

Practicing mindfulness benefits parents and children, study says

September 26 2018, by Kim Eckart



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Parents, picture the situation: Your child is misbehaving. You've had a

hard day, and one more outburst sends you over the edge.

You threaten. You yell. Maybe you announce a punishment so over the top you know you won't, and shouldn't, follow through.

"That's reacting based on emotions," explains University of Washington psychology professor Liliana Lengua. "Not in the way you know you'll be effective."

What is effective, Lengua and her team report in a new research study, is practicing mindfulness: staying calm, seeing a situation from other perspectives and responding in an intentional way. Through a [parenting program](#) that UW researchers created and offered at two early childhood centers, participants learned strategies and techniques that helped them manage their own emotions and behaviors while supporting their child's development.

"Our goal was to support parents engaging in practices that we know build up their children's social and emotional well-being, and in a pretty brief program, parents showed improvement in their own feelings of emotional control, and demonstrated more of those parenting behaviors that support children," said Lengua, who directs the Center for Child and Family Well-Being at the UW. "Our data show that when parents improve, kids improve."

For this study, published in the journal *Mindfulness*, 50 parents of preschoolers participated in programs at two sites—one a kindergarten socialization class at a suburban elementary school with a high population of children receiving free or reduced-price lunch, the other a Head Start program at a community college. Over six weeks, researchers guided parents through a series of lessons on mindfulness and parenting strategies:

- Being present: noticing, listening and engaging with what's happening right now
- Being warm: paying attention to the child's emotions and giving the child opportunities to initiate interactions
- Being consistent: setting limits and developmentally appropriate expectations, praising the good things they do
- Guiding without directing (otherwise known as "scaffolding"): offering help when needed but encouraging independence and commenting on child's accomplishments

In addition to lessons geared toward parents as a group, researchers observed parents interacting with their children and surveyed the parents—before the program started, at its end, and three months afterward—about both their own behavior and their child's. One of the biggest improvements, Lengua said, was in the [parents'](#) ability to manage their emotions, which helped them apply consistency, guide and encourage more often and reduce negativity.

Children, meanwhile, showed improvements in their social skills, and also displayed fewer negative behaviors when they were observed interacting with each other.

While the study was relatively small, Lengua said, the results are promising, not only because of the reported and demonstrated behavior changes among adults and children, but also due to the ability to provide such lessons in existing early learning settings. In other words, there is potential to reach people of a variety of backgrounds—not just those participants who might be familiar with [mindfulness](#) concepts—and arm them with positive parenting tools.

"Mindful parenting" has become something of a buzzword, Lengua added.

"People talk about 'mindful parenting' as a thing. It's really just recognizing your child, in that moment, as having their own experience, and being attentive and intentional in that moment," she said. "We view these strategies as skills that we can teach discreetly, and they provide regulation practices that we can use for any purpose."

Researchers now are implementing the program at additional sites, largely via community organizations that serve a diverse range of families, to see if the results will be replicated, Lengua said.

More information: Liliana J. Lengua et al. Preliminary Evaluation of an Innovative, Brief Parenting Program Designed to Promote Self-Regulation in Parents and Children, *Mindfulness* (2018). [DOI: 10.1007/s12671-018-1016-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-018-1016-y)

Provided by University of Washington

Citation: Practicing mindfulness benefits parents and children, study says (2018, September 26) retrieved 9 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-09-mindfulness-benefits-parents-children.html>

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