

# Mindful Parenting



A Bringing  
Up Great Kids  
Resource



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Australian Childhood Foundation



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## About the Australian Childhood Foundation

The Australian Childhood Foundation is a national not for profit organisation that provides therapeutic services, educational programs and creative resources aimed at ensuring that all children are raised in relationships that are safe, caring and respectful.



Australian Childhood Foundation

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# Parenting is an adventure!



On a Saturday morning in a house near you.....

It is 9am. Helen, Chris and their 3 children are getting ready for the day. They must take their dog, Sandy, for a walk, do some shopping and later in the day attend a 40th birthday party for Helen's brother.

Susie (5 years old) has finished her breakfast, dressed herself and is now waiting impatiently with the dog for the rest of the family to get ready.

Charlie (3 years old) is lying under the kitchen table screaming because the only thing he wants for breakfast this morning is ice-cream. Helen tries to make some alternative breakfast suggestions but having no luck gives up and walks away.

Baby Chloe (14 months) is teething and has had a very unsettled, grizzly night (as have her parents!) She is standing up, holding onto the coffee table and turns to look at her parents, smiles, and very tentatively takes her first two steps.

Chris and Helen look at each other and laugh. "No one told us that family life would be this crazy!" says Chris. "I remember saying before we had Susie that having children will not change our lives at all!"

Susie calls out impatiently. The dog barks. Still screaming, Charlie makes his way out from under the table, and the baby smiles.....

Parenting can be one of the most exhausting, challenging, and frustrating tasks that we will ever undertake. Yet it can also be the most rewarding, exhilarating, exciting and satisfying challenge we ever take on. It is also the one we for which we can feel least prepared.

As a parent, you can feel pushed and pulled in many directions. Life is on overload. So it can be complicated trying to find the space to think, to be calm...just the time for some quiet.

Do you sometimes find it hard to stay calm?

In the race to get everything done, have you ever found it difficult to be with your child without thinking about the next thing you have to do?

Have you ever found your own feelings getting in the way of how you are responding to your child?

This booklet is filled with ideas and strategies to support you to be mindful and reflective in your parenting.

Hopefully, it offers you some ways to understand how you are parenting in the middle of all these demands.

# How can you be a mindful parent?



Mindful parenting is the chance for you to do things with your child without having your attention drawn away from what is happening between the two of you right then and there. Mindful parenting is like a pause to take a small breath. It is a pause that allows you to know what you are feeling. And it lets you recognise how your children are feeling and what they might need from you then and there.

Mindful parenting is you in a place and time that connects you to your children in small and powerful ways.

## Being mindful in your parenting:

- helps you be more aware of you own feelings, thoughts and bodily sensations;
- helps you become more aware of your child's thoughts, feelings and needs;
- assists you to be more self-aware and improve your capacity for emotional self-regulation in your parenting;
- helps you to be less critical or judgemental of yourself and your child;
- increases your ability to stand back from situations without responding immediately or inappropriately;
- gives you more choices in how you respond to your child; and,
- strengthens the relationship between yourself and your child.

Being a mindful parent can take practice but it is worth it in the end. Mindful parenting is about taking the time to pause, clear your mind of all thoughts and ask yourself these questions:

What is happening with my child in this moment?

What does my child feel?

What does my child need?

What am I feeling?

What do I need?

Pausing in moments with your child to think about these questions will make a difference for you and your child.



# Being mindful helps you stay calm



In a calm state, you are more able to respond to your children rather than react to their behaviour. When you pause and become mindful, you are more likely to respond to your children with the logical, rational part of your brain rather than reacting out of frustration, stress, or anger. In a calm state, you are more able to see the reasons behind your child's behaviour. You are able to respond not just to the behaviour, but to the needs and feelings that sit behind the behaviour.

Parents who practise being mindful say it increases their satisfaction in being a parent, lowers their stress levels and encourages more fun and positive experiences with their children.

## There are many ways you can practise mindfulness

One of the most useful and common ways to practice mindfulness is being more aware of your breathing. Throughout this booklet, you will learn a range of mindfulness strategies to practice in every day life.



# Stop, Pause, Play

'Stop, Pause, Play' is a mindful exercise using breathing that helps parents to be in the present moment with their children.

Using 'Stop, Pause, Play' is a stepping stone to mindful parenting.

This three minute exercise is designed to help you to calm down and enable you to think and act more clearly.

When you are calm, you are more able to reflect on what is going on for your child and how best to respond.

The exercise has three parts:

## 1. STOP: what you are doing

If possible make sure your feet are firmly on the ground.

## 2. PAUSE: focus on your breath

Breathe in slowly, right down into your belly, then exhale completely.

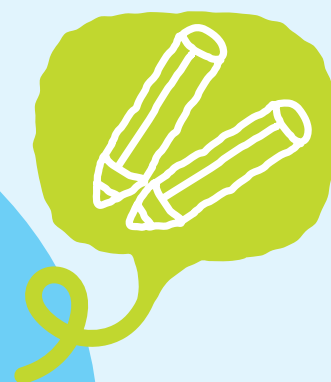
Take 5 more slow breaths, being aware of each breath in and each breath out.

After several such breaths, you will find that your heart rate has slowed down, your breathing is deeper and you will feel calmer. It is the out breath that relaxes your body and allows you to feel calmer and think clearly.

## 3. PLAY: Respond to your child the way you want to

When you are in this calm state, you will probably be better able to respond in a thoughtful or considered way to your child.

You will also be more likely to stay connected to what is going on for your children. You will be more aware of their experience of the situation and how they might be feeling.





# Being mindful takes practice

Many things can get in the way of parents being mindful.

Time pressures, work, and busy life styles are all obstacles to mindful parenting. Sometimes, the impact of messages from our own past make it difficult. Having unrealistic expectations of ourselves, as parents, can result in us feeling stressed, frustrated and angry. Our own emotions can also get in the way of us responding in a way that is most helpful to ourselves and our children.

It is important to know what can interrupt the experience of mindfulness for parents. Some of the examples are explored in this section.

## Messages From our past

Have you ever found yourself doing or saying something to your child that was said or done to you as a child....

.....even when you promised yourself you would never do that.....?

We all bring messages from our past. These messages shape our values and beliefs, how we think and what we do.

What powerful messages from your past influence your parenting?

How we were parented has a powerful influence on the way we parent our own children. Some parenting beliefs get passed down from one generation to the next without us considering whether they actually meet our current needs or the needs of our children. We just do things because that is the way it has always been done.

What messages about parenting and children did your parents pass onto you? What values, attitudes and beliefs are important to you? Where did they come from? Which of these would you like to pass on to your children?

Which ones do you not want to use in your own parenting?

Being a mindful parent will help you become more aware of the impact of messages from your past. It will enable you to actively decide which ones work for you and which ones you want to leave behind.







## A dad tells the following story:

"I realized that I always yell at my son when he is going to bed – I get angry when he doesn't get ready for bed fast enough.

When I took time to reflect on it, I realized that this was the way my father used to put me to bed – always yelling. I remember I always seemed to go to bed crying. But now I realize that I don't have to do it his way anymore. I can change the way I put my son to bed. By being calm and thinking about what my child needs I have made changes to bed time. When I am calmer, my child is calmer.

I have started reading stories at bedtime and I give him a little longer to get ready because he likes to do things slowly and orderly. Most nights now he goes to sleep quickly with no tears and I am happier too. It feels so good to know that I can change some of those habits I brought with me from my childhood and make new decisions to parent my way."



"There are some experiences from my childhood that I want my child to have too, and others that I want to change. My Dad didn't spend much time with us as kids and I never felt very close to him. I want to be more involved with my children."

## Mindful reflection

This dad has recognised that he was passing on the way his father had managed bed time to his own child even though he had not liked the yelling when he was young.

By staying calm and reflecting on what was going on every night, he was able to recognise what his child needed from him at bed time. He was able to see that his son needed to do things slowly and orderly.

By responding to his child in a more mindful way, the dad is acknowledging the needs and feelings of his child. In turn, he is feeling himself be more like the dad he wants to be. The result is a calmer and more nurturing experience for both of them.

# Understanding how children develop

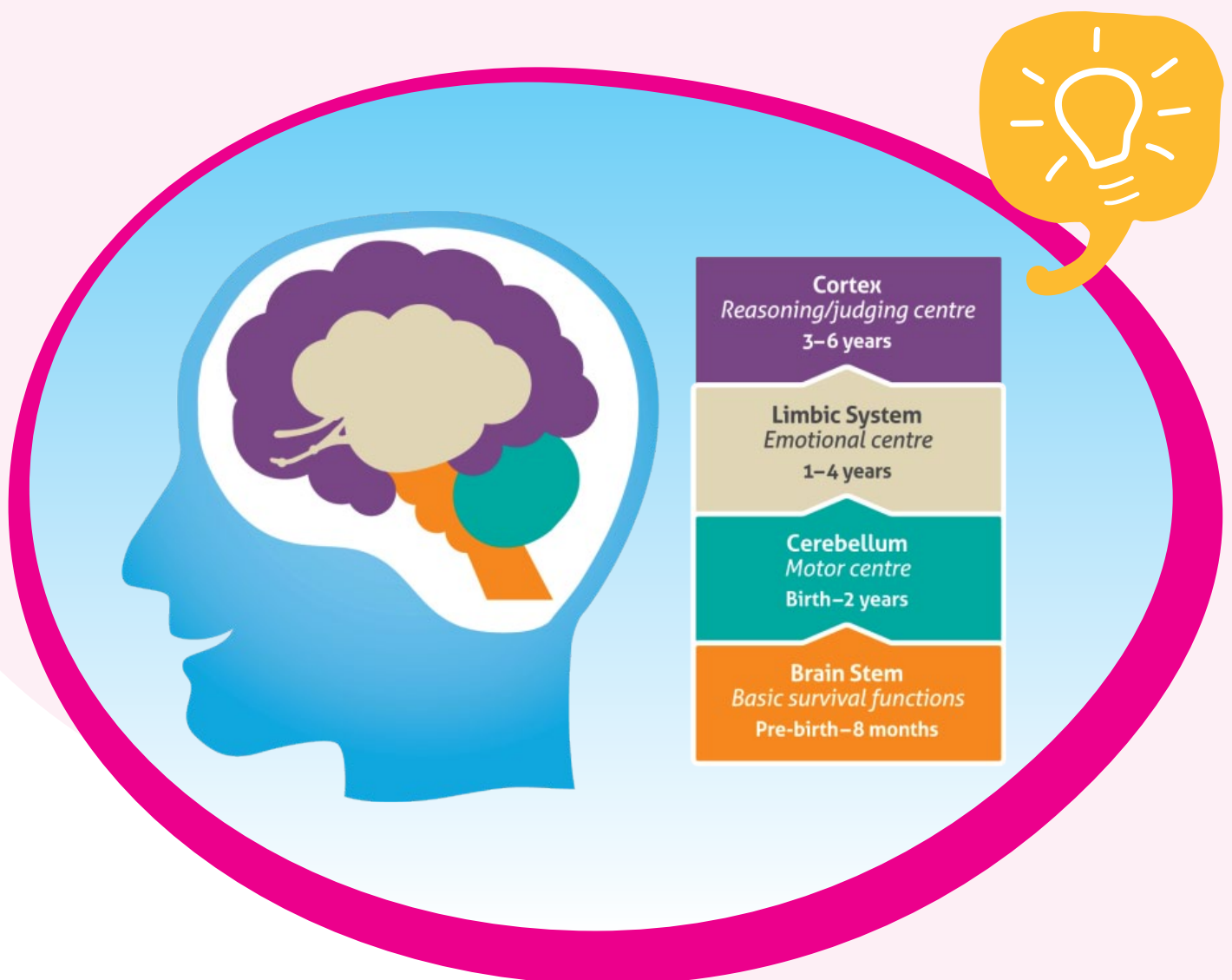
It is hard to be mindful and calm if we expect more of our children than they are capable of. It can feel like they are letting us down. Because they are little, children do not keep up with adults. Sometimes we want them to do things on their own because we have so much to do. In the middle of busy life, it is easy to have unrealistic expectations of our children.

Knowing a little more about how children's brains develop and grow can support you to be more mindful. It can give you a map to understand what makes your child tick from the inside.

## How do children's brains develop?

Children's brains are amazing things. They are growing and changing constantly.

Understanding more about the way children's brains develop helps us to understand why children feel, act and think in certain ways at different stages of their lives.





Understanding children's brain development helps us to have more realistic expectations of them.

## There are four major brain centres.

**The Brain Stem:** is the first to develop and is responsible for the basic functions which keep us alive such as our hearts beating and breathing. The Brain Stem is fully developed by birth.

**The Motor Centre:** is responsible for movement and develops over the first few years of life. It starts when babies gain head control and continues to mature as they sit, crawl and walk. Over the next few years they learn to skip, kick a ball, ride bikes, drawing, and even eating with cutlery.

**The Limbic System:** is the emotional centre of the brain and rules the lives of children up to four years of age. During the Toddler years, the Limbic System goes through a period of rapid development. This explains bursts of emotional behaviour and tantrums. Toddlers need our help to support and manage their feelings. Young children feel and act at the same time. They have limited ability to think and be reasoned with – they can't link their feelings, thoughts and behaviour together. Thinking and being able to know what to do when develops later when their cortex matures.

**The Cortex:** or thinking part of the brain is the last part to develop. This is the part responsible for reasoning and planning. It is only when it has come online that children learn to think before they act. In order for the thinking part of the brain to grow and mature, children need everything to be repeated before they can remember it and use it later.

How children's brains develop is very dependent on the strength and quality of the relationships around them. As such, parents are important sculptors of children's brains. Children are best supported when parents' expectations of their children match their children's developmental capacity.





# How emotions rule behaviour

Regardless of our age, our emotions can rule our behaviour. It is different for children and parents.

## For children

In a highly emotional state, children hear very little of what is said to them. The thinking part of their brain is switched off. The emotional part of their brain is in control. They are reacting to how they feel. They are not able to be reasoned with, follow instructions or easily do anything their parents are asking them to do!

## For parents

Just like our children, when we become highly stressed, tired, angry or anxious, these feelings overwhelm the brains of parents and cause "a fog" over the logical rational (thinking) parts. At these times the thinking part of our brain is switched off too and the emotional part of our brain takes control.

Sometimes it is hard to stay calm when we are struggling with our children's behaviour.

If we can be mindful, and stay calm, we can support children to keep the thinking part of their brain switched on. When parents are mindful, we are able to remain connected to what our children's needs and are more able to respond to them.

# Becoming mindful - Breathing Exercises

Here are a few mindful breathing exercises for you to try.



## Snake breathing

Breathe in normally. Then with a long breath out, make a SSSSSSSSS sound like a snake.

## Abdominal breathing

Place one hand over your heart and the other over your abdomen. Breathe normally, noticing the rise and fall of your chest and abdomen. Continue this practice for about 10 breaths.

Remember, when we regularly practice mindfulness we are better able to be attuned to our children's needs and stay connected to them.

## Bee breathing

Breathe in normally. Then make a humming or buzzing sound like a bee as you exhale an extended breath out.

## Feather breathing

Hold a soft feather in one hand and raise that hand as you breathe in. Let go of the feather and breathe out slowly as you watch the feather float to the ground. Try to make your breath out last until the feather reaches the ground.

## 1,2,3.....Sigh!

Count slowly 1..2..3 (either aloud or silently) as you breathe in. Then give a long sigh as you breathe out. Repeat this several times until you feel yourself calming down.



# Mindfulness in a sticky situation

Read through the scenario below. Try and see the situation from Sophie's perspective.



Sophie (2 years) and her dad, Rick, have just returned home from grocery shopping. While Rick is unpacking the shopping Sophie decides continue to build the house out of Duplo that she and her dad were building before they went out. It is a bit tricky for her little fingers to connect the blocks but she tries a few times, calling out to her dad to help her. He is still busy unpacking the shopping and has just received an important call on his mobile phone.

Sophie is getting more and more frustrated with her construction. She knocks the blocks over in frustration and goes into to the kitchen to look for her dad. Distracted by a large container of yoghurt on the kitchen bench, Sophie reaches out for it knocking the container to the floor, spilling the yoghurt. Sophie bends down to feel the yoghurt – it feel so cool and yummy – she runs her hands through the yoghurt and starts to feed herself. The family's dog joins her, lapping at the strawberry puddle on the floor.

Just then Rick walks back into the room, tripping over a piece of Duplo, as he gazes at the scene in the kitchen – Sophie covered in yoghurt and a sticky mess all over the floor. Rick shouts loudly at Sophie causing the dog to run off with his tail between his legs, leaving a trail of yoghurt footprints behind him.

"Sophie! Look what you have done! You're a bad girl. You need to go to your room and think about what you have done wrong." He picks up Sophie, being careful not to get yoghurt on himself, and puts her in her room telling her he will come back in 5 minutes. Sophie starts to cry. She cries even louder as he leaves the room, making Rick feel even more frustrated.



## Mindful reflection

What was going on for Sophie? What did she need from her dad in that moment?

What stopped Rick responding to Sophie in a more mindful way?

Rick was busy - preoccupied with a phone call and unpacking the shopping - and then he sees the mess. His emotional state created the "fog" that stopped him from responding mindfully.

His frustration and anger caused him to react to Sophie.

It may have been more helpful for both Rick and Sophie if Rick had paused to calm down before he responded. In a calmer state, the thinking part of his brain would have enabled him to reflect on what was happening and how best to respond.

Sophie is 2 years old so we know that her thinking part of the brain has not developed. Thus she is not capable of "bad behaviour". Developmentally, she is curious and driven to explore. She needed adult assistance and support when it was not there. Sophie does not understand why Rick is screaming at her and is scared when left alone.

A more mindful Rick can still be annoyed by the mess he sees but does not take it out on Sophie. A more mindful Rick understands that the situation has been caused by Sophie's still developing motor skills - a time of clumsiness and poor coordination. He would have been more able to recognise that he was distracted and not there to support Sophie when she needed him.



# Mindful Walking

Mindful walking is another brief mindful awareness exercise that, like the 'Stop, Pause, Play' exercise, can be used anytime you feel like you need to anchor yourself in the present in order to respond in a calm and appropriate way with your children. This is a practice that can be incorporated into your morning (eg before your shower, to start the day in a mindful way), or anytime of the day when you need to create peace in yourself.

Paying attention as you walk will help you to connect with the present mindfully - paying attention with flexibility, openness and curiosity.

A simple mindful walking practice is just to breathe in while taking a step with the left foot and breathe out when taking a step with the right foot.

Mindful Walking can be done very slowly or at a normal walking pace. It's simply a matter of synchronising breath and footstep.

Before you start walking it is a good idea to stand quietly and focus on your breathing for 3 breaths and then commence your mindful walking practice.

Walk for 3-5 minutes if time allows. If you are busy, walk for as long as time permits. Even one minute of mindful walking will help bring you back into the present moment.



# Mindfulness under pressure

Nathan (4years old) is engrossed in his play with his friend in the sandpit. His mother, Mandy, has just realised the time and she is now running late. Looking hurried and stressed, Mandy rushes up to the sandpit holding Nathan's shoes and yelling, "Put your shoes on Nathan! It's time to go! Hurry up!"

Nathan looks up but keeps on playing with the toys in the sandpit. Angrily, Mandy shouts "Come on Nathan. Right now!" Nathan shouts "No!" and throws sand at his mother.

Mandy turns to her friend, Kate, saying crossly "Sometimes I could just throttle him!" With Mandy looking frustrated and upset Kate puts her arm around her. In response Mandy commented "I feel like such a bad parent!"



## Mindful reflection

What was going on for Nathan? What did he need from his Mum in that moment?

What stopped Mandy from responding to Nathan in a more mindful way?

Mandy was highly stressed and upset that time had gotten away from her causing her to be late. Her stress caused her react hastily, making very quick demands on Nathan. Her anger and frustration builds with Nathan's non-compliance with her expectations. The whole exchange left her feeling negative about herself and her parenting.

From Nathan's perspective his mother's behaviour is confusing, unexpected and possibly frightening. Children pick up on the feelings of others and can react to anger and stress in their parents. How children respond will be determined by their temperament, age and stage of development. Nathan's reaction to his mother was to reflect back to her how she was treating him – to get angry and throw sand.

Young children focus only on what they are doing and have no concept of what is going on around them. Nathan is too young to appreciate that his mother is running late and they must rush away from the sand pit. Young children don't see the world in the same way that adults do. He doesn't understand his mother's alarm about being late.

A more mindful approach from Mandy would have been to STOP, PAUSE, take a breath and reflect for a moment how she was feeling about running late and think about how best to assist Nathan to finish playing so that they could leave the park and respond (PLAY) by calmly engage Nathan, explaining that it was time to leave and let him know what was about to happen next. When young children are having fun, they often need our help to end the play in a timely way. Mandy could have sat with Nathan at the edge of the sandpit, helped him to finish his play and put his shoes on. The few minutes that this may have taken would have resulted in a better outcome for both Nathan and Mandy.





# The parenting journey ...

To be the parent you want to be for your children takes courage, persistence and a willingness to be reflective about yourself and your children.

Mindful approaches to parenting assist us to be more self-aware and attuned to the needs of our children, allow us to take a step back and consider what is going on for ourselves and our child and enable us to respond rather than react to our children.

Using mindful approaches in your parenting takes practice. Allow yourself and your child to make mistakes. You are both doing the best you can do. Remember that changing behaviours, habits and ways of thinking takes time and repetition.

A closer connection between you and your child and a calmer, more peaceful family life will be the reward.







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