

Can Living in the Moment Make You a Better Parent?

[Sarah Wheeler](#) | April 11, 2016



dmitrimaruta/Dollar Photo Club

In the information age, parents are bombarded with tips for how to improve our child-rearing: *8 Ways to Be a Better Parent! Are You a Spoiler?* Even if it is well-meaning, all of this advice can be overwhelming—especially for those of us with young children.

It can be hard to find the time to commit to changes we think are important, like making our own baby food or doing some sort of daily exercise. So the average parent simply does not have the hours, or the psychological bandwidth, to make self-improvement a part-time job. Still, there must be

some practical value to gain from such an inexhaustible knowledge base. Is it possible to be inspired by all the “better parenting” literature, rather than simply discouraged by its demands?

A new [study](#) from the Catholic University of Chile suggests that parents may be able to breathe a sigh of relief. Why? As it turns out, the key to better parenting *and* better mental health may be as simple as letting go of worry and releasing ourselves from judgment. In other words, mindfulness.

The researchers asked 62 mothers of preschool-aged children about their mindfulness and mindful parenting. Mindfulness can be defined as an in-the-moment awareness and acceptance of our thoughts and feelings. When applied to parenting, it includes the ability to ignore critical thoughts about our parenting choices so we can focus on being present with our child. Rather than asking, “Is he going to cry all night?” or thinking, “It’s probably because I didn’t give him enough dinner,” the mindful parent accepts the crying and deals with it moment-to-moment.

Just to clarify, mindfulness doesn’t dictate that you *like* the crying, just that you shift your awareness to the present situation and show compassion toward yourself and your child. Similarly, the parent of a toddler refusing to put on his shoes doesn’t have to rejoice in their child’s stubbornness (although the tenacity of a two-year-old is really quite admirable). But they *can* attend to their child’s current emotional state and accept the tantrum, rather than launching automatically into anger or self-doubt. The researchers believe that this could have positive effects beyond simply decreasing parenting stress, such as providing good modeling for children and even enhancing child brain development.

In addition to reporting on their mindfulness, mothers in the current study answered survey questions about their depression, anxiety, general stress, and parent-related stress. As hypothesized, mindfulness was strongly related to a mother’s mental health: The mothers who were more mindful were less stressed, anxious, and depressed.

Parents who can name their present challenge and not blame themselves or others are more likely to have a healthier mindset and a smoother parent-child relationship.

When the researchers dug even deeper, they found that a mother's ability to describe and label her experiences in a non-judgmental way ("I'm yearning for a few hours alone, and that's okay") actually predicted her levels of depression, stress, parenting stress, and mindful parenting. In other words, parents who can name their present challenge and not blame themselves or others are more likely to have a healthier mindset and a smoother parent-child relationship.

Fortunately for the harried parents of the world, the mothers surveyed in this study did not participate in any formal mindfulness exercises or regular meditation. It seems that, even in the absence of a daily podcast or weekly class, we can make both parenting and life easier by just staying in the present. Here are a few tips for mindful parenting:

- **Recognize that things are temporary.** Children are constantly changing, often shedding habits and behaviors with each passing week. In fact, some of the best parenting advice ever given to me was to add "...for now" to the end of my observations about my child. "He's not sleeping through the night...for now" or "She refuses to wear anything but her Superman costume...for now."
- **Accept your child as flawed.** When we spend time with our children day in and day out, it's easy for us to hyper-focus on a problem behavior or compare them to other children ("His brother eats his vegetables.") Most well-adjusted adults had several difficult traits as children (I, for one, was a major tantrum-thrower), and it all turned out fine. Children are inherently chaotic and unpredictable.
- **Accept yourself and your parenting as flawed.** Your job is to provide unconditional love and safety for your child, not to anticipate her every whim or keep him from having negative experiences. If you

find yourself constantly striving toward some unrealistic ideal or scrutinizing your every move, it may be time to throw away the parenting books (or unfollow the parenting blog) and focus on listening to your own instincts.

Hopefully further research will continue to encourage parents not to dwell on past mistakes—or worry about future ones. For now, staying in the present may be the path to taking better care of ourselves and our children.

This article originally appeared on [Greater Good](#), the online magazine of UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center, one of Mindful's partners. [View the original article](#).

Subscribe to [support Mindful](#).



Sign up for Mindful Newsletters

As a gift, we'll send you a guide for getting started with mindfulness.