop-kick a puppy into the neighbor's yard every time it piddles on the floor. You just keep bringing it back to the newspaper.”

Anne Lamott
Questions?
Resources

Mindful Parenting:
- *Everyday Blessings: The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting* by Myla Kabat-Zinn & Jon Kabat-Zinn

For children:
- *Sitting Still Like a Frog: Mindfulness Exercises for Kids (and Their Parents)* by Eline Snel
- *Mindful Monkey, Happy Panda* by Lauren Alderfer
- *Moody Cow Meditates* by Kerry Lee MacLean
- *Peaceful Piggy Meditation* by Kerry Lee MacLean
- *A Handful of Quiet: Happiness in Four Pebbles* by Thich Nhat Hanh
- *Yipper and His Journey of Mindfulness* by Darcie Nuttall

General mindfulness:
- *Wherever You Go, There You Are* by Jon Kabat-Zinn
- *You Are Here: Discovering the Magic of the Present Moment* by Thich Nhat Hanh
- *Full Catastrophe Living* by Jon Kabat-Zinn
Resources

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction:

- A Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Workbook by Bob Stahl and Elisha Goldstein
- The Mindful Way Through Anxiety: Break Free from Chronic Worry and Reclaim Your Life by Susan Orsillo, Ph.D. and Lizabeth Roemer, Ph.D.
- The Mindful Way Through Depression by Mark Williams and John Teasdale

Websites/Internet Resources

- http://www.mindful.org/
- http://marc.ucla.edu/ - MARC is the Mindful Awareness Research Center through UCLA
- http://self-compassion.org/ - Kristin Neff’s website on self-compassion
- http://www.umassmed.edu/cfm - University of Massachusetts Medical School, Center for Mindfulness

Local Resources

- http://centerformindfulawareness.org/