

Mindfulness in Parenting: The Application Guideline

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Abstract

This article presents the application guideline of mindfulness in parenting which found that mindfulness in the Buddhist context is characterized by observation, attentiveness, and contemplation of the present moment in parenting. The practice of mindfulness in parenting leads to deliberate expression toward the child and insight of parenting help dissolve parents' attachment to the expectation toward their children. In the study of Buddhist mindfulness parenting discovered a significant category regarding awareness and understanding process in parenting, revealing mindfulness mechanism within parents' mind while maintaining mindfulness in parental relationships. The author reviewed the relevant literature, aiming to present a set of guidelines for parents, divided into two parts: self-regulation and mindful responses to children. This article focuses on benefits for parents who would like to bring up their children with mindfulness for the result in positive parent-child relationship and well-being of both parents and children.

Keywords: Mindful Parenting, Buddhism, Buddhist Psychology

Introduction

Parenting, an utterly important task of parents to facilitate a child's growth and development, requires physical and mental strength from parents in encountering constant new challenges in the parent-child relationship (Muller-Nix et al., 2004; Weinstock, 2005; McLeish & Redshaw, 2015), which is sensitive and impactful on the growth of their children. Thus, it is found that mindfulness during this sensitive phase can be beneficial to overall well-being and development of children (Kelly, Morisset, Barnard, Hammond, & Booth, 1996; Kochanska, Aksan, Prisco, & Adams, 2008), and familial relationships (Medeiros, Gouveia, Canavarro, & Moreira, 2016). Developing mindfulness among child-rearing parents is, therefore, highly favorable to any family.

Plenty of Western research integrates mindfulness into parenting and found advantages to mental health of parents and children. These studies have shown that mindfulness allows caretakers to be aware of their emotions, more prone to positive emotion, and more contented with parenting (Bailie, Kuyken, & Sonnenberg, 2012; Singh et al., 2007; Vieten & Astin, 2008). Being able to regulate the emotion leads parents to be able to keep positive parent-child relationships, more constructive interactions, and greater empathy (Bailie et al., 2012; Bögels, Hoogstad, van Dun, de Schutter, & Restifo, 2008). All these initiates children to self-regulation, greater emotional and social development, and less aggressive behavior (Bögels et al., 2008; Singh et al., 2007).

Mindfulness in parenting was defined by Kabat-Zinn and Kabat-Zinn (2009) as a care given to a child and a parenting style characterized by attentiveness and being in the present moment. Emphasizing on how parents are aware of their emotion, feeling, and need, which in turn leads to greater responsible to children's needs. Later, Duncan, Coatsworth, and Greenberg (2009) created a theoretical model of mindful parenting, emphasizing the forging of familial environment filled with satisfaction from parent-child relationships since parents become aware and acknowledge their children's needs. This model consists of 5 dimensions of parenting: 1) listening with full attention-listening and focusing on experience of children at the present moment; 2) non-judgmental acceptance of self and child-the ability to realize one's own expectation toward oneself and one's child until that expectation resolves into acceptance of one's own and the child's behavior; 3) emotional awareness of self and the child- ability of parents to be aware of their own and the child's emotions; 4) self-regulation in the parenting relationship-ability of parents to react less to their children's behavior and to contemplate on proper reactions; and 5) compassion for self and child-care and perception towards children and oneself genuinely from parents' perspective.

Literature reviews on mindfulness in parenting show that these dimensions of parentings focus on interaction with children at the present moment, calmness in parenting, and self-regulation of parents (Placone-Willey, 2003; Reynolds, 2003; Singh et.al., 2006). This approach of parenting aims at warmer, supportive relationship with less negativity and conflicts. The body of knowledge has been widely interested in studying in the contemporary mindfulness field, yet it is beneficial to develop a guideline to apply mindfulness in parenting in the context of Asian parents. As a result, the literature of Asian parenting has also been reviewed from the recent research in the East with the primary objective to create the Guideline of Mindfulness in Parenting, which can provide more profound insight and is applicable to parents and caregivers.

In Thailand, a grounded theory on Buddhism-based mindfulness in parenting within the Thai context was conducted with parents who had been practicing Vipassana based on Four Foundation of Mindfulness (Satipattana), the original practice of Buddhism (Analayo, 2003). In this study, Saejeng (2018) discovered additional important dimensions regarding the understanding of parenting nature: as time goes by, contemplation to understand selves, children, and parenting can lead to insight: that parents will be aware that they cannot assume to possess their children as part of themselves, that attachment to their children leads to suffering, and that relieving from suffering of parenting can be possible only when parents see the truth that children also need liberation which is essential for children's growth. Among these understanding parents are also aware that they are needed for their children's growth. Such insight into parental relationship can foster the awareness and understanding process in parenting, which goes on throughout the parenting period, enabling parents to become more determined in their mindfulness during parenting.

In the study of Saejeng (2018), besides the theoretical aspects that can be applied to the psychological knowledge and benefits experts working on parents' minds, one of the category also show that mindfulness starts from the process of being aware of the present moment. Parents observe the intense stimuli, be their children's countenances or their own's unstable minds. This observation leads to the awareness that the mind, both parents' and children's, is hardly settled and unstable. This awareness then leads to the ability to regulate one's own mind not to be agitated and not to respond to the children when in agitation. With the calm mind, parents will enter the process of empathy through contemplation for a certain period, resulting in greater understanding of children and themselves. At this point, parents can better respond to their children based on this newfound understanding. The process is shown in Table 1. Believing that this finding can help maintain the awareness of parents

during their parenting to respond to their children empathetically, the author has decided to create the following guideline.

Table 1 Awareness and understanding process in parenting

Main category: Awareness and understanding process in parenting	
1. Awareness of the present moment	1.1 Observe stimuli coming in contact with the mind at the very moment 1.2 Be aware of what is croppin up in the mind
2. Self-regulation	2.1 Stop doing what is being done 2.2 Isolate from the situation 2.3 Observe physical sensations 2.4 Focus on things coming into attentio 2.5 Shift attention to the child
3. The process of understanding through contemplation	3.1 Contemplate while interacting with the child 3.2 Contemplate after seeing the outcomes of the interation 3.3 Factors facilitating the contemplation 3.4 Understanding
4. Deliberate responses towards the child	4.1 Value and give importance to the child 4.2 Respond to the child with understanding 4.3 Genuine communication 4.4 Grant freedom 4.5 Encourage the child to observe his/her mind and facilitate problem solving

Source: Saejeng (2018)

The process of awareness of the present moment starts with observation. The study found that observation may be activated to either inner or outer stimuli, such as the feeling of parents, or the child's intense expression at the moment. Observation can arise from the intention to perceive things at the present moment. This is in accordance with the principle of mindfulness in Buddhism, which suggests taking things here and now into attention when the mind is ready to observe things related to what one is doing (Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, 2005), specifically on four domains of experience: toward the body or posture, toward feelings or sensations, toward the mental state, and toward the natural truth in the current phenomenon one is experiencing (Wallace, 2011). The vital part of mindfulness in parenting is parents' awareness of their own feelings and their children's ones at the present moment (Coatsworth, Duncan, Greenberg, & Nix, 2010). Therefore, in parenting, parents can observe either the intensity of the feelings arising in their minds or physical responses at the moment: for example, observing fast heartbeat, body heat, stress, respiration, speech, or actions that are unusual. If the stimulus in focus is the child, parents can observe his/her actions or reactions, including facial expressions, gestures, sad feelings, etc. All these things will manifest their impermanence when parents keep observing thoroughly. Observing in this manner, parents will gradually develop keen awareness and ability to regulate themselves not to react on impulse to their children. As found in Kennedy (2017) study that parents reported to be more capable of self-regulation and reduce the automatic interaction toward the children, but able to understand the children from their points of view after attending a mindful parenting program.

Saejeng's study also reveals that inhibition helps hinder agitation in the mind and stops mental default by mitigating turbulence in the mind. Similarly, Bögels, Lehtonen, and Restifo (2010) emphasizes reducing parental reactivity by reducing parental stress. The finding shows that this method is practical. When the mind is agitated and yearning for reacting to

the child in a certain way, parents should stop what they are about to do as that reaction is the outcome of agitated mind, which can be negative. This approach is found applying in Mindfulness-based therapy results in reducing negative automatic thought (Kaviani, Javaheri, & Bahiray, 2005). If the circumstance was utmost difficult for parents to inhibit their disturbed mind or the consequential negative reaction, they had better isolate themselves from the situation.

Afterwards, the study found that parents will use the new familiar method of mindfulness to calm their mind: by observing bodily sensations or breathing, focusing on footsoles touching the ground or the clenching of the fists, etc. Turning attention to focus on one thing can also help pacify the mind. According to Buddhist study, focus the mind on a particular thing can induce concentration. When the concentration is strong, the mind is more in balance. Which the five hindrances in concentration, such as restlessness and distraction, will become weaker and disappear during maintaining the attentive concentration (Nhat Hanh, 2008). Similar practices are integrated into mindfulness training for parenting in the West, for example, breathing awareness, awareness of the body, and focusing on the central point of the body (Altmaier & Maloney, 2007; Placone-Willey, 2002; Vieten & Astin, 2008). In addition, another mind regulation technique beneficial to parental relationship is to shift the mind to focus to the child. The informants in this study also mentioned how they shifted their attention from their own desiration at the time to observing and trying to understand their child. If their concentration on the child was intense enough, agitation in their mind would also subside, resulting in empathy and understanding towards their child and more harmonious parental relationship. This is supported by Kabat-Zinn and Kabat-Zinn (2009), who pointed to the importance of empathy, the ability to understand the child's feelings and respect the true self of the child. To understand a child, parents need to be aware of their emotions and feelings so that they can separate between their world and their child's.

With calmer minds, the parents in this study reported how they contemplated to fathom themselves and their child, leading to parenting style proper for the contexts at present. Goodman, Greenland, and Siegel (2012) also mentioned of mindfulness practice that leads to insight: mindfulness allows us to see the present experience in clearer light and more wisely choose to act in each daily situation with greater insight into its nature. Contemplation can be achieved by going over and recollecting the roots of a particular situation, such as the cause of certain reactions, their children's needs and sufferings, the source of their restlessness, roots for their frustration, etc. Such contemplation will lead to actions germane to the proper context of parenting. This process is in line with Yonisomanasikara in Buddhism, the critical cause-effect reflection to gain insight into suffering and deal with it at the root cause (Phra Brahmagunabhorn (P. A. Payutto), 2012).

The finding from the study of Saejeng (2018) also suggests that after the parents calm their mind and understand their child, themselves, and situation at that time, they could respond to their child more empathetically, aiming at having their child understand and regulate his/her emotions. The study also finds 5 characteristics of mindful parents interacting with their child: value and focus on their child, respond to their child with understanding, genuine communication, granting freedom, and facilitate their child to observe his/her mind and solve problems, all of which can be applied to mindful parenting. To be able to understand, accept, and be capable of interact harmoniously with the child and able to soothe the child's distress are the sensitivities in parenting (Broberg, 2000)

For parents to respond to their child in a way that helps him/her learn how to regulate his/her emotions, parents need insight gained from contemplation to respond to the child with calm, firm emotion and communication that focuses on and values the child: for example, listening to the child attentively and appreciate him/her even in trivial matters to remind that he/she is important in the eyes of the parents. This will make the child realize of his/her value as a

human being as stated by Bögels, Hellemans, van Deursen, Römer, and van der Meulen (2014) that parents need to increase their ability to express that they value without judging and listen attentively to the child, both of which are also important dimensions in the mindful parenting model of Duncan et al. (2009).

Respond with understanding is also a part of showing appreciation of the child's value and helping him/her to understand his/her emotion, feeling, and need and be aware of what is happening to him/her with mindfulness at the present moment. Moreover, this expression also leads to the sense of safety within the atmosphere of love, encouraging the child to face his/her own insecurity more directly. Kabat-Zinn and Kabat-Zinn (2009) highlights the expression of understanding by conveying acceptance, explaining that it is the ability to acknowledge and accept the child as he/she is whether it is what the parents want or not. This is an essential component in applying mindfulness to parenting. Empathy can be expressed by either body language or words, as exemplified by the informants: intimacy, embracing, touching with love, and speaking emphatically to the child, among others.

Genuine communication is an important part that prompts the child to observe his/her context and learn to contemplate and understand the situation as it is. Parents' communication should invites the child to observe directly what is happening, rather than directs him/her with emotion, such as pointing to the cause of the child's disappointment to get what he/she wants or the outcome of his/her deeds without blaming. This will enable the child to see the truth without blocking, resisting, and avoiding. The child will then learn to encounter and adjust his/her mind to live with the reality, not sinking in his/her own suffering and expectations. The techniques are consistence with the study of Phaneuf & McIntyre (2007) which found that parents' appropriate feedback help child to reduce risk of future behavioral problems.

Regarding the child's freedom during early parenting, it is challenging for parents to balance between granting freedom for the child to learn to interact with his/her environment by himself and with parental intervention. This freedom would be granted more at ease as the parents gradually contemplated to understand their child and the parenting situations and saw it proper to let their child gradually make more decisions himself in many matters, leading the child to be able to contemplate situations by himself/herself as well.

Such freedom needs to consist of cognitive support provision made possible by creating clear cognitive steps for the child to follow (Morris et al., 2002). In this regard, Saejeng (2018) found that parents with mindful parenting not only granted freedom to their child but also encouraged him/her to observe his/her mind and facilitate problem solving. Parents will encourage the child to observe his/her feelings at the present moment to find the root cause of that feeling and the following outcome which is a pathway to end the trouble feelings as taught in the Four Noble Truths principles in Buddhist teaching (Anderson, 2013). Furthermore, parents facilitate the child to explore the situation and/or solve problems by reflecting on the child's mind and expectation and inviting him/her to explore the uneasiness the child is feeling. Together with parents, the child will encourage to think of ways to solve or prevent it the next time; assisting the child in resolving the problem by himself/herself through nondirective instruction technique; and giving the child freedom to face challenges to develop the child's autonomy and sense of independence (Grolnick, Gurland, DeCoursey, & Jacob, 2002).

Responding mindfully toward the child was found positively related to authoritative parenting style: the parenting practice that consists of warmth, respect, clear boundaries, and high sensitivity responding (Nyarko, 2011), and negatively related to over-reactivity (De Bruin, 2012) in parents' discipline, and authoritarian parenting (McCaffrey, Reitman, & Black, 2017): the highly demanding parenting practice but lack of responsiveness (Ang & Goh, 2006). In the study of this relation between mindfulness and parenting styles also found that there was no relation between mindfulness in parenting and gender, but significantly

related to income was found. This could be explained that the household with lower income experience more stress which affects their being with the child in the present moment. Thus, economic issues parents may be facing in everyday life are suggested to be aware as a possible stressor for parents to lose their determination to be mindful with the child.

Moreover, parents could also develop the foundation of their mind so as to maintain mindful parenting and skills in observing themselves. Self-observation by being aware of internal affective states helps further in self-regulation (Segall, 2005) . With constant reviewing their parental roles, the parents will learn how they are related to their child in reality, how they have contributed to the child's growth, what they can and cannot control, how their child has grown in his/her own way, what in their child that contradicts with their desires, and what the child needs from parents' care for optimal growth. All this will allow parents to gradually gain insight into the nature of parenting and strengthen their resolution to develop the calm mind in parenting for the sake of their own mind and their child's growth and happiness. This resolution is an important part that can further maintain their mindful parenting (Saejeng, 2018; Saejeng & Taephant, 2020; Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006).

Conclusion

Literature review reveals that the parental relationship is sensitive and vital to the child's growth. Parent-child interactions, then, require attentiveness to each moment of parenting. That's why mindfulness in parenting can help parents observe and accept their child and themselves, leading to listening and regulating parenting behavior to respond to their child more positively. From the study of mindfulness-practicing parents suggests that parents could elevate mindfulness in parenting by emotional regulation when agitation arises and their mindful responses toward the child, the following points can be concluded:

Emotional-Regulation in Parenting

- 1) Observe intensity or characteristics of the emotion arises in the mind or the expressions of the child.
- 2) Regulate the expression of negative feelings by shifting attention to observe the body, such as breathing and body movement.
- 3) If the feelings are too overwhelmed to inhibit, isolating oneself from the situation at that moment is an alternative.
- 4) Avoid ruminating when in negative feelings.
- 5) When the mind calm down, recall the situation to investigate and contemplate the cause of that situation in parenting.

Mindful Responses Towards the Child

- 1) Using insight from contemplation to respond to the child firmly and communicate in a way that makes the child feels important and valued.
- 2) Use the acquired insight through gestures, facial countenances, and speeches to create the atmosphere of love and empathy.
- 3) Communicate clearly and genuinely and avoid using disturbed emotion to guide the conversation. By being clear and calm, the child can see the situation that affects his/her mind at the very moment more clearly.
- 4) Give the child freedom at the safe level to express himself/herself, make decisions, and learn to contemplate things going on around them.
- 5) Invite the child to observe his/her mind and solve problems without any blaming.

In application, if parents encounter trouble observing and understanding themselves or their child during parenting, the author recommends seeking consult from experts, such as counseling psychologist skilled and experienced in developing mindfulness in parenting to assist in monitoring and reviewing self-observation and child-observation, leading to contemplation of the entire parenting experience. Moreover, the authors suggest a study be

conducted to test the effectiveness of this guideline in practice: whether it can benefit parenting in the Asian context. That said, the findings are still highly valuable to attempt to further develop the fundamental body of knowledge in parenting.

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