

Sumi Loundon Kim

*Mindful Parenting: Nurturing an Intentional, Compassionate Family*

Week Three: Mindful Parenting On the Spot

August 18, 2019



Welcome back to our third week on mindful parenting. My name is Sumi Loundon Kim, and this week we'll be learning about several mindfulness practices that you can apply to parenting on the spot.

Let's start with one thing that you can do to increase your mindfulness substantially: putting away your devices and any screen that has an internet connection.

It's true that in the past parents had the distraction of radios, TVs, telephones, and even trashy romance novels. But there's something about the devices that we use today that pull our attention away more than any other form of entertainment or technology. We can see it in our own children. When they're on a device they are completely cut off from the world around them, and that's no different for parents. When we're on our devices, we're disconnected from everything around us in a unique way.

In order to bring our mindfulness back into the room, we need to put our devices away. These days, much of our lives are organized around having smartphones, in particular, so we may need to think about a few work-arounds. For example, if we use our phone to keep track of time, we might need to buy a watch. If we've been using our phone as a camera, we might need to use a decommissioned phone as a camera instead. I know one father who puts his phone on a high shelf in a kitchen closet and has a subscription to the print version of the newspaper, so he can keep up with the news without getting sucked into his phone.

It could be that our devices work to counteract mindfulness. Perhaps if we didn't have devices at all we would have a baseline level of awareness as parents. It's having devices around that undermines the natural mindfulness that we should have. If you're trying to develop yourself as a mindful parent, consider how the presence of a device undermines your capacity to be mindful.

Gil Fronsdal, a teacher at the Insight Meditation Center in Redwood City, California, once mentioned in a dharma talk that when he interviews and counsels adults around their childhood traumas and difficulties, he's observed that the one wound that is most difficult for them to recover from is when their parents didn't see them as children. Their parents were unable to recognize them, be present with them, and see who they are. This indicates that if we're not providing our presence and our awareness to our children, this can have a damaging impact. On

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the other hand, when we bring our full presence and wholeheartedness to our children, we are giving them a beautiful gift.

Another way that we can bring mindfulness into parenting on the spot is to use a full-belly breath. We already know the power of a deep breath in helping us calm down and regulate what's going on. For example, when a child approaches us very upset and they can't get their words out, we intuitively say to them, "Slow down. Take a deep breath." We let them take that breath, and then they can tell us what's bothering them. We're able to see how that deep breath helped the child to find calm and clarity so that they could proceed.

That doesn't stop with childhood—deep breathing can be useful for us as well. When we have a moment of overwhelm, or we feel swept away or disoriented, we can remember to come back and intentionally take a nice, deep breath. It's important to take that breath down in the belly because it's in our belly where we have the “rest-and-digest” part of the nervous system.

When we breathe in the belly, we touch into the nerves of the parasympathetic nervous system which helps to reset things so that we can think more clearly about what's going on. Although I wouldn't wish this on you, I hope that if you do experience a moment of intensity sometime this week, you can bring to bear this practice of a deep breath, or perhaps three deep breaths.

A third practice that draws nicely on this breathing practice is called STOP. In this acronym *S* stands for stop, *T* stands for take a breath, *O* is for observe, and *P* is for proceed. When there's a fraught moment, if we have the presence of mind we want to STOP. We should realize that this is a moment that requires us to say, “Hold up. Wait a second. I need to stop.” Then we're going to take a nice deep breath, particularly down in the belly. Then we want to observe. We want to take note of what we're feeling, what we're thinking, what kind of narrative is running through our head, and what sort of assumptions we have around the situation at hand. We might also want to observe what's going on for the other person or what's happening in the situation around us. After taking some time to observe, we can then form an idea of how we want to proceed, particularly in a way that's aligned with our highest values and priorities. Perhaps you can use this technique—stop, take a breath, observe, and proceed—in a moment in the week to come.

A fourth practice that we can draw upon is mindful listening and attunement. There are different levels of listening. In family life, we are mostly doing partial listening. This is characterized by

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simple, wordless responses in conversation, such as "Mm-hmm. Ah. Oh." You know you are not really listening when those things are coming out of your mouth.

A different way of listening is to really drop whatever it is you're doing and turn your attention fully to receive whatever is trying to be communicated to you. I like to practice this when my children are telling me dream sequences, which I normally find terribly boring and don't want to listen to. But I remind myself of what's important in the moment and drop what I'm doing so I can turn my attention toward them and listen mindfully.

Another aspect of mindful listening is a wholeheartedness, which is a presence that we bring to receiving other people's words. As we're listening, we can tune into what we're feeling and the kinds of reactions we're having internally. We can also become attuned to what the other person is saying. What sort of emotional valences are coming with what our child is saying? What's their body posture? What is their facial expression? What are they not saying? With this attunement we might find that we can better understand what is going on for our child, and we can make much more informed, wiser decisions about how to proceed.

Many children's problems can be solved if we simply pay attention to whether they are hungry, sleepy, understimulated, or overstimulated. This really isn't mindful parenting, but if we pay attention to these four things many problems are resolved. Then we can bring mindful parenting to bear on some of the more challenging, less obvious situations that arise.

Mindful listening, taking a breath, and putting away your device will all come naturally to you if you have a daily personal meditation practice. For example, if you're meditating every day, you establish a home with your breath. If something difficult comes up later in the day, you will very naturally find your way back to your breath as a way of grounding yourself.

Likewise, in meditation we're already practicing listening to sounds in the environment, and to what's going on inside of us. Again, that capacity will naturally come out later in the day when needed. With daily meditation practice, you'll want to listen more carefully and with greater awareness, and even the desire to have your device will be diminished. As we learn to enjoy the simple things in life—enjoying the simple moment of resting and being—we will tend to reach less for the low-calorie, cotton-candy, empty entertainment of our cellphone. Instead we will

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reach for higher-calorie, more nutritious interactions that we might have with our loved ones and our children.

You can apply these practices to parenting intentionally and conscientiously on the spot while also trusting that your daily practice is going to help these grow and become a part of your life over time. There's a wonderful scene in *The Karate Kid* in which Daniel comes to Mr. Miyagi and says, "I don't understand the point of all these errands and chores you're having me do. Wax on, wax off? How is this related to karate?" Mr. Miyagi pauses, nods thoughtfully, and then very suddenly throws a punch. Daniel-san automatically waxes off and blocks the punch. Likewise, when we're doing meditation practice, we're training ourselves. When life throws us a punch, we will automatically respond in a way that both protects us, and is most appropriate to the situation.

Today we learned how our devices could potentially undermine the mindfulness that we are seeking to develop in this practice, and how putting away our devices restores our attention. We also learned how to take a deep breath and how we can integrate a deep breath into the STOP practice, which is to stop, take a breath, observe, and proceed. We also learned about mindful listening and attunement, and we ended with a note about how meditation practice will naturally support all of these mindful parenting practices.

I imagine there'll be a moment in which you can apply some of these techniques in the next week. Please join me next week for our fourth and final talk in which we'll learn about how to take mindful parenting deeper. We'll learn particularly about how meditation, mindfulness, and self-compassion can assist us in the process of healing from our own childhood, and provide us with liberating insights. Please join me. Thank you.