

Sumi Loundon Kim

*Mindful Parenting: Nurturing an Intentional, Compassionate Family*

Week One: Becoming a Mindful Parent

August 4, 2019



Hello, my name is Sumi Loundon Kim and I'll be leading a Tricycle dharma talk series on mindful parenting. I presently serve as the Buddhist chaplain at Yale University, but I got my start in family dharma back in 1975 when I was born into a Zen community in rural New Hampshire, where I learned firsthand what it's like to practice mindfulness as a child.

In my teens, I started doing retreats at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, and I've been practicing in the Theravada lineage ever since. I became a mother of two in my early thirties, and I was completely overwhelmed and underprepared for this new role. I soon began to think about how mindfulness and meditation could help me in this new work as a mother.

When my daughter was three, I started a group called the Buddhist Families of Durham in North Carolina, which eventually became the Mindful Families of Durham. For the next eight years, I helped dozens of families integrate mindfulness into their daily lives.

Everything that follows in this series is from my experience working with a wide range of families. When we hear the term "mindful parenting," we think about how we're going to bring mindfulness to the moments when we are interacting with our children. We hope that with mindfulness we can be more wise and calm in our responses. We hope that we'll be attuned to resolving conflict more easily. Many of us think if we have mindful parenting we'll never yell at our kids ever again.

That's the direction we're headed in, but how are we going to get there? It's not as simple as willing ourselves to be more aware on a moment-to-moment basis in our family life. The great challenge is that family life is overwhelming and fast-moving. We're often multitasking, so it's easy to forget to be mindful. It is possible to be mindful in very short spurts now and then, but for long-term results, we need another approach.

The very best way to begin mindful parenting is to have daily meditation practice of between five and 20 minutes. If you can swing five minutes, that's great. If you can do 20 minutes, that's even better. It's ideal if you can do this every day with maybe a day or two to slack off.

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Here's why this works. You often hear meditation teachers saying that mindfulness is like a muscle and the more that you exercise it the stronger it gets. Let's take this analogy and extend it out a little bit. How do we build our physical muscles? We go to a training place, set aside a specific amount of time, and we practice continuously with repetitions. The same thing is true with mindfulness practice through meditation. Meditation is like the gym where we're going to do our workout. We have a dedicated amount of time where we practice mindfulness continuously with repetitions.

We could also say that when we're building muscles in the gym we work on specific skills. We work on both large groups of muscles and subgroups of muscles. The same thing is true with mindfulness practice in meditation. When we practice for our five to 20 minutes, we are working on specific skills that will come in handy later. When we build our muscles in the gym the strength we have from that training is available to us throughout the rest of the day. If we suddenly need to lift a heavy object we have the strength to do that. Likewise, when we do meditation practice once a day, we're building our mindfulness strength. That strength is available to us at any time, including when there's a heavy moment. More than that, the meditation practice that we have each morning or each evening is a wonderful time to rest, pause, and think about our day, and to have a moment to reflect on what's happened.

Very often, things happen that we simply don't have the time or capacity to address. We might dismiss or discount it in some way. But when we sit down to meditate, what's bothering us will come up in our awareness and we'll have the opportunity to reflect. "How was that received? Do I like how that came out? Do I need to go back to that person and try to resolve things with them?" Taking a moment to be aware of what's going on in your life can provide small adjustments on a day-to-day basis. This can help the flourishing and health of the family.

The third benefit from a daily meditation practice is that when we sit quietly we allow the opportunity for insight to arise. You may have heard that some of the best composers, artists, and writers often get their creative ideas when they're in the shower or on a long walk. This is because, in these settings, attention is alert and aware but the mind is also relaxed and free-floating. Meditation practice provides this right balance between relaxed and alert. When we've attained that condition, deep and penetrating insight can arise. I would like to challenge you to try meditating for 30 days and see whether it has an impact on your family life.

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Because I was raised with meditation, when I entered adulthood I began to doubt that meditation was effective. Are all these people under some mass delusion? How could sitting there and doing nothing actually benefit my life?

In my early adulthood I decided to do an experiment. I rededicated myself to meditation practice. I only did 20 minutes, but I did it very sincerely. I did it every day for 30 days, and then I just watched. Did this help my work as a mom? Of course it did. Since I saw a positive effect from my experiment, I have been meditating fairly regularly ever since then. I think I'm a better mother as a result.

If you have children under the age of three, it's very hard to find time to sit down and meditate. I totally understand this, as I remember what it's like myself. You can try to integrate a few minutes of meditation while you are giving your baby a bottle, or nursing. Many parents practice meditation when they're putting their children to sleep. Your child may request your presence but you don't have anything to do, so you can sit and meditate while they're falling asleep.

If you have very young children, there are other moments throughout your day where you can practice a few minutes of quiet reflection. If you're new to meditation there are many excellent apps that can help you get started. Additionally, of course, the Tricycle website has many resources for getting started on a meditation practice.

However, if you don't have time to even find an app, please know that meditation can be kept very simple. You can start by following your in-breath and out-breath, and also become aware of sounds in the environment. Notice how your body is feeling. Watch your thoughts arising and passing away. Take note of the emotions that come to be and dissipate. Always come back to the breath as a starting point. It can really be as simple as that.

If you're not convinced that a daily personal meditation practice is a good way to start on the path of mindful parenting, then I'd like to make a second argument. As you yourself may know, you have become like your parents, whether you wanted that or not. You may hear yourself saying something or behaving a certain way and think, "Oh that's just like my mom." We will also see it in our children. There will be a moment where they say something or do something and we see ourselves reflected in them. Our children absorb a tremendous amount from us

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nonverbally. They will carry forward our speech patterns, our relationship habits, and our ways of thinking about the world. (I often find it funny to hear children talk about current politics because I know it's 100 percent whatever their parents have said at the dinner table!) We can think about how much of us is imprinted on our children. If we want our children to carry forward their lives in a mindful way, that begins with us. As parents, we need to embody, and act, with mindfulness. How do we learn to embody that? We practice meditation for ourselves. Gradually, we become more mindful. We slow down and pay attention.

In that regard, I like to think we're getting a two-for-one deal when we do personal practice. We benefit not only ourselves, but without any effort, we also benefit our children. This benefit may last for generations—we could be benefiting our grandchildren.

Today we've learned that an enduring mindful parenting practice begins with a daily meditation practice. We also learned that meditation practice is where we strengthen our mindfulness muscles, and that mindfulness capacity is available for us throughout the rest of the day. We also learned that 'we must embody the mindfulness that we wish to see in our children,' as a small riff on Gandhi.

I hope you're excited about starting a daily meditation practice, or rededicating yourself if you have one already. Please join me next week to learn simple, easy ways of teaching our children mindfulness so that we can benefit their personal, emotional, psychological, personal, and spiritual development. Thank you.