

# Mindful not Mind-full parenting

Learning to stay calm instead of shouting would make us all happier parents. Here's what you need to know about mindful parenting, with expert tips from Elaine Halligan of The Parent Practice.

Mindfulness is the first step to positive parenting. It allows us the clarity and calm to deploy the right parenting techniques.

Most of the time we run around with our mind full – full of to-do lists, thoughts about the past and the future, things we should have or shouldn't have done cluttering our minds and pulling our attention in a million directions.

When it comes to parenting, we go into 'fight or flight' mode, led by our emotions. Mindfulness is the ability to focus on the present, so we remember the parenting skills we have learned when we really need them. It is about training the prefrontal cortex, which is the part of the brain responsible for higher order functions such as awareness, concentration, emotion regulation and decision-making – the part of the brain that can really help us be the kind of parents we want to be.

Mindful parenting is all about being in the moment with your children – noticing, listening, communicating and connecting with them in a non-judgmental way. It can be as simple as putting your phone away so you can give your child your undivided attention, taking 10 minutes before bedtime to chat about their school day, walking to/from school together and pointing out nature's features – its colours, smells and textures – or even slowing down at dinner time to connect as a family, asking each person to name one kind act they did that day.

"Press the pause button." So says Elaine Halligan, director of The Parent Practice and author of *My Child's Different*.

When you're tired and stressed and the kids are frantically pushing all your buttons, pause and stay there for a moment or two, then respond rather than react. Well that's the idea, anyway.

Mindfulness doesn't happen overnight. It takes time to train the brain, but if you stop to notice, understand, listen and communicate with your children, you can prevent frustration, anxiety and an almighty meltdown.

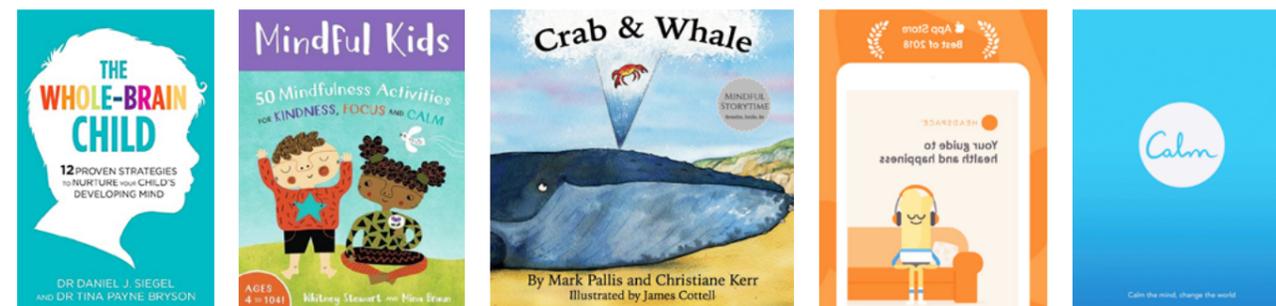


Lucky for us, Elaine has some practical tricks up her sleeve, but they require careful consideration and well, mindfulness.

**1-** Take the time to understand your child's temperament and have realistic expectations. Are they an introvert, extrovert, shy, sensitive, confident, flexible child? Nature presents us with our kids, but we can provide strategies to make life easier for them, and for us, if we understand them. Elaine reminds us that, "each child, even within the same family, is different. Treat them uniquely according to their needs, not equally. Raise the kids you have, not the ones you want them to be."

**2-** Understand that all behaviours have a cause. What we often see when our children act out is the tip of the iceberg. We have to understand that they are experiencing a whole range of emotions. When children are overwhelmed with feelings, they are not thinking logically. So, stop, listen and communicate. Try to understand their feelings rather than dismiss them.

**3-** Look for the positives. About 80% of what our children do is good, but we tend to focus on the 20% that they don't get right. If your child comes in from school and hangs up their coat nicely on the peg but discards their shoes in the middle of the floor, what are you most likely to do? Probably tell them off for the shoes and forget to mention the coat. So, we need to retrain our brains to look for the positives and eliminate that negativity bias that lurks everywhere.



## ELAINE'S TOP TIPS FOR MINDFUL PARENTING



**1- Set up a golden notebook:** Notice three or four things that your kid gets right during the day and write them down. Before bedtime, read them out to them. This raises their self-esteem just before their head hits the pillow. It also acts as a permanent record to you and your children of just how valued they are.

**2- 'Name it to tame it':** When your child is upset, name their emotions. "I know you are upset. I understand that you are angry." By validating their feelings, their defiance and resistance will subside, and they will learn how to cope with their emotions rather than become overwhelmed by them.

**3- Give descriptive praise:** This is a great motivator. Notice when your kids have done something kind/good, no matter how small. Then describe what they did and why it was good or helpful.

**4- Say sorry:** Sometimes as parents, we lose our cool. Just apologise if you do, explaining why you reacted the way you did and why it was wrong. A great deal of parenting is modelling, so what children see, children do. Learning to say sorry when you've made a mistake is a pretty valuable lesson to learn.

Elaine and her colleagues at The Parent Practice offer courses covering all aspects of parenting challenges. They recently gave a parenting talk at our school and have kindly invited all Honeywell parents to a free taster class in Wandsworth on Monday evenings and Tuesday mornings. Contact The Parent Practice on 0208 673 3444 if you are interested in attending. <https://www.theparentpractice.com>

## APPS

**Headspace** (for kids) teaches parents and children together about meditation for different age levels. They focus on: Calm, Kindness and Bedtime.

**Calm** provides mindfulness and sleep stories for children of varying ages. It helps children relax, and restore themselves after a full day of running around.

**Three Good Things: A Happiness Journal.** This app helps children focus on the positives in the day. (Ages 6 and up.) Every child gets to list three things daily that went well, which begins to train their mind to look for things to appreciate and begin a gratitude practice.

## BOOKS FOR PARENTS

**The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Proven Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind** by Daniel J. Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson. This practical book provides 12 key strategies to help your children lead balanced, meaningful and connected lives. **How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk** by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish. From the widely acclaimed **HOW TO TALK** series (also available for teens) this book provides step-by-step techniques to help you improve and enrich your relationships with your children.

## RESOURCES FOR KIDS

**Mindful Kids** by Whitney Stewart. This boxed card deck for 4-10 year olds includes 50 creative mindfulness games, visualisations and exercises divided into five categories to help children feel grounded, find calm, improve focus, practice kindness and relax.

**Crab and Whale** by Mark Pallis and Christiane Kerr. This is a fun and heartwarming story that subtly introduces the skills of mindfulness to children (ages 2 - 8). Children will find themselves becoming more aware of their own bodies, breath, emotions and surroundings without even realising it.