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Mindful Parenting



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What is Mindful Parenting?

Mindfulness, or full attention, is an inherent capacity of human beings which everyone has and can develop through meditation practices that are designed for that purpose. The appreciation of this capacity is currently booming in western society, although it was first developed in Asian and Buddhist cultures, where it has been known and studied since thousands of years. The capacity that we call "mindfulness" results from deliberately paying attention to what is happening inside ourselves (thoughts, body feelings and emotions) and around us (relationships and social events).

One of the reasons for its booming is that, due to the hectic pace of modern life, the activation of "autopilot" is almost permanent in the workplace, in social relations, during the daily activities and even in family relationships. This automatic functioning decreases the quality of our experiences in different situations, which has high impact on the exercise of parenting. Thus, if we do not allocate the right time to know the needs of our children when they cry, our response may not be appropriate. It also affects the communication with our children when they try to tell us significant facts and we do not pay enough attention, thereby missing that relevant moment.

Although being a parent involves positive emotions and feelings, such as pride and happiness, it can also generate anxiety and stress. That is due, among other aspects, to the rapid changes at the physical, cognitive and affective level in both the parents and the children, as well as to the changing circumstances that are happening in the social environment. These changing conditions generate great uncertainty about the way of acting, which may interfere with our actions in the educational scope. The concept "mindful parenting" refers to the application of those skills that are involved in paying full attention to the exercise of parenting. This is aimed of facing the complexity of providing a reflective response to the environment demands.

How to promote Mindful Parenting?

The studies conducted in this field have identified five key skills to promote mindful parenting:

- ▶ **Listening with full attention.** This consists in having the intention to hear beyond the words spoken, paying attention to other aspects that are immersed in them, such as their meaning, causes or consequences. This leads to a deep reading of the communication messages between parents and their children. An example of this would be accurately perceiving the verbal and emotional message of the child or observing the behavioural signs of the latter.
- ▶ **Acceptance without value judgments toward oneself and toward the child.** This involves avoiding interpretations, inventing causes or generating expectations that could have a negative effect on the parent-child relationship. Moreover, it prevents us from transmitting perceptions biased by our desires and, on the other hand, it helps us to accept them and to show them understanding and empathy. An example of this would be the appreciation of the personality traits of our children as they are, without distortions or impositions of how we would like them to be.
- ▶ **Emotional awareness of both the parent and the child.** This consists in focusing the attention on inner states and being aware of them, in order to reduce their automatic processing and identify the emotions that arise. Thus, it is possible to interact with the child in a conscious manner and make reflective decisions that help to expand our perspective of what is happening. The capacity to provide an adequate response to the needs and emotions of the child would be a good example of the use of emotional awareness.
- ▶ **Self-regulation in the parental relation.** This is based on reducing the negative impulses through the adoption of a waiting space that allows the parents to reflect instead of falling for the automatic reaction. The capacity to “stop” helps to respond with intentionality without limiting oneself only to reacting. An example of this would be the use of emotional self-regulation when we have to react in the face of a tantrum or a behaviour of our children which we perceive as defiant.
- ▶ **Compassion, both toward oneself and toward the child.** This is based on adopting a position of acceptance and empathy and a proactive attitude in communication, with the aim of satisfying the needs of our children and providing harmony and solace in those moments when positive affection must be promoted. An example of this would be being more understanding of ourselves regarding the efforts we make in those tasks related to their upbringing and education.

What techniques could I use?

There are several evidence-based intervention programmes that use full attention as a central element to reduce the symptoms of stress and anxiety, or the use of acceptance and acquisition of commitments. Such programmes include different techniques based on meditation, which is the most effective means to attain mindful parenting. Although these techniques have been studied and designed for structured use in parenting education programmes, their daily use may be a resource to acquire the desired awareness in the exercise of parenting. Next, we present examples of the eight most popular techniques, whose combination is especially effective to train the different key skills of conscious attention mentioned above:

- ▶ **Self-registration.** This is a technique to observe a specific situation, either internal or external, with the aim of knowing how we feel about it, so that we can differentiate our thoughts, feelings, emotions and behavioural reactions. In a daily self-registration sheet, designed to help us become aware of pleasant events, it is worth asking ourselves: What was the experience?; Was I aware of the pleasant or unpleasant feelings?; How did my body feel, in detail, during the experience?; What feelings and emotions accompanied this event?; How did my verbal (words, tones, volume, etc.) and gestural behaviour react?; What thoughts come to my mind now while I am writing this down?
- ▶ **Communication dynamics.** These are role-playing games whose aim is to attain one-to-one interpersonal communication in order to help the parents become aware of their active listening and communication patterns. This awareness will allow them to know how the stress factors affect the communication with their children. Assertive communication strategies must be addressed, being aware of the thoughts and feelings of both the parents and the children, without judging them while talking to them.
- ▶ **Meditation with mantras.** This type of meditative practice is a particular way of practising focused attention, which implies a concentration-tending style; it consists in repeating a special word or sentence as an object of awareness to be resorted to. An example of mantra could be “I accept myself as a parent”.
- ▶ **Meditation with music.** Music acts as a facilitator of attention, as it has an external element that guides the observation. Using breathing as an anchor, it consists in becoming aware of the musical elements (rhythm, sounds) and one’s own elements (memories, thoughts, body feelings, emotions).
- ▶ **Meditation focused on breathing.** Meditation focused on breathing, paying special attention to the inhalations and exhalations, as well as to the thoughts, feelings and emotions that emerge, without attempting to act on them, only paying attention to them to make them conscious.
- ▶ **Meditation while walking.** This practice is aimed at meditating while the body is in motion. The objective is to attain relaxation through awareness in each action before, during and after the movement, as well as in the body feelings that it generates. To favour observation, the actions and movements that produce the gait are connected slowly and subtly, delving into each of them.
- ▶ **Body scanner.** This technique consists in performing conscious stretching exercises, sequentially, in the different parts of the body, with the aim of observing and knowing the body feelings produced by the stretching exercises.
- ▶ **Open monitoring meditation.** This involves a non-directive style and the use of experience-monitoring techniques and non-judgment observations to maintain awareness in the present. There is no focus object; the aim is to listen to oneself with an open attitude and predisposition, in order to increase the level of self-knowledge and foster personal reflection.

Implications

Research on the results of programmes based on mindfulness and mindful parenting shows different benefits in different individual dimensions, such as stress (reducing both physical and observable symptoms, e.g., perceived stress), anxiety, general health and mood. It has been demonstrated that the benefits are not only individual, but that mindful parenting can promote safe affective relationships between parents and their children and improve the relationship between parents and their children by changing their communication. Even in the case of internalising and externalising behavioural problems of the children, the practice of full attention by the parents has a positive impact on such problems.



Additional Resources

- ▶ **Youtube channel “Intimind”:**
<https://www.youtube.com/c/intimind>
- ▶ **Website on mindfulness:**
<https://www.webmindfulness.com/>
- ▶ **Blog about emotional acceptance and mindfulness:** <https://aemind.es/>
- ▶ **Research article:** Santamaría, M. T., Cebolla, A., Rodríguez, P. J., and Miró, T. (2006). The practice of meditation and full attention: Millenary techniques for parents of the 21st century. *Revista de Psicoterapia*, 17, 157–176. <https://doi.org/10.33898/rdp.v17i66/67.910>



More information

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