Mindful Parenting

Finding Space To Be – In a World of To Do

Susan Bögels

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‘Showing you the world,
makes my life worth living.’

Karl Ove Knausgård, Letter to an unborn daughter

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Praise for *Mindful Parenting*

'At last, a book for parents by the world's leading expert in mindful parenting! Susan Bögels and her colleagues have spent over a decade figuring out precisely how and why mindfulness is so helpful to parents. She offers the reader her latest insights, along with charming personal examples and carefully selected practices that bring it all to life. This short book is packed with wisdom, candid and absolutely non-judgmental – a compelling road map for handling the trickiest dilemmas parenting has to offer.'

Christopher Germer, PhD
Faculty, Harvard Medical School
Author, The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion

'"I don't have time to do mindfulness - I've got kids". It is indeed the hardest thing to take time for yourself when you're juggling work, homemaking, and parenting. Any spare time you might have had has already been allocated. How on earth could you find time to meditate? Internationally acclaimed psychologist and mindfulness teacher Susan Bögels shows how this is possible. Yes, there are some short guided meditations to help you reclaim a few minutes of the day for yourself, but mostly she invites you to make your daily parenting schedule into your mindfulness curriculum. Sounds simple. It is. But remembering to do it is not so simple. So each week she suggests new methods that will help you. Research shows that cultivating these skills can help you transform your life: keeping your feet on the floor when things get tough, dissolving the over-critical voice in your head, and enriching your relationships with your children and wider family. I highly recommend this book.'

Mark Williams
Emeritus Professor of Clinical Psychology,
University of Oxford

'The most difficult task for a human being is being a parent. Mindful Parenting *will be of assistance in this because it points to specific activities with well-specified aims, with an exceptionally well-structured training programme that will bring readers closer to being the best parent they can be. This scientifically grounded, well written, exceptionally accessible book should be required reading for all of us struggling to do the best we can with our sons and daughters. This book is highly recommended to anyone caring for children and young people.'*

Peter Fonagy
Professor of Contemporary Psychoanalysis and Developmental Science,
University College London

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About the author

Photograph by Kee & Kee

Susan Bögels is a Clinical Psychologist and Founder of the Mindful Parenting method. She is Professor of Family Mental Health, in particular focusing on the role of mindfulness, at the University of Amsterdam, and Founder of UvA Minds, an academic training and treatment centre for children and parents. She has published over 200 journal papers and is associate editor of the journal Mindfulness. She is lead author of the scholarly book *Mindful Parenting: A Guide for Mental Health Professionals* (Springer, 2014).

This book reflects two decades' experience of working with parents in mindful parenting courses and leading a research group exploring the role of attention in child development and psychopathology. It was also inspired by memories of Susan's own upbringing and of raising three children, and by her experiences as a participant and instructor in mindfulness retreats, training and personal meditation.

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Foreword

Nirbhay N. Singh
Medical College of Georgia, Augusta University, Augusta, GA

As parents, particularly of young children or children with diverse abilities, we are constantly on the go. We are trapped in the doing mode because there is just so much to do! By the end of the day we feel we have not had a moment to catch our breath. Indeed, sometimes we feel so overwhelmed by the needs of our children that we slip into overdrive and respond on automatic pilot, occasionally wishing for what it could be rather than accepting what it is. This is not acceptance in the sense of passive resignation but, as Jon Kabat-Zin calls it '*radical acceptance*'. We can perceive the true nature of reality in those moments only by letting go of the thoughts that our mind produces. As Swami Vivekananda once said, '*We are what our thoughts have made us; so take care about what you think. Words are secondary. Thoughts live; they travel far*'. What if we could train our mind to let the thoughts pass without pulling them in, and inviting them to stay for coffee and cookies? Would this enable us to parent our children more mindfully? Can we teach our conceptual mind to function in a healthier manner such that we can be present for our children, mindful of our own needs as parents, and respond to both ourselves and our children with loving kindness and compassion?

All wisdom traditions have experientially perfected ways of teaching the mind to behave, thus enabling people to develop and embody mindfulness. Eastern concepts of mindfulness have trickled in over the last century, but it seeped into Western consciousness only over the last 50 years. The impetus for the spectacular growth of the field of mindfulness was Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program aimed at using the wisdom of our own mind and body to face pain and suffering. Mindfulness meditation has entered the Western lexicon but the actual meaning of the term mindfulness has remained elusive, not only because something has been lost in the translation of the original Pali term *sati* (or smṛti in Sanskrit), but also because its meaning and practice is dependent on the spiritual lineage of modern meditation masters. Jon Kabat-Zinn has defined mindfulness as... '*the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment to moment*'. However, the great meditation master Munindra's view of mindfulness may work better in the context of mindful parenting, '*…experiencing from moment to moment, living from moment to moment, without clinging, without condemning, without judging, without*

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criticizing—choiceless awareness… It should be integrated into our whole life. It is actually an education in how to see, how to hear, how to smell, how to eat, how to drink, how to walk with full awareness'. When we are mindful, each moment, even in the chaos of daily parenting, may hold infinite possibilities.

What practicing mindfulness offers is nothing less than personal transformation in our daily life. What Susan Bögels offers in this book is a precise road map, a GPS to mindful parenting. She has distilled more than 20 years of experience in meditation and mindful parenting and produced a gem of a book that I wish I had when my wife and I were parenting our own children, but it is not too late for us to use with our grandchildren! There are many things I love about this book. First, it is written by an expert who not only has vast clinical experience but who also (and more importantly) has had to juggle an academic career, clinical work and consulting with raising her own children, all at the same time. So, she knows what parents go through when raising their children. Second, interspersed with the teachings throughout the book, you will find narratives of her own parenting practices, many of which you will be able to relate to on a personal level. She presents her struggles and successes with equal acceptance, encouraging you to validate and accept your parenting experiences with equanimity. Mindfulness is not a magic bullet for totally positive parenting but if you practice mindfulness with the right attitude and intention, and are mindfully present for your children, the outcomes for you and your children will be clearly evident. Third, she also details her own journey in the practice of meditation. She began as a novice but quickly mastered mindfulness meditation practices, used her personal discipline of meditation to sustain her daily life, and then engaged in developing and evaluating mindful parenting programs. Her earlier book, *Mindful Parenting: A guide for mental health practitioners*, was designed for professionals, but this book is for parents. No professional guidance is needed—just read a chapter and put the teachings into practice. Fourth, in this book Susan Bögels demonstrates a unique skill that most academics do not possess. Instead of turgid academic writing, she presents the book as a conversation with parents in unmistakably easy-to-read prose. She provides examples, describes what to do, how to do it, and then tells you what the mindfulness principle is called. She does this so casually that you may fail to appreciate how well she takes difficult mindfulness concepts and explains them in a way that my grandmother would understand without having any clarification questions.

This is a book that you want to learn from, cherish, and pass onto other parents. Its 11 chapters provide a range of specific mindfulness practices. Read each chapter at your own pace, immerse yourself in the practices, perform the easy-to-follow exercises, and transform your life, as well as

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those of your family and friends. The effects of your practices will cascade or spillover to everyone you come into contact with. Of course, reading this book alone will not get you far. Intellectual understanding of mindfulness meditation will arise as you read this book but, like all things, it will decay and pass away without practice of the teachings it presents.

Dhira – Self-Reliant

Look closely, my heart

See how all things
arise and pass way—

even that
which is turning
the shapes on this page
into the sounds
and thoughts
you are
right now
silently speaking
to yourself.

When you no longer need
to read the signs
to find your way,
you'll know for yourself
that books and maps
can only get you so far.

There is a direct path.

(Matt Weingast, *The First Free Women: Poems of The Early Buddhist Nuns*, 2020)

The direct path is mindfulness meditation. As meditation teachers emphasize: an ounce of practice is better than a ton of reading. Read this book and then practice, practice, practice.

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Preface

I came to mindful parenting through a combination of my scientific and clinical work and my personal life. As a researcher I've studied the role of attention in problems such as social anxiety and blushing.[1,2,3] Whenever we feel tense or embarrassed in a social situation, perhaps because we're talking to someone we find attractive or admire professionally, we tend to see ourselves through the other person's eyes and worry what they'll think of us. In doing so we lose sight of the interaction and the moment, and end up stuck in stories about ourselves. If aspects of those stories are negative, this will only heighten our tension and shyness, for example by making us blush – which then makes us worry even more.

With my research group I developed a therapy called *task concentration training* (TCT). Using this, individuals with social anxiety and fear of blushing could learn to become aware of where their attention was focused in social situations, and to redirect it in more healthy ways. When our first paper on the positive effects of TCT was published in 1997[4], Professor Isaac Marks emailed me from the UK to ask: '*Isn't this the same as mindfulness*?'. I didn't know what mindfulness was and I certainly didn't want to appear stupid to a researcher whose work I much admired, so I studied the scientific literature of mindfulness. I was hooked – to the extent that I joined a Vipassana group and began my meditation practice.

I invited Professor Mark Williams, one of the leaders of the development of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) for depression[5], to provide mindfulness training to me and my colleagues. Staff from both the adult and child mental health care centres participated. At the adult centre we were already planning to research mindfulness for social anxiety[6], but after the training colleagues from the child centre were also interested in researching mindfulness. So in 2000 we ran a pilot study on mindfulness for young people with issues centred on attention difficulties, for example ADHD, autism and behaviour disorders. As most of these young people lived at home with their parents, it seemed important to give their parents parallel training in mindfulness principles, so we offered a course on 'mindful parenting'. This combined approach reduced the severity of the issues, and markedly improved the young people's attention control[7]. Parents reported great success against goals such as 'Being able to set limits to my child' and 'Sleep better', and many wished the training had been available sooner.

That's why we further developed mindful parenting as a standalone group training for parents. With Joke Hellemans I gave the first training in this

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form in 2008. The participants were parents who had been referred to our treatment centre because of problems with their child, problems that got in the way of healthy parenting, or problems in their relationship with their child. The children ranged from babies to adults (as one never stops being a parent).

In its first ten iterations, the group appeared effective in reducing parenting stress, improving parenting skills, and reducing problems like anxiety, depression, attention and behaviour problems in both parents and children.[8] Further research on ten more groups showed that the more parents improved in their mindful parenting, the more their children's symptoms reduced.[9] Next, we showed that the course was just as effective for parents and children who hadn't been referred to specialist mental health care[10], and finally we found that improvement in specific aspects of parenting correlated to improvements in specific types of issue in the child (e.g. anxiety, depression, attention problems).[11]

In 2014 I co-wrote a book presenting material from my mindful parenting course in a clinical and scientific way for mental health professionals.[12] The book you're now reading presents similar knowledge in an updated and much more accessible style for parents themselves and those who seek to guide and help them, and allows you to immerse yourself in the theory and practice of mindful parenting. It is the result of my experience teaching this approach for 20 years, and of the scientific knowledge produced by my own and others' research groups into the role of attention in children's development and well-being. It is also inspired by personal memories of how I myself was parented as a child, how I parented my own children, and my experiences in meditation and mindfulness during training events, shared retreats and at home on my meditation pillow.

Whether you're a parent, future parent, step-parent, foster parent, grandparent, caregiver or simply someone who wants to learn more about mindfulness and how it can be applied to parenting and other human relationships, I hope that you find value in this book. And when you reach the end, I hope the single most important insight you take away is that the relationship with your environment mirrors the relationship with your inner child. May your inner child benefit from this book as much as your loved ones and all the children in your life – past, present and future.

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Introduction

I grew up during a period in the Netherlands when women were fired from jobs 'because of marriage'. Yet my mother had five children, worked full-time as an artist and fashion designer, and had a rich social life and many interests. When we came home from school each day, it wasn't our mother who welcomed us but a childminder. If anyone called for her, we'd ask them to call back after 6pm when she was home and cooking our dinner. The fact that our stories had to wait until Mum got home didn't bother me one bit as a child; I only wondered why she was always in a rush, and why the food was often not well cooked or burnt.

As a parent, I struggled and continue to struggle with the same double agenda – my passion for work and my wish to be with my children, physically and mentally. During part of my training as a psychotherapist I was pregnant with my first child. We were each asked to talk about our upbringings, and when it was my turn the other trainees asked '*Will you do it very differently from your Mum?*'. I was surprised because I wanted to be just like my Mum – juggling work, children and other interests. I wanted an intense life; or as John Kabat-Zinn, the founder of mindfulness in the Western world, calls it, '*full catastrophe living*'![1].

A few years later, with a young family and a budding career, I discovered meditation. Initially I meditated in the bath, so that I was still getting something done, or practiced yoga so that as well as meditating I was exercising. I found it very hard to take time for myself to do nothing but sit feeling my body, observing my mind, listening to the silence and being present in the moment. 'Not-doing' seemed much simpler in family life, where I could just be with my children, watching and listening to them and feeling wonder at their lives. At those times, there seemed to be no need to be anywhere other than where I was: with them.

Not for some time did it dawn on me that the hard work of sitting meditating on my pillow while there was so much to be done, and while there seemed to be so many more interesting things to focus on than myself, was making me far more aware of my parenthood, my children, and the precious time we had together.

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So, what do we mean when we talk about mindful parenting?

Let's first look at what we mean by *parenting*. This means much more than superficially similar words like *rearing* and *raising*. All three require the provision of shelter and nourishment, but only parenting involves preparing someone physically and mentally for an independent life – and only parenting is indelibly associated with effort and worry. Forming and developing our children to be helpful members of society causes us stress, specifically *parenting stress*.

Parenting stress springs from questions in parents' minds ('*Will my child turn out well?*' '*Will she get a good job?*' '*Will he be happy?*'), tasks that parents must fulfil as part of and alongside their parenting, and a host of other possible factors. It can narrow our perspective, destroy the pleasure of parenting and turn us into impulsive, unpredictable, frightening beings. Parenting stress shapes the family environment, and it can begin to affect a child even when it is still in the womb.[2]

So, now that we have considered parenting in general, what is mindful parenting?

Jon Kabat-Zinn defines *mindfulness* as '*directing the attention in a special way: intentionally, in the present moment, and without judgment*'. He developed Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) training[1], an approach that helped people to reduce their stress substantially in a short time, and improve their quality of life. In 1998 he and his wife Mila published their book *Everyday Blessings: The inner work of mindful parenting*, which to my knowledge is the first time the term 'mindful parenting' was ever used.[2] When Kathleen Restifo and I wrote our 2014 book *Mindful Parenting: A guide for mental health practitioners*[3], Jon and Mila developed a new definition of mindful parenting just for us:

> *'Mindful parenting is an ongoing creative process, not an end point. It involves intentionally bringing non-judgmental awareness, as best we can, to each moment. This includes being aware of the inner landscape of our own thoughts, emotions and body sensations, and the outer landscape of our children, our family, our home, and the broader culture we inhabit. It is an on-going practice that can grow to include (1) greater awareness of a child's unique nature, feelings and needs; (2) a greater ability to be present and listen with full attention; (3) recognizing and accepting things as they are in each moment, whether pleasant or unpleasant; (4) recognizing one's own reactive impulses and learning to respond more appropriately and imaginatively, with greater clarity and kindness.'*[4]

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This book consists of 11 chapters about facets of mindful parenting as defined by Jon and Mila. I suggest that you approach it as a self-help course, reading one chapter per week and doing the associated exercises, but of course it's up to you. However you choose to use it, please don't make the mistake (as I did, initially) of thinking that reading about mindfulness is the same as practicing it. Only through putting the principles of mindfulness and meditation into practice for yourself will the knowledge become embedded and 'stick'. Personal experience is essential, so don't just think about mindful parenting – try it out! Read each chapter mindfully, with deliberate, non-judgmental, here-and-now attention, and don't rush to get to the end. The reading takes as long as it takes.

Each chapter ends with a series of practices to do that week (and, if mindfulness grabs you as it did me, for the rest of your life). Some have accompanying audio tracks, which as a buyer of this book you can download from www.pavpub.com/mindful-parenting-resources. Often when presenting these exercises I'll suggest that you record your experiences in your notebook. This can be a real notebook or a computer, but I do recommend that you do keep a journal of some sort – over time it will become a unique account of your experiences and progress in mindfulness that you can revisit whenever you need it again.

Above all, let go of any and all expectations about what you might get from the practices – you don't need to enjoy a practice or achieve a tangible result for it to be an important and helpful step on your journey. With mindful parenting, as with parenting more generally, the experience itself is what really counts.

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Chapter 1: Mindful parenting: Being there without prejudice or judgement

'Nothing will stay with us if we don't give it our full attention.'

Of all our unpaid tasks, parenting is the one that the majority of us devote most time and attention to (or feel we do, anyway). It's also the one that worries us most when it doesn't go well, and the one we talk about most. Research shows that the amount of time we spend with our children is increasing, for both parents. In 1965 mothers spent a weekly average of 10.5 hours with their children, and fathers 2.6 hours. By 2010 the average had risen to 13.7 hours for mothers and 7.2 hours for fathers[1]. This still isn't much, by the way: two hours a day for mothers and one for fathers, spread across all their children. Yet during the same period, the time spent by mothers in paid employment has risen dramatically and fathers' working hours haven't gone down. So the question is – where have parents found those extra hours?

Time is a necessary condition for attention, but it isn't sufficient in itself. A question that parents are never asked in this kind of research is how many minutes of the daily time spent with their children is their attention truly focused on the children? Picture it: your child comes home from school and you ask how their day was, and in the course of an enthusiastic but rather long answer your mind wanders to other things. You think of emails you need to answer, shopping you need to do, your other child who needs to be picked from a club soon. You nod, smile, and perhaps even respond to what your child is saying ('*That's great, well done!*') but you haven't really followed what made their day so special and you can't really share in their happiness because you weren't paying full attention. If you're lucky your child will catch you out: '*You're not really listening! I already told you that… didn't you hear me?*'.

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Lienhard Valentin, a passionate author and publisher of books about mindfulness and parenting[2], invited me to give a course on mindful parenting in Germany. While I was there, he showed me a video of an orphanage in Hungary where young babies who had been abandoned by their parents were raised by carers trained to look after children in a mindful way[3]. The time the carers have for each child is no more than in other orphanages. But when they change a baby's nappy, for example, they have been trained to keep their attention fully focused on that baby, ignoring the other babies and their crying.

We watched an interaction between a carer and a baby with serious developmental problems relating to premature birth and trauma. Difficult to wake, the baby was largely unresponsive, giving few indications of what she did or didn't want. The carer came across as highly 'centred': her actions were calm, loving and attentive, based on a deep trust in herself and in this fragile, vulnerable, and entirely dependent little human being entrusted to her care. She announced all her actions through verbal and non-verbal signals, and you could almost feel the back of her hand stroking the baby's cheek. She looked at and listened to the baby with undivided attention, reacting to all her signals, however tiny. She completely ignored the ceaseless crying of other babies, appearing to be fully absorbed in this particular moment with this particular child.

We then saw the same carer dress a slightly older boy with the same undivided, unconditional and loving attention, once again entirely absorbed in this specific moment with this particular child. She responded attentively to all the boy's behaviours, even if they were unrelated to dressing. As a result, the process of getting dressed took as long as he needed it to, because this was his time with the carer. She offered him a choice of two sweaters, once again giving him space, and followed him in the process of choosing – how he pointed at one then the other, making a game of it. Watching, I felt no impatience whatsoever; time seemed to stand still in this moment in which carer and child shared the experience of dressing. You could feel the carer's trust that, through their interaction and joint attentiveness to the moment, the child would eventually end up dressed – as would all the others after him.

As I watched, I sensed a deep calm and silence, despite the noise of other children crying in the background. They had to wait; but each of them knew that they would also get their moment in which the carer would give them her undivided attention, and so they soothed themselves. These short but fully attentive interactions allowed the children to heal their traumas.

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Children get to know themselves through the attention their parents and other carers pay to them, which is also known as 'mirroring'[4]. Parents mimic the facial expressions of their infants without even realizing it. They read the facial expressions of their child very carefully and follow their movements and sounds attentively, trying to understand what their baby wants. This attention that parents (and other professional carers) pay to a developing child is as vital to its survival as food and oxygen. Through it, the infant learns to experience itself as an integrated whole. It learns to feel its centre, its self, the point from which its interactions with the outside world emerge, and to which it can return when it is saturated with new impressions or when others have no time for it (as in the case of the babies in the orphanage). So when speaking about being 'centred' here, I am referring to an attitude that we can cultivate through meditation, and one that children learn through attentive interaction with their parents and carers.

Children try to draw their parents' attention to things they notice by pointing or, if they can talk, saying, '*look!*', '*listen!*', '*feel!*', '*taste!*' This is a process we call *joint attention*, and it is an important indicator of healthy development – it has been found that children suffering from autism, depression and/or neglect develop this kind of behaviour later and to a lesser degree[5]. When parents and children pay joint attention to something, it helps the child to concentrate. After all, if a parent is truly focused on something, then it tells the child that it must be important – and so, with the parent's encouragement, the child keeps looking more closely, for longer or more often. When parents do not engage in much mirroring behaviour, i.e. they pay little attention to what the child feels, says and does, and fail to look or only superficially looks at what the child points out, it can have the opposite effect. The child may not develop a sense of self, or experience himself or herself as a whole to the same degree. The child may be less centred, and may pay less frequent, shorter and more superficial attention to things.

Compared to other species, human children take longest to reach the point where they can survive without the care of their parents. This is related to the size of a baby's skull, which in turn is a result of our large brains – particularly our frontal lobes, a feature that distinguishes us from other animals. To grow such a large skull, the baby must be born very early in developmental terms, long before it can walk, feed and protect itself. That's why it takes a huge amount of effort to raise a human child. We are evolved parents[6]: the way we raise children has been shaped by natural selection, because tactics that increased the chances of a child reaching adulthood were more likely to be passed on to the next generation. In the history of our evolution, the fact that a mother had to feed her baby so often and for

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so long at the start of its life made the mother and child vulnerable to outside attack, and dependent on the father, grandparents, siblings and wider community for protection and food. This is why people raised their children in groups, and where the expression 'It takes a village to raise a child' comes from.

Very little is left of this communal way of bringing up children in contemporary society. We tend to live in nuclear rather than communal family units, and in cities in particular there is little social cohesion and control. Rather than being looked after by grandparents, other family members, friends or neighbours while their parents work, children tend to be looked after by day care professionals or paid childminders.

Because caring for children involves so many things, it risks becoming one long list of to-dos. It is all too easy to crunch through tasks without giving any of them our full attention. Operating in this way is sometimes referred to as the *doing mode*[7] – a state of mind in which we get things done, solve problems and tick off jobs, and are aware of what is done and what still needs doing. The doing mode lets us efficiently carry out tasks we're familiar with, and which don't require much conscious awareness on our part – such as feeding the children, cleaning the house and traveling to work. In the doing mode we're generally on autopilot, so to speak – it's our default mode. Often our thoughts are ahead of us – while driving to work you may be thinking about the day ahead, for example, or while taking your children to school you may be thinking about who will collect them. The doing mode is drilled into children from a young age, both by parents and at school: '*Hurry up or you'll be late! If you finish your homework you can have an ice cream. Stop dawdling!*'.

There is another mode, however, that every human being is also born with, and that is the *being mode*[7]. In the being mode we are connected to the present, we can experience things at this particular moment in time, and we can let things be just how they are. We're accepting and open to pleasant, neutral and unpleasant feelings (our own and those of others), we don't try to change any aspect of our experience, and we feel calm, still and centred. By nature, children are in the being mode. Walking to school, they don't think about the time or their destination; instead they stop to look at flowers or jump in puddles – they are focused on the present moment in the present place.

Since I learned about these two states of mind I've developed a habit: whenever I write yet another to-do list on a yellow sticky note, I also write a 'to-be list' on a pink or blue note to remind myself what life's really about. Don't get me wrong – ticking off to-do lists performs a valuable function by

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getting things done and activating a reward centre in the brain. Each time you tick off a task, you automatically reward yourself: well done! But what's important is to find a balance between the doing and being modes in the manner in which we carry out tasks and attempt to achieve our goals.

To do:

- buy Jack a birthday present
- take Eva to swimming
- call school about lost homework
- ask Lucy to stay over with Anna
- help Lucy pack her bag
- bake cupcakes for school with Jack

To be:

- calm
- attentive
- patient
- in contact/together
- enjoying the moment

Parenting seems itself to have become an item on life's to-do list, something we feel obliged to succeed at – with success defined in terms of characteristics like beauty, education, achievement and social skills. We compare our own children to those of others who seem to be doing better on those fronts. We're influenced by magazines showing pictures of happy families eating together during the Christmas holidays – everyone smiling, beautiful and slim, with perfect hair and makeup, in a bright tidy house with wonderful looking food laid out on a perfectly decorated table.

Thinking back to Christmas meals in my family when I was growing up, memories of a different kind come to mind. The turkey that was undercooked because it was put in the oven too late. My father pulling a melted plastic bag with giblets out of the bird when it was finally put on the table – which was *not* seen as a laughing matter. The children arguing or giggling, resulting in our father sending all five of us upstairs one by one, without our dinner, leaving my parents alone at the Christmas table – and deeply unhappy, I imagine. No doubt they had their own expectations of what a Christmas meal should look like – how festive the atmosphere should be, what the turkey should taste like and whose responsibility that was, and how the children should behave.

During the holidays my parents were clearly in a doing mode, experiencing a gap between the way things ought to be and the way they actually were. As a child, I remember feeling the tension and fear of things going wrong – and the loneliness when they did, again. But what might have happened if my parents had taken a mindful parenting course and learned about the

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being mode? Could they have looked at their table of bickering children, the underdone turkey with its melted plastic interior, their unfulfilled expectations about each other and their own shortcomings, and given up trying to turn the experience it into something other than it actually was? What might have happened if my mother had cooked the turkey with real attention, and been aware of what she needed from her husband and children in order to do so? Or if my father had looked at my mother with real, open attention, and seen that she would have much preferred to be painting rather than cooking – that she was so worn out from caring for five children, in addition to a more than full-time job and a busy social life, that he could have given her no greater pleasure than by putting the turkey in the oven himself?

I have much happier memories of Easter and how our mother would decorate eggs with us according to a custom passed down from my Polish great-grandmother. I remember the smell of melting wax, from the crayons we used to draw on the warm, round surface of the eggs, and how we'd dunk the eggs into different coloured paint baths, delighted at the white lines that appeared where we'd applied the wax. Then the smell of the vinegar bath, and finally of the butter we used to polish the eggs until they shone. I still follow this same custom for decorating eggs every Easter, as do my own children.

In parenting and in family life, the being mode means seeing our children, our partners and ourselves the way they and we really are, without trying to change anything. A simple way to practice this is with the weather. When we leave home each morning we have no control over the weather outside. Instead of trying to resist the prevailing conditions (e.g. head down and shoulders hunched when it's raining, windy or cold) we can cultivate an attitude of openness and acceptance of this particular weather on this particular day. How does it feel – the rain on your face, the wind whistling past your head, the cold against your skin? We can experience the weather just the way it is at that particular moment, letting go completely of any idea that it should be different.

I get the perfect chance to practice this attitude when I spend camping holidays on an island off the north coast of the Netherlands. After days of bad weather, I always hear parents in the shower block telling their children, '*Next year we'll go to the south of France!*'. They are no longer in the moment, on the present holiday, but planning another one which should be better. Children don't think this way: they experience the weather just the way it is, at that moment, and play in the shower block when it's too wet outside and too cold in the tent. We adults could learn something from that!

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Cognitive psychologists conduct a good deal of research into biases, which are prejudices or distortions of reality[8]. Our minds work in such a way that biases maintain themselves. Once we get a certain idea about how reality is (e.g. '*I can't write*'), we pay selective attention to events or information that seem to confirm this idea ('*the bad mark I got for that essay*'), while ignoring other information that doesn't confirm it or even contradicts it ('*that grade was due to poor spelling*'; '*I was asked to write for the school magazine*'). We fix our identities in this way, depriving ourselves of space to develop. And we don't just do it to ourselves; unintentionally, we also do it to our children.

Visiting Professor Alan Stein's lab in Oxford, I watched footage of mothers with eating disorders spoon-feeding their babies their first solids. These mothers were worried that the babies would get dirty, or become overweight. What should have been a celebratory and playful moment, in which mother and child jointly discover solid food, was a stressful experience for them. They held certain biases (e.g. '*eating makes you fat*'), which they projected onto their babies. And it isn't only mothers with eating disorders who have problematic biases; parents with social anxiety disorders, who are afraid of being negatively evaluated by others[9], tend to worry that their babies will also be judged negatively, and parents who suffer from depression or borderline personality disorder think their children don't like them and ignore the smiles their baby sends their way. In the worst cases, a mother with severe postnatal depression may go so far as to kill herself because she is convinced that her baby is better off without her.

Psychological disorders can be the seeds of bias. However, the ways in which parents who do not suffer from psychological disorders view their children is also coloured by all kinds of biases, both positive and negative, which can hinder a child's development. Parents who give a child positive labels such as 'athletic', 'gifted' or 'responsible' can unwittingly limit that child's development. For example, a 'responsible' child is often put in charge of their brothers and sisters, depriving them of opportunities to develop their own playful side. The 'athletic' child is constantly training, and never learns simply to relax and do nothing. And the 'gifted' child, while challenged intellectually, isn't invited to discover the more earthly pleasures of working with their hands.

These kinds of positive biases can also lead parents and other caregivers to miss signals that a child needs their help, and to have problems accepting any behaviour that does not conform to the child's 'label'.
I remember how my daughter, who scored highly on cognitive tests, came home disappointed after giving her first school presentation, which was about whales. '*I expected more from you*', is what her teacher had said.

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The label 'intelligent' had inadvertently blinded the teacher (and me) to the difficulty my daughter had with structuring information in the orderly way required for a presentation.

Positive labels can also have a negative effect on a child's sibling: the brother or sister of a responsible, athletic or gifted child can be perceived as irresponsible, unathletic or slow, and develop accordingly. I remember how my teachers used to sigh and say, '*You're not like your sister*' (who was more serious, hardworking, and organized than me and got better grades), and how I did my best to conform to that negative image by doing as little work as possible and getting the lowest possible pass grades.

Any diagnostic labels a child may be given, such as ADHD, autism, sensitivity or fear of failure, can also serve as biases that limit parents in paying attention to their child in a truly open way. One mother told me how, after a healthcare professional had called her son autistic, she began to experience her son's habit of arranging his soft toys in order of size, in a completely different way. Behaviour that she'd previously seen as attentive, precise and endearing, she now viewed as rigid and childish, triggering feelings of fear and aversion.

Because we spend so much time with our children, we develop all kinds of interactions that become habitual. These habitual patterns lead us to react in the same ways we've always done, and can limit a child's development. Researcher Jean Dumas carried out an elegant experiment in which he asked teachers to categorize pupils as either socially competent, average, aggressive or anxious[10]. Each group consisted of 30 children with an average age of four. The children's mothers were asked to perform a task once with their own child and once with someone else's child, without taking control. The task was to push a toy trolley around a miniature supermarket and gather five items on a list from shelves containing different categories of products, taking the shortest possible route for each item on the list. The interactions between the mothers and children were filmed and assessed by psychologists trained to score parental behaviour in terms of 'positivity' and 'reciprocity'. The observers did not know which child was the mother's own.

The study found that the mothers of aggressive and anxious children scored lower in terms of positivity and reciprocity when reacting to their own children than mothers with average or competent children. However, the same mothers displayed equal levels of both qualities when interacting with other children. This shows that the mothers of aggressive and anxious children are capable of reacting just as positively and reciprocally as the mothers of average and competent children, and the way they interact with their own child has developed over time rather than being 'inbuilt'.

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The way parents see their child can be affected by all kinds of biases or distortions, resulting from their own or the child's problems, diagnostic labels, comparisons between children and interactions developed over time. Parents can also hold biases resulting from the way they were themselves brought up. If their own parents were critical and disapproving, then they may have internalized this behaviour and adopt a similar attitude to their own children. Wherever parental biases come from, they have the potential to hinder a child's development and disrupt a healthy parent-child relationship.

So how can we lessen the effects of such biases to give our children the best chance to develop in a balanced way, based on their own talents and ambitions? One thing parents can practice is approaching their child with a *beginner's mind*, which means looking at them as if they're seeing them for the first time. Doing things with a beginner's mind means doing them with full and open attention. Use all your senses, as this helps to absorb you in the experience. Think back to when your child was just born: do you remember the smells, the sounds, the way they looked and moved, how they felt? Did you feel a sense of wonder, surprise or curiosity? Can you recall how you held your baby for the first time? That's the beginner's mind.

A good technique for seeing your child with a beginner's mind is to try to see them not as 'your child' but as 'a child'. Here's an example to illustrate how this works: what would you think if your son threw himself onto the floor screaming at the supermarket checkout because he couldn't have the chocolate bar he wanted? Perhaps you'd think he was spoiled, that it was your fault, or that you were a bad parent? Now, what if it was someone else's child having such a tantrum? Does your response change to thinking that children must learn that they can't always get what they want, that the parent is right not to give in, or that chocolate shouldn't be displayed at supermarket checkouts?!

Looking at your son or daughter as 'a child' instead of 'your child' is the first beginner's mind exercise we give to parents on our mindful parenting courses, and it can have a powerful and liberating effect. One mother talked about using a beginner's mind to observe her son while he was reading. He had been diagnosed with ADHD, and she was often irritated by his loud and fidgety behaviour, including when he was reading. She tended not to look at or listen to him in such moments. Now, as she observed her child as if for the first time, she noticed not just his beautiful hair and fine features, but also how much enjoyment he got from reading. He empathized with the story, laughing, frowning, cheering, looking surprised and moving about enthusiastically while immersed in the story. Now, instead of being irritated, she enjoyed watching her child enjoy himself.

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Exercises

Exercise 1.1: Sitting meditation (audio track 1)

This is a ten-minute sitting meditation, in which you focus awareness on your breathing. Find a quiet spot where you feel relaxed and safe, and where you won't be disturbed. You can meditate sitting on a chair, cushion or meditation bench. Make sure you're warm – put a blanket around you if you need to, and wear socks – and sitting comfortably. It's best if you can do the meditation once a day for a week. If you find you reach a point where you know the audio track by heart, you can do it unguided and set an alarm to go off after ten minutes (or however long you want to meditate). Let go of any expectations about what you should be experiencing – just doing it is all that matters. Afterwards, make notes about your first experiences of meditation in your notebook if you wish.

Exercise 1.2: Beginner's-mind parenting

Choose five minutes this week to observe your child as unobtrusively as possible. You can do it while they're sleeping, playing, reading, sitting at the computer, watching TV or any other situation that seems suitable. Open up all your senses and observe your child as fully as you can, as if you're seeing this child for the first time. You can also imagine that you're a painter, illustrator, reporter, photographer or video artist. What does the child look like? Observe colours, shapes, light and dark. Notice all the little details, zooming in and out, from details to the bigger picture and back. Carefully observe the way they move. Listen to the different sounds: the tone of their voice, noises they make when moving, the sound of their breathing perhaps, or the beating of their heart. You can also use your other senses, depending on the situation. If you're sitting close to your child, you may be able to pick up the smell of their skin, body, hair or clothing. Can you feel anything? Maybe your child is leaning against you or sitting on your lap. Can you taste anything, for example if your young child sticks a finger in your mouth? What does it feel like to watch your child like this, with a beginner's mind, like you're seeing them for the first time? Don't try to change the experience in any way; it is what it is. Make notes about your experience in your notebook if you wish.

Exercise 1.3: Bringing full attention to a routine action with or for your child

Routine actions are things we do automatically (at least in part), because they don't require much attention: they have become habitual. This allows us to do them while doing something else at the same time, like peeling

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potatoes while we watch TV or driving while our thoughts wander. This week, pick a routine action, one that you do with or for your child at least once a day, and carry it out with full attention as if you're doing it for the first time. It could be taking them to school, asking how their day was, dressing them, brushing their teeth, preparing their lunch, serving their dinner, or saying goodnight. Make sure the action doesn't take up too much time. If you want to choose something that takes longer, use just the first few minutes for the exercise.

Focus your attention on your child, on yourself, and on the contact between you. Let the experience be the way it is. The only objective is to be aware of this moment, just as it is. To observe a routine action consciously, it can help to slow it down a bit. Once you've decided which routine action with or for your child you want to carry out with your full attention, keep it up for a week. Don't switch between different actions. Make notes about your experiences in your notebook if you wish.

Exercise 1.4: Joint attention

Watch out for moments when your child asks you to pay joint attention to something: '*Daddy, Mummy, look!*', '*Listen to this song*', '*Look at this video*', '*Guess what I got for my test?*'. What kinds of things does your child want to look at with you? When you look at something with your child, try to give it your full and undivided attention, and do this for longer, more deeply or more often than you would usually do. Make notes if you wish.

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