



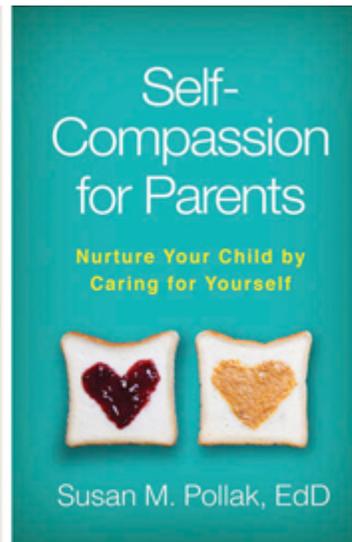
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## Mindfulness for Parents and Children: New Parenting Books 2019

The answer to today's parenting challenges, new books suggest, might be as simple as old-fashioned mindfulness and self-compassion

By Adam Boretz | Jan 18, 2019



The abundance of parenting styles and fads—tiger moms, helicopter parents, and cat dads, not to mention free-range parenting, baby-led parenting, and attachment parenting—is enough to make any new

parent's head spin. As a possible antidote, several forthcoming titles suggest that maybe what moms and dads really need is to slow down, be a little more mindful, and practice some self-compassion.

"It really feels like mindfulness is having a moment," says Suzy Reading, author of *Stand Tall Like a Mountain* (Aster, May), who points out that, though mindful parenting may be trendy, there's nothing new about the practice of mindfulness, which is a way of grounding oneself in the present moment. "Over the last 20 years, there has been significant research into the health benefits of mindfulness. And with the advent of positive psychology—the study of the building blocks to wellbeing—there's no surprise that mindfulness is center stage."

In *Stand Tall Like a Mountain*, Reading, who is a psychologist, yoga instructor, and mother of two, outlines mindfulness practices for parents and children, offering a range of choices that cater to different interests. Some practices incorporate yoga and mindful breathing, some focus on relaxation and meditation techniques, and others

make use of art and journaling. "I wanted to create an easily accessible resource that families could turn to, to enjoy together," she says. "Mindfulness has wonderful benefits, for each of us as individuals and also for the health of the family unit. It helps us to navigate difficult emotions and challenging experiences and to truly savor the joyful times, too."

Echoing Reading's sentiments about the science behind mindfulness is Diana Korevaar, a perinatal psychiatrist and the author of *Mindfulness for Mums and Dads* (Murdoch, Apr.). She stresses research into human brain functioning and the impact emotions have on people's thoughts, behavior, and relationships. "The science of mindfulness is very much grounded in what we know about the development of the brain through childhood, and then the way the brain continues to be developed throughout our lives," she says, noting that mindfulness practices help foster a capacity for clear thinking, creativity, and problem solving, among other attributes.

Korevaar's book details mindfulness strategies that can be practiced anywhere and that are aimed at helping parents calm down, reframe challenges, and experience life more positively. "Research shows that within eight weeks, in some of the more robust mindfulness training programs, we can quite literally change the structure of the brain," she says.

Susan M. Pollak, author of *Self-Compassion for Parents* (Guilford, Aug.), also extols the science behind mindfulness, but she attributes the popularity of mindful parenting to another factor: having kids is really, really hard. "We never feel that we're good enough," says Pollak, a psychologist, student of meditation and yoga, and mother of two. "For many of us, there is so much pressure and so little support. We look over our shoulder, comparing ourselves with our friends, families, neighbors. We lose sleep. We wonder if someone, someplace does it better."

Self-compassion and mindfulness, Pollak says, suggest another path: "We now have decades of solid research that shows that mindfulness and compassion can help us lead more fulfilled lives. We don't have to feel angry or helpless and drive our kids and ourselves to exhaustion trying to do it all. The seeds for happier and less combative parenting are within us."

Pollak stresses the value of mothers and fathers nurturing themselves as a way to improve their parenting. "If we include ourselves in our circle of compassion, we're less likely to yell, to melt down if a child spills her milk or refuses to help set the table," she says. "Rather than berate ourselves when we're having a hard time, we learn to be a good friend to ourselves when we're struggling. To extend kindness to ourselves is one of the biggest gifts we can give a child."

## **Pregnant Pause**

If parenting is difficult, it's even more challenging for mothers dealing with postpartum depression. That's the focus of *Expecting Mindfully* (Guilford, Mar.) by clinical psychologists Sona Dimidjian and Sherryl H. Goodman.

"Many women are at risk for depression during pregnancy and the postpartum period, and this is concerning for the mother and likely also involves her partner and other support people," Dimidjian says. "Depression in pregnant women is also concerning for the fetus, given that all of the developing neurobehavioral systems have implications for later development."

*Expecting Mindfully* is grounded in mindfulness-based cognitive therapy—a form of therapy that leverages mindfulness practices—and offers mothers and mothers-to-be guided meditations, yoga practices, journaling exercises, and other tools aimed at preventing postpartum depression. The book will also feature a companion website that includes audio downloads narrated by meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg and video clips of prenatal yoga practices.

"The strong evidence for mindfulness-based cognitive therapy is compelling," Dimidjian says. "We wrote this book to help mothers access comfort and support and concrete tools that will help them navigate the challenges of pregnancy and parenting."

## **The Kids Are Alright**

In addition to books that help parents be more present, which in turn will benefit their children, some titles focus on mindfulness for kids.

“I’ve seen firsthand how stress affects children and how much calmer and more open to learning they are once they’ve done some mindfulness,” says Uz Afzal, an educator and author of *Mindfulness for Children* (Kyle, Apr.). “When I teach the practices in this book to children, they have practical tools they can use to help them to focus, and to calm their minds when they become upset, overwhelmed, or angry.”

One key practice is balloon breathing: a child imagines a small balloon inflating and deflating in her belly with each breath, while using simple phrases—e.g., “Blow up the balloon” or “Let all the air out”—to maintain her concentration. “I was speaking in a class recently to a child who told me how mindfulness helped him before a test,” Afal says. “He was feeling anxious, and the practice helped him to calm his nerves and to focus.”

Lisa Roberts, a certified yoga instructor and author of *Teach Your Child Yoga* (Sterling, June), has also seen how mindfulness can benefit kids through her work running the inpatient yoga program at St. Louis Children’s Hospital. “Yoga connects the mind and the body through intentional movement,” she says. “Moving the body with awareness and control by linking movements to the breath results in meditation.”

In her book, Roberts demonstrates that yoga supports children’s physical, cognitive, sensory, emotional, and social development. She includes lessons designed for kids that aid posture, digestion, cold and allergy relief, and more.

Because stress and anxiety are not exclusive to adults, Roberts emphasizes the importance of parents teaching children coping skills to help them navigate everyday challenges. “Parents are feeling the effects of our rapidly changing world and the pace at which we move and live,” she says. “They’re learning how to adapt so they can cope and keep up with these changes, and they want their children to have these skills too.”

## **Bless This Mess**

Mindfulness and self-compassion can help parents and their children in myriad ways, but they’re no panacea for the abundant challenges—diapers that need to be changed, kids who won’t nap, homework that needs to be completed, to name just a few—that parents face every day. And to some extent, that’s kind of the point: parents can’t change what it means to be a parent, but they can change how they react to parenting.

“Parents are tired of being frustrated, irritated, angry, or flying off the deep end with their children,” says Steven Fonso, a holistic doctor, whose *Finding Magic in the Mess* (TarcherPerigee, July) aims to help parents recognize unhelpful patterns, release the need to be perfect, and reframe challenges as growth opportunities. “The benefit for parents is that they learn to relax for their own sake, which helps to lower stress hormones,” he says. “They discover a larger emotional range, which can replace frustration and irritation with love, joy, and peace.”

Teacher, school counselor, and educational consultant Kim John Payne, in *Being at Your Best When Your Kids Are at Their Worst* (Shambhala, Sept.), also acknowledges the inherent difficulties of parenting. He offers lessons in remaining calm when children are misbehaving and testing boundaries.

“When your kids are pushing every button on your control panel, [it’s because] they’re disoriented, they’re looking—they’re lost,” Payne says. “And what they’re doing is using you to echolocate. They’re pushing you because they’re trying to find the resistance they need to find where they are. If we can stay centered when our kids are pushing us, the whole situation doesn’t escalate and become inflamed. They find what they need because they’re looking at us to orient them.”

This isn’t always easy, Payne acknowledges. “Parenting is probably one of the hardest things that we do in terms of how we stay centered, even calm. We can do that in a lot of areas in our lives, but parenting... Our kids have just got a way of pushing us.”

## **Parents, Not Zen Monks**

Authors extolling the virtues of meditation and self-compassion caution parents against seeing “be mindful” as yet another item on their already-lengthy to-do lists, and against thinking they need to achieve enlightenment in order to be good parents. Instead, mindful parenting can be achieved in small, everyday moments.

“You might be thinking, ‘Yeah, I have to work, shop, and make dinner, do laundry, attend to my aging parents, exercise, walk the dog, and now I have to practice self-compassion too? When is that going to happen?’” Pollak says. “But the beauty of self-compassion is that you don’t need to disappear from your daily life. You can do this in the midst of life, in the chaos of your world.”

“No amount of mindfulness and compassion will remove unpleasant things from our daily lives,” she adds. “Poopy diapers will not magically disappear or suddenly turn to gold. But what happens if we bring awareness to the task of changing diapers? How we respond to the daily drudgery of parenting can have an impact on our day. While we can’t make the unwanted tasks of parenting go away, we do have a choice about how we are in relationship to them.”

Reading agrees, stressing that one of the strengths of mindfulness is that it doesn’t require elaborate practices. “We use everyday tasks to hone the skills,” she says. “This helps us build our mindfulness muscles, so they can really sustain us through more stressful moments.”

### **Below, more on the subject of parenting books.**

The Science of Parenting: PW Talks with Emily Oster

In ‘Cribsheet,’ her follow up to ‘Expecting Better,’ the economist confronts common parenting wisdom with hard data.

Nonfiction Comics About Parenting: New Parenting Books 2019

Forthcoming books by Lucy Kinsley, Guy Delisle, and others bring the reality of parenthood to vivid visual life.

Helping Kids During Troubled Times: New Parenting Books 2019

Here are the latest books that focus on children’s social and behavioral development.

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Zen and the Art Of Modern Parenting