

Susan Bögels and Kathleen Restifo: *Mindful Parenting: A Guide for Mental Health Practitioners*. Springer, New York, 2014, 328 pp

Shirley N. Pakdaman

© Springer Science+Business Media New York (outside the USA) 2013

While raising a child has been said to be one of the most rewarding and pleasurable experiences of life, when faced with daily stress, many parents find themselves overwhelmed, angry, and perhaps physically and emotionally exhausted. Psychological and behavior problems in both parent and child, recent and remote histories of trauma, and issues with attachment and bonding further complicate the crucial parent–child relationship. Humanity is and always has been subject to large forces that influence our lives; however, we are also capable of making purposeful choices about how we are going to respond to the environment and moment in which we find ourselves. In their book, *Mindful Parenting: A Guide for Mental Health Practitioners*, Susan Bögels and Kathleen Restifo present a treatment based on ancient traditions to cultivate equanimity in the face of the unpredictable cacophony of modern life with children. Drawing upon the work of Myla and Jon Kabat-Zinn's *Everyday Blessings* and Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program, this new treatment manual integrates knowledge of mindfulness meditation practices with neuroscience and psychology in a way that is useful and practical. Rooted in evidence-based practices and a solid research base, this book will guide therapists to help parents bring full awareness to raising children with compassion and wisdom.

Mindful parenting has been defined specifically as “paying attention to your child and parenting in a particular way: intentionally, here and now, and nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn and Kabat-Zinn 1997). While mindfulness may not be the answer to every question and challenge, it is a way of seeing and being that can be integrated into the pragmatics of any family's life. Mindfulness is presented here as a flexible

framework in which parents make individual decisions about what is best for their families and themselves by drawing on creativity and capacity to be fully aware on a regular basis. In this view, mindfulness is the alternative to living on automatic pilot, an important alternative for parents balancing competing demands while providing for children in a world that is increasingly stressful and complex.

The book echoes Bögels' and Restifo's dedication to their own mindfulness practices, their experiences as parents, and the lives of numerous parents who have experienced their courses. The end product is a relatable and practical picture of what the program looks like. The program itself is based on knowledge of the best of parenting research in addition to newer psychological research on the science of compassion, attachment, and cognitive schemas. The program introduces the formal meditation practices of MBSR and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy such as bodyscan, mindfulness of breath, body, sounds, thoughts, emotions, choiceless awareness, mindful seeing, mindful walking, and yoga; it also emphasizes mindfulness in daily life with a focus on family and parenting activities.

The book's 14 chapters are divided into two sections. Part I of the book (the first three chapters) provides introductory material on mindful parenting, helpful background information on evolutionary perspectives in regard to parenting and stress, human affect regulation systems and the fight or flight response, attachment, and also the evolutionary underpinnings of compassion and empathy. Part II is a session-by-session outline of the program.

Chapter 1 provides a solid rationale for a mindfulness-based approach to parenting. The authors contend that parenting skills learned from books, classes, etc. are bound to collapse under stress. Knowledge about what the “right” thing to do or what a “good parent should” can go out the window despite the overwhelmed parent's best intentions, socioeconomic status, mental health, or personal history.

S. N. Pakdaman (✉)
16111 Plummer Street, North Hills, CA 91343, USA
e-mail: spakdaman@gmail.com

This can be an additional source of stress and self-judgment for parents, especially those who find themselves repeating their parents' mistakes, exactly what they swore to themselves they would never do. The authors also cite studies demonstrating that parent training focused on child behavior is found to be less effective when the parent suffers from mental health problems, underscoring the importance of addressing parents' own suffering, stress, and symptoms in the process of improving family functioning.

The authors recognized a need for such an orientation when noticing from their groups and own personal experiences, just how easy it is for a stressful situation between a parent and child to erupt into a very emotional exchange. These seemingly automatic interactions often ended up in the child and/or parent responding in anger and hurt, further escalating a cycle of negative interaction and emotions. Such automatic reactions are mediated by the brain's reactions to perceived threat, an automatic and evolutionary, but no longer adaptive, mechanism. Automatic responses to threat in parenting were observed to be often triggered by a recreation of patterns of experience from the parent's own childhood. The authors propose that bringing mindful awareness to interactions with children can lead to examining whether the most heated reactions to their child have connections to difficult or unresolved patterns in their own childhood and doing this with curiosity and openness. Awareness of any possible connection can free the parent to be more present in the actual reality of the situation at hand, more empathic towards their child, and more compassionate towards their own reactions and pain. Such mindfulness and compassion also empower parents to prevent intergenerational transmission of dysfunctional parenting and attachment patterns.

In Chapter 2, the authors use lessons from our evolutionary history to illustrate that it is both crucial to take care of ourselves as well as our children. Accepting our limits without putting judgment on ourselves allows us to be creative about finding sufficient resources to raise children, including seeking help from others. Human children are costly and require significant caretaking responsibility; there is no way that our species would have survived and evolved if mothers raised children absolutely alone. Historically, fathers, grandmothers, as well as communities have helped raise children. Many parents feel they should be able to cope with parenting along with their other responsibilities, regardless of the amount of help they have. However, while parents may think they can handle it all, they may simultaneously feel stressed, depressed, guilty, or overwhelmed. In the mindful parenting paradigm, such feelings of distress are not viewed as pathology but rather a signal of need, perhaps a need for emotional or social support. Human systems to avoid threat, the drive to achieve, and to pursue contentment/affiliation are also seen as interconnected needs that we can observe and keep in balance through mindful awareness. The authors also

highlight the importance of attachment in parenting relationships, noting that it can be developed through mindful states, touch, and even reflecting on one's own attachment and understanding the emotional impact it has on present relationships. Human beings cannot help feeling fear and aggression just as much as we cannot help feeling and acting compassionately; we are hard wired to do both. Mindfulness offers the possibility of choosing one's own course of action, purposefully, and with eyes wide open.

In Chapter 3, the authors detail the results of three phases of research on their program. The results of three clinical trials of this program indicate that Mindful Parenting helps reduce emotional problems in both parent and child, reduce behavior problems in children, and reduce parenting stress and parental reactivity to stress. Tests of the latest version, as presented in this manual, demonstrated large effect sizes and significant and substantial improvements in mindful parenting, parental experiential avoidance, and general mindfulness. Such findings can lead to parents developing a stronger bond with children and increasing ability to solve conflict, along with the capacity to more fully experience joys in the parent-child relationship.

Part II details a session-by-session guide through the 8-week Mindful Parenting program. The aim of the program is enabling participants to parent their children from the place they and their children are in, moment-by-moment, rather than striving towards some idea of how things could or should be. Core mindfulness skills are elegantly threaded through group exercises and education about parenting and stress. Chapter 4 presents an overview and guidelines for the Mindful Parenting program. Readers are reminded of the program's main aims from parents' self-report of how this program has helped them and also results from the research. A helpful table displays the themes of each session, in-session formal practice, in-session mindful parenting exercises, and assigned home practice.

The first session of the program is described in Chapter 5. Here, parents are invited to bring awareness to the tendency to parent on automatic pilot. This phenomenon is presented in a nonjudgmental way: automatic parenting can occur at any time whether it be during times of stress (and can be connected to the fight/flight/freeze stress reaction) or in daily interactions. Herein lies the main rationale of the course: parents can learn to pause before reacting, even under stress, and choose to respond with intention. Those familiar with MBSR and other mindfulness-based therapies will be delighted by a variation on the raisin exercise; after parents do the raisin exercise in class, they are invited to experience their child as a raisin at home and discover what it is like to experience this child fully, mindfully, and presently. Through this homework assignment, parents may feel themselves open up to the full experience of this child and what it is like to be in his/her presence and to be his/her parent.

In Chapter 6, parents are given the opportunity to share what it was like to experience their child in his/her entirety, not just the child's difficulties, but the child as an individual with many facets, strengths, and struggles of their own. Some parents may have difficulty with this exercise and may become aware of how they hold a presumptuous view of their child, which may not reflect the totality of who that child is as a human being. The tendency to view the child in a negative light, as a diagnosis or label is explored. Also, presented in this chapter, not coincidentally, is the attitude of kindness. Here, kindness and sympathy toward their child or themselves as parents who have stressors and struggles are realistic and achievable alternatives to judgment.

Chapter 7 emphasizes how important it is for parents to reconnect with their bodies as parents. Tuning into themselves and taking care of themselves is the first step to tuning into and taking care of children. Often, the body sends early signals that are signs of parenting stress. Observing these signals is key in becoming grounded in the present moment, enabling parents to take a pause in between a stressful stimulus and choosing the best course of action for that child and situation in the moment. Parents are also reminded here to take care of themselves physically, to know and be compassionate towards their bodies' physical limits, and to experience pleasurable sensations. Mindful practice of gentle yoga is introduced here as a way to familiarize parents with the sensation of approaching a limit, appreciating the work the body does, experiencing physical sensations as they arise, and ultimately is a metaphor for being accepting and compassionate towards the self and experiences one finds themselves in.

Building on the previous session, Chapter 8 discusses awareness as the key to responding, rather than reacting, to parenting stress. Parents are asked to sit in a 20-min meditation focusing on breath, the body, sounds, and thoughts. Through this exercise, parents learn to become aware of stress in the body and mind and to accept it rather than push it away. Options for responding under stress are demonstrated through a humorous exercise in which parents see that while they may be predisposed to fight, flee, or freeze, mindful awareness creates a space in which it is possible to *dance* with stressful situations. Here, the dance is seen as a metaphor for establishing awareness then responding to challenges creatively and intentionally. The 3-Minute Breathing Space is introduced as a way to cultivate a sense of spaciousness in the face of what may seem to be stifling challenges. Many parents reported that this exercise was the most useful of all presented in the program. This chapter corresponds to the midpoint in the program, and participants are asked to complete a halfway evaluation.

Chapter 9 details a challenging and transcendent aspect of parenting: the possibility of giving our children something different than what we had, perhaps a better experience, and through this, heal from our own childhood experiences. When

parents are emotionally triggered by children, they are prone to shifting into child-like modes or schemas of their own attachment or relationship patterns. Through mindfulness, parents can become aware of and explore patterns in the parent-child relationship and notice whether they are similar to patterns from their own childhood. Once this is noticed, parents then have the choice to disengage from emotional overreactions to their children and make choices based on the type of parent they want to be instead of repeating their parents' behavior or mistakes. The practice in this session emphasizes holding emotions gently, practicing the 3-Minute Breathing Space when the child is the most misbehaved, and extending self-compassion and acceptance to ourselves to heal the hurt of our inner child when triggered.

Chapter 10 corresponds to session 6. In this session, parent-child conflicts are reframed as opportunities for growing closer to the child. By using mindfulness to cultivate a sense of spaciousness, parents can learn to see beyond their own perspective only (which can narrow in times of stress) to a broader view, which includes their more expansive perspective, and also their child's perspective. Parents now have the opportunity to extend the practice of bringing compassion to themselves to bringing compassion to their child's emotional experience. An outdoor walking meditation expands awareness of the self and surroundings at the same time. By attuning to their own and the child's experience at the same time, new opportunities are created for growth and repair after a difficult conflict.

The theme of compassion is explored in two ways in Chapter 11. In this session, parents explore their inherent capacity to extend love and compassion to themselves and to others and also to view limit setting as a form of compassion. One way that parents can show their child love is by setting limits. As parents have learned to be attuned to their own limits (including physical limits and personal boundaries), they are more apt to be aware when these limits are crossed by their child and able to respond with awareness. In this view, limit setting provides structure and guidance for the child and is a form of self-care for the parent. Parents are also asked to explore issues they may have with setting limits that may stem from their own childhood experiences with a role play exercise in session and homework to set limits mindfully.

Chapter 12 describes the last session of the mindful parenting course. In this session, participants are asked to reflect on their experience of the course and what if anything has changed as a result of it. The authors are compassionately aware that for many participants finding the time to practice formal meditation is a struggle, that parents may have faced difficult emotions as a result of the exercises in the course, and still others may be frustrated if they have had a lack of progress at this point. Other parents may have had dramatic shifts in their experience of parenting and their perspective on their life and their children; some may also discuss ways their

children are changing in response to the parent's new behavior. Parents also create their own personal meditation plan using the various meditations and types of mindfulness introduced in the course. The course ends with parents sharing a work of art, song, object, etc. that symbolizes the changes and or the process that the parent has been through as a result of the course.

The authors suggest holding a follow-up session 8 weeks after the course has ended. The main purpose of this session is for parents to have the opportunity to renew their intentions to bring mindfulness into parenting and their relationship with their child. Renewing of this intention is a beautiful mirror to the experience of mindfulness: the same way we can gently bring our attention back to our breath when we noticed our minds wandering during a meditation, we can always come back to present moment experience with our children. In the follow-up session, parents share their experience of the past 8 weeks without the course and complete meditations that focus on stability in the face of stress, awareness, and good wishes for themselves and others. Here, parents are also asked to complete individual evaluations with the teacher. The final chapter of the book contains the voices of the parents who have completed the Mindful Parenting course sharing their experience of life after this program.

Bögels and Restifo's work will instantly become a trusted source for mindfulness teachers and mental health professionals,

especially child and family therapists. The book is written in a warm, relatable style and reads like a conversation with a kind colleague who is not afraid to be authentic and human. By expressing knowledge and acceptance of the human condition in every chapter, the authors put readers at ease and offer a palpable sense of relief. In addition to excellent background material and session-by-session content, this book includes parent handouts and tracking sheets, illustrations of gentle yoga poses, meditation scripts, research, participant feedback, and much more.

The concepts explained in this manual will have tremendous impact on parents, grandparents, stepparents, essentially anyone who knows the joys and stress of the roller coaster ride that is being with children. Regardless of their pasts or current conditions, parents learn to open their eyes to the possibilities available only in the present moment, empower themselves with mindfulness, compassion, and authentic conscious living.

Most importantly, this book emphasizes not only mindfulness as an individual skill but also the true goals of practicing: to become a compassionate human being and for behavior to reflect genuine compassion. Parental attunement to self and others creates the opportunity to choose actions with intention, wisdom, and ultimately, kindness. The benefits of this work will be felt through families and communities, affecting generations to come.