



The Soul of Parenting¹

By Mary Ann Christie Burnside, Ed.D.

Parenting is the hardest job there is. In fact, it can even be overwhelming at times. And although it is the most significant work that those of us with children will ever do, it is the one job for which we are least prepared.

From a mindful perspective, to take on the role of parent is to take up the mantle of becoming our best selves, again and again. For many of us, the unconditional love of a child reminds us of our true nature as precious beings. Through their open and loving countenance, children inspire us to become better men, better women, better partners, and better people. For this reason, among others, parenting can be a spiritual discipline with mindfulness as its very core or soul.

What exactly is mindful parenting? It is both a way of being with our children and a way of seeing them. A general definition of mindfulness is to pay attention to the present moment, with intention and without judgment. When we are mindful, we are conscious of the moment. We are purposefully looking, listening, and thinking about what or who is in front of us. When we are mindful, we stop ourselves from getting lost in the past, anxious about the future, or judgmental about now. When we are mindful, we have an open mind and an open heart, which means that we can listen to whatever there is to hear, whether we like it or not, and we can make thoughtful choices rather than reactive ones. When we work to cultivate mindful relationships in our homes, we transform our experiences as parents and the relationships that we have with our children.

Love and good intentions, which many of us have for our children before they are born, are not enough. Think for a moment about marriage, which also begins with love and good intentions. As time goes by, we learn how hard it is to live in a long-term committed relationship. If marriage is hard, which it is, parenting is harder. We, as parents, love our children and have good intentions but beyond that, we need specific skills. For example, if we can learn to become intentional and purposeful, we can develop a deeper awareness of ourselves, our children, and of our relationships with them. With this awareness comes a nascent set of skills that can both relax us and give us confidence in tougher moments. When we can comfortably settle into our lives as parents and behave as healthy, well-adjusted adults, we model for our children what healthy well-adjusted behavior looks like.

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Given that our children's map for relating to the world and to themselves is shaped by their observations and experiences of relationships in the home, our thoughtful attention is well warranted. No matter what our stories or histories, we can learn to lead with love, respect, and integrity rather than with anger, harshness, or withdrawal, which can be common reactions for many of us, particularly when we ourselves are hurt or angry. The quality of our children's everyday lives, and ours, depends on it because it takes love, intention, and skill to create and sustain a healthy family.

Here is a brief, reflective exercise that should give you a sense of what mindful parenting can look like in your life. Take a minute or two to recreate in your mind's eye a particularly difficult exchange between you and your child. In this scene, what are you thinking about your child and about yourself as a parent? What feelings come up for you? Now think about what you tend to do and say when you are feeling off or out of balance. Do you lash out in anger? Do you withdraw? Do you blame yourself or your child? What do you tend to say? With all this in mind, replay this scene in your head once more. This time, imagine that you have an awareness of a particular want or need of yours that is not being met. In your mind's eye, imagine that you are speaking calmly and firmly to your child about that want or need. Now respectfully set an appropriate limit around this particular behavior of your child's, which only moments ago, you were struggling with. How do you feel now? How do you think your child feels?

Mindful relationships with our children can increase joy and reduce stress in our homes. Attention and intention can ground us in the reality of now instead of what happened yesterday or what might happen tomorrow. Mindfulness makes room for self-care by encouraging us to consider what we want and need, in addition to what our children want and need. It can help us manage our own behavior, particularly when we are in the midst of a strong emotional experience.

When we are conscious, mindful parents, we come to see our children as gifts in our life, which of course, they are. From this place of appreciation and gratitude, it is natural to move toward honoring and protecting their preciousness. When we learn to acknowledge our children's thoughts and feelings, they learn to do the same. When we come to respect them as sovereign people, they come to respect themselves and us. When we really listen to them, they learn to listen. When we look them in the eye, they learn to do the same. When we hold them accountable while remembering love, they learn to hold themselves accountable while remembering their love for us. When we love them, they come to know that they are lovable and learn to love themselves. When we are there for them, they learn trust, security, and confidence.

Mindful parenting practices can be healing. On a good day, we know that we are not simply reacting to our children but are taking responsibility for how we feel and what we do and say. On a bad day, we are better able to hold ourselves accountable by being in touch with our thoughts, feelings, words, and actions. Either way, we can live with integrity and while doing so, teach our children to do the same.

These are but a few highlights of mindful parenting which connects us to the ones we love, including ourselves. Our purposeful attention allows us to simultaneously discern our reality and invite the perspective of others. The power that comes from knowing our mind helps us to make intentional choices and decisions. An understanding that the only person each of us can control is ourselves liberates us from fruitless, manipulative efforts and opens us up to healthier possibilities.



Being mindful makes us conscious. When we are able to pay attention, our children guide us toward meeting and knowing the best parts of ourselves. When we speak and act, we feed the hearts and minds of our children, as well as our own. Mindful parenting practices build awareness that we are doing our best to raise our children, which is all that we can really do. When we know that we have done our best, we can learn to have peace with the outcome, whatever it is. And we can take comfort in the assurance that the very next moment is a chance for a new beginning.

Mary Ann Christie Burnside, Ed.D. is a developmental psychologist, experienced educator, and mother of two. She founded **Hearts and Minds, LLC** to educate parents, teachers, and other caregivers of children about mindful relationships and to promote the well being of families. Mary Ann has a private coaching practice, conducts online seminars, and teaches face-to-face workshops near Boston, Massachusetts. Her newest course, **Extravagant Love: Our Children, Ourselves**, examines love as a set of commitments and practices. This seminar will be offered online early in 2009. Registration begins in January. Visit www.withheartsandminds.com for details on how to register or for more information about Mary Ann and her work.