

Seven Important Aspects of Mindful Parenting

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Usually Gateways does not include articles geared for parents, so the following is an exception. This article can of course be offered to parents, and it can also be a resource for early childhood teachers. In it we are reminded of some essential practices that we can continually attempt in our working with the children, all supporting the essential activity of connecting with each of the children. One could easily substitute the word “teacher” each time “parent” is used. – Stephen Spitalny

The task of parenting is one of the most challenging, stressful, demanding, and rewarding jobs on the planet. There is no instruction manual on “how to parent,” and all of the popular guidebooks mostly deal with specific behavioral challenges that children present to adults. Parenting is a subjective activity that is influenced by so many internal and external factors that oftentimes we do not have time or extra energy to consciously examine how we respond to children. Day after day our relationship with our children can become an “auto-pilot relationship,” where we merely react to external circumstances that are out of our control.

We have to come back to what we can control

and that is *our own* mind stream. We need to understand how to be ourselves with clarity and intention before we tackle all of the “doing” of parenting. Being with children is a profound transformative experience — it always presents us with the question, “What do I want to bring to this situation for myself and for the child?” Mindful parenting allows us to question our habits and habitual unawareness. It can allow us to realize that “whenever we believe that something besides our perception of an event or a person is angering us, we give our power away. You believe that the event or person has *made* us angry, happy, sad, or guilty” (Bailey, 2002, p. 99). Our task is to reclaim power and responsibility for our own feelings and then model that skill or behavior to our children.

So much of behaviorism only deals with external signs of behavior and how to change them into acceptable behaviors that fit into adult/parent expectations. If the goal of parenthood were to produce servile children, then this would be an acceptable parenting technique. Yet the primary task of parenting is to raise healthy, happy, independent, confident human beings who are capable of making

responsible choices in an oftentimes chaotic and complex cultural setting. We are sorely overdue to fundamentally examine and change our reactive, reflexive habits when it comes to parenting.

This article lists seven key aspects of mindful parenting, which deserve close scrutiny from all people who work or spend time with children. This is only a brief introduction to many important topics that dominate the parenting landscape. The list of websites, resources, and books at the end of this article will be a great starting point for a critical examination of these fundamental parenting issues. Then we can start moving the dominant parenting paradigm from punitive, temporary compliance/power and control relationships to relying on warmth, empathy, and building a transformative relationship with our children.

I. Discipline Begins with Adults, then Children

A few parenting books have recently been advocating a radical notion: Instead of focusing on what particular behavior you want your child to do or not do, you change your focus to your own self-control. Parents often react to children habitually as opposed to responding mindfully. ScreamFree parenting has a wonderful website devoted to “learning to relate with your kids in a calm, cool and connected way.” ScreamFree parenting’s primary premise is that “loving yourself first is the only true way to be scream free because it is the only way to truly benefit your children without burdening them with the need to benefit you” (Runkel, 2005, p. 201).

In the book *Easy to Love, Difficult to Discipline*, Becky A. Bailey (2002, p. 26) defines self-control as mind control. She writes, “It is being aware of your own thoughts and feelings. By having this awareness, you become the director of your behavior. Lack of self-control turns your life over to people, events, and things as you careen through life on remote control, either unconscious of yourself or focused solely on what other people are thinking and feeling.” This life on “remote control” is modeled and taught to children with our actions and words as parents.

The major premise of *Magical Parent, Magical Child* by Joseph Chilton Pearce and Michael Mendizza (2004) is that “the adult is transformed by the child as much as the child is transformed by

the adult” (p. ix). Parents need to realize that you can control how you react or respond to events much more easily than you can try to change how things or events happen to you. You can consciously decide how to be in a particular situation rather than simply repeating habitual actions over and over again.

II. Move Beyond Punishment-and-Reward Systems of Parenting

We still live in an era where it is legal to beat children with paddles in schools in twenty-three states! Punishments and rewards go together as a dubious, naively dualistic approach to parenting skills. Alfie Kohn in *Unconditional Parenting* has documented the effects of punishment and reward systems on children. His arguments, based on solid research data and practical knowledge, are very compelling in demonstrating the devastating effects of both punishment and reward systems as a technique in parenting.

“One basic need all children have,” Kohn argues on the book’s cover, “is to be loved unconditionally, to know that they will be accepted even if they screw up or fall short. Yet conventional approaches to parenting such as punishments (including ‘time-outs’), rewards (including positive reinforcement), and other forms of control teach children that they are loved only when they please us or impress us.” Evaluative praise is remarkably ineffective because such extrinsic motivational techniques actually erode the development of intrinsic sources of personal motivation. To base your parenting techniques on a reward and punishment system is to base your view of your child on conditional responses (either love-withdrawal or positive reinforcement) and judgments that can become “life sentences for children.” Kohn goes on to document what many research studies have shown: “When children receive affection with strings attached, they tend to accept *themselves* only with strings attached” (p. 23). This statement has been proven by scores of studies with people of different ages, genders, and cultural backgrounds and with a variety of different tasks and rewards.

Chick Moorman (2003, p. 120) makes the important distinction between evaluative, appreciative, and descriptive praise. Too often parents rely on evaluative praise to set up an

external, dualistic good boy/bad boy hoop for the child to jump through, rather than relying on beneficial descriptive and appreciative praise. I think many parents are just lazy and rely on unexamined habits in using such evaluative praise as “Good job, Johnny.” Parents need to exert the extra effort and attention to describe what is being praised, or to make appreciative comments.

Joseph Chilton Pearce convincingly argues that “day by day we accept the image we see reflected in the mirror of our relationships. People may talk about unconditional love and acceptance, but that is not what children see. Children see our punishments and rewards, our comparisons, judgments and contents . . . so early is our identification with external values that few ever discover or identify their authentic nature, their true self-worth” (2004, p. 89). In the book *Evolution’s End* (1991), Pearce came up with a shocking statement: “Punishment and rage break the child’s will, the capacity to overcome obstacles and explore the unknown, which is learning itself. They will leave him or her with no self-confidence, no faith in themselves and they will fumble or retreat at every little difficulty or challenge. That youngster will grow to be one of us, thinking one thing, feeling another, and acting in a way disconnected from both” (p.76).

III. Parent Talk: Your Words are Important

Language and how we communicate to our children directly impact a child’s self-esteem and also model the values that we act on. Recent research has also found that our language fundamentally affects how a child’s mind develops and grows. Allan Schore’s book *Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self: The Neurobiology of Emotional Development* demonstrates that when a toddler hears the words “no” or “don’t” (which is on average every nine minutes of waking life!) and sees the corresponding shaming look by parents, it brings “the shock of threat, interrupts the will to explore and learn, and produces a cascade of negative hormonal-neural reactions in the child. Shore then describes at length the child’s depressive state brought about as a result of these episodes of shame stress” (Pearce, 2004, p. 137).

In *Easy to Love, Difficult to Discipline*, Bailey concisely outlines to parents how to “focus on what you want to have happen instead of what you don’t

want.” Focusing on what you don’t want actually pits your body chemistry against your will power and undermines your chances for success (p. 31). The major focus of Bailey’s book is how to turn seven powers for self-control into seven steps in discipline skills, which then models the seven values for living. This book is clear and concise in guiding adults into how to be with children in many differing situations. Chick Moorman’s *Parent Talk* is another resource in this area.

IV. Children Need a Showering of Unconditional Loving Guidance

Children need to be loved unconditionally – that is a love beyond whatever mistakes, whatever parental expectations may get in the way. Our kids do not have to earn our love by the various methodologies we employ to seek control of their lives. Often there is confusion among parents that responsibility for children involves various punishment and reward systems of controlling behavior, rather than setting a priority to be responsible to our children by loving them unconditionally.

It is impossible to shower kids with love if we do not first care for or love ourselves. Many parents come to a false dichotomy: “If I care for me, I feel like a selfish jerk, like I’m doing something very wrong. If I focus on my kids, I sometimes feel like a doormat, busting myself to please and serve yet feeling much unappreciated for all the sacrifices I make” (Runkel, 2005, p. 193). The relationship we have with ourselves and the relationships we have with our children do not have to be power struggles pitting one against the other. The more we invest in taking care of ourselves as parents, the more we will approach parenting from a grounded, holistic perspective. We will be able to take on the many voices that parents must artfully embody and employ to raise healthy and happy children.

V. Children, Like Adults, Learn from Their Mistakes

How we view mistakes and conflicts has a direct impact on how children learn to view their own mistakes. The fact is that our children will make all of the big decisions in their lives on their own, as young and growing adults. Our task is not only to model how to make good decisions, but perhaps more importantly, how to respond and learn

from poor or bad decisions. Recent research, well documented in Joseph Chilton Pearce's *The Biology of Transcendence* (2004), extensively demonstrates how children with defensive personalities and habits are not in the position to truly learn from an experience. During defensive stances children use the fight-or-flight mode of survival and act to protect their self-esteem.

VI. Countering the Stress of Busyness and the Loss of Creative Play

Today we subject our children to many practices that are eroding the very foundation of childhood: creative free play. A recent article entitled "The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds" in the journal *Pediatrics* conclusively documents how vital play is for children (Ginsburg, 2007, p. 3):

Play allows children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength. Play is important to healthy brain development. It is through play that children at a very early age engage and interact in the world around them. Play allows children to create and explore a world they can master, conquering their fears while practicing adult roles, sometimes in conjunction with other children or adult caregivers. As they master their world, play helps children develop new competencies that lead to enhanced confidence and the resiliency they will need to face future challenges. Undirected play allows children to learn how to work in groups, to share, to negotiate, to resolve conflicts, and to learn self-advocacy skills. When play is allowed to be child driven, children practice decision-making skills, move at their own pace, discover their own areas of interest, and ultimately engage fully in the passions they wish to pursue.

Over the years active and imaginative play for children have been replaced by adult errand activities or designed educational programs that leave no room for playing just for playing's sake without an adult agenda. Of course, we also have corporations spending over twelve billion dollars each year in order to increase the over twenty-eight billion dollars that American children from age four to twelve spend every year. Playing has come to be

defined as how children spend money for popular crazes or games that will soon end up at the garbage dump.

We now have decades of research to show us that creative and imaginative play boost "healthy development across a broad spectrum of critical areas: intellectual, social, emotional, and physical." It is vitally important to closely examine how we structure our children's lives. How much do we consider having daily rhythm, or seasonal and yearly rhythms? Rhythms help provide a sound and trusting atmosphere for a child to grow in. Adding many after-school or weekend classes produces overly stressed children who lose the capacity to play in a creative and imaginative way. The only thing left is to be entertained passively in front of a television. The Alliance for Childhood has a wonderful website that demonstrates how important play is to children and how it is threatened by our pathological culture.

VII. Put the Relationship First!

Parenting in our day and age has become less joyful because parents cling to ideas of perfection with consequential invasive control of children's lives. Yes, children need guidance and structure in order to develop into responsible, caring, and healthy adults. Yet so much of parenting has become preoccupied with getting compliance with children at whatever cost. *Magical Parent, Magical Child* is an amazing gift to all parents in discovering and engaging in the "optimum learning relationship" that transforms both the child and the adult. Pearce writes that "the true nature of children — their complexity and open-ended possibilities — places them well beyond our attempts to predict, manipulate and control. Eventually every parent and educator discovers this obvious fact, much to their dismay" (p. 10).

Parents need to focus on building a loving relationship, which is impossible to do if the adult is critically judgmental. Children cannot learn and defend themselves at the same time. The neurology of the brain makes this impossible. Defending oneself splits attention and energy. Let the consequence of the actions impact the child rather than having adults intellectually lecture a child as to why certain actions are bad choices. Pearce's whole book is based on the premise that true learning is playful and effortless, and that many adults have

no understanding of how to truly play in a loving, nonjudgmental way.

The fundamental core of a parent-child relationship is succinctly summed up by Pearce: "Nature designed us to love our children and allow them to love us. Love is the safe-space, in which both parent and child can play and where learning takes place naturally. A parent can't teach love. They can only love and the child's natural state unfolds in response to that love. A parent can't love if he or she was never loved when they were children. *But* the natural state of a child will teach the parent to love in turn, if the parent is tuned in to that child" (p. xiii).

So the questions remain: How playful are we as parents? Do we really understand the value and significance of creative, imaginative play in childhood? How often do we ask for compliance for no particular good reason? How often do we transform our demands of "do this now or else" to asking the simple question "what does this child need right now?" How often do we ask ourselves how to *be* in a relationship before we *act* in a relationship? We need to ask these fundamental questions before we can get answers as to how to unconditionally love and guide our children.

Parenting Resources

Alliance for Childhood: resources can be found at www.allianceforchildhood.org

Bailey, Becky A., Ph.D. *Easy to Love, Difficult to Discipline*. New York: Harper Collins, 2002.

Bronson, Po. "How Not to Talk to Your Kids," *New York Times Magazine*, February 19, 2007. It can be found online at www.nymag.com.

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Kabat-Zinn, Jon and Myla Kabat-Zinn. *Everyday Blessings: The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting*. New York: Hyperion, 1997.

Kohn, Alfie. *Unconditional Parenting*. New York: Atria Books, 2005.

Lee, Norm. www.nopunish.net. Download for free a book titled *Parenting Without Punishing*.

Moorman, Chick. *Parent Talk: How to Talk to Your Children in Language that Builds Self-Esteem and Encourages Responsibility*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003. Chick Moorman has a great website offering newsletters for both parents and teachers: www.chickmoorman.com. He has developed an entire parenting skills training system: *The Parent Talk System: The Language of Response-able Parenting* is a twelve-hour class that deals with many practical parenting issues.

Pearce, Joseph Chilton and Michael Mendizza. *Magical Parent, Magical Child: The Art of Joyful Parenting*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books and In-Joy Publications, 2004.

Pearce, Joseph Chilton. *The Biology of Transcendence*. Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 2004.

Payne, Kim John. Kim has a wonderful website, www.thechildtoday.com, where he approaches bullying, teasing, and parenting/discipline issues from a Waldorf perspective.

Runkel, Hal Edward. *ScreamFree Parenting: Raising Your Kids by Keeping Your Cool*. Duluth, GA: Oakmont Publishing, 2005. Hal has a wonderful website with newsletters and information at www.screamfree.com.

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