



Center for Mindful Development, PLLC

Psychological Services and Mindfulness Education

Fostering a Mindful Relationship with Young Children

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Being present with infants, toddlers and preschoolers is one of the best ways to foster mindfulness as a parent. But what does “being present,” mean exactly? Often as adults in the role of parents, we are caught in rainstorm of grocery lists, appointments to remember, and expectations from near and far. Feeling flooded takes us away from really paying attention to the quality of our children’s voices, delicate hand movements or the way their eyes shine in the sun. When we are aware and fully attentive to these and other unique qualities of our children, we are present. Presence nudges us to say an immediate “yes” when our children utter the words, “Will you play with me?” Being present compels us to forget about how ridiculous we may look with a princess hat, Batman cape and oversized glasses on and just play with our child. Presence allows us to relax enough so that when the barrage of thoughts of how many emails we still need to return disrupts us while rocking our baby to sleep, to say to ourselves, “yep, those emails need to be returned and now I am amazed at these eyelashes and feel that you are heavier than you were yesterday.” Presence is not magic. It is deeply paying attention to who or what we are with as well as ourselves in the present moment.



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Once present, the fun begins. Young children explore their worlds through every sense. Experience their worlds with them, noticing and describing what they are touching, tasting and holding. Mirroring an infant's experience as she investigates her world (e.g., "You see your bear! Let's give bear a big hug. I love watching you hug your bear!" and "You are hungry and now you're tasting peas. I think you like peas!") is presence, encouragement of language development and love all wrapped into one. Because young children especially are reliant on sensory input to foster their learning, any time adults can become more sensory-based through play, the better. (In fact, humans of all ages benefit from sensory input when learning but it is especially critical in the early years). Start with observing what you see, hear, smell and taste. Once you observe something of interest, share it with your child.

Being more present with young children

- Become aware of what distracts you when you want to be present with your children. Is it notifications on your phone? Is it another child? Food preparation? Take stock of what it is that pulls you away *most* of the time as well as what doesn't seem to pull you away.
- Recognize that this distraction is just that – a distraction. A few distractions are indeed urgent and need to be taken care of right away. *Most of the time*, however, the distractions are minor. Sometimes saying "hello" to the distraction or labeling it can help make it less sticky and alluring.
- Ground yourself back in the moment doing something physical. This could be closing your eyes, taking a deep breath, feeling your feet on the floor or rubbing your hands together until they are warm and then placing them on your face. Borrowing from Amy Cuddy's research on presence, it may also help to put yourself in a physical position of being present. This does not necessarily mean a power pose but it may mean physically moving yourself in order to make comfortable eye contact with your child, placing a hand on your child's back and even following their movements as they crawl, climb and collapse.
- Get messy and be disorganized. Finger paint, make mud cakes, blow bubbles, run through a sprinkler, have "no manners" dinners, build cardboard cities and observe what it feels like to truly play.
- Go on a "Yes Walk." Being in nature is a beautiful way to experience presence. On a "Yes Walk," the adult makes a commitment to oneself that "no" will only be uttered if the child is in serious danger. It may go something like this: "Yes, let's walk down to the creek! Yes, run! Yes, you fell and yes you got up again. Yes, touch this tree, feel the roughness of the bark. No, stop there, the water is too deep. Yes let's touch the water. You heard a bird! Yes, that is a cardinal." Yes? Yes.