

Where You Are Season 3, Episode 4: A Mindful Approach to Par...

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SPEAKERS

Dr. McDermid, Bryn Askwith, Alison, Char Black

A Alison 00:04

I really feel like I am so much more aware of the good and the bad in parenting. And I think that when we're having just a really great moment, I feel like I have this ability to really see it. I mean, I certainly have times when I let things pass by and we're busy, and I am absolutely, I absolutely do that a lot. But every once in a while you have that moment where you're just right there watching something happen. And I just feel like I'm so glad I'm here right now and I see this. And I think the mindfulness really helps me to do that.

B Bryn Askwith 00:48

This is Where You Are, a podcast that helps families and their children promote their mental health and wellness. I'm Bryn Askwith. Joining us as co-host for this episode is Char Black. Char may sound familiar to some of our listeners, as she was a co-host with us in season one. Char, so great to have you back behind the mic.

C Char Black 01:05

Thanks, Bryn. It's really fun to be back after being away for a season. I'm really excited to be joining this episode in particular, because it's about mindfulness and parenting. And a lot of my current work is related to mindfulness right now in supporting the Centre for Mindfulness at BC Children's Hospital. And mindfulness can be defined in a lot of different ways by different people. Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and without judgment. And really, for me, as a parent with two kids under the age of six, which is often chaotic, truthfully. I'm always looking for approaches that can be helpful to me in my role as a parent. Mindfulness helps me in everyday life in terms of handling feelings of guilt and addressing co-regulating emotions with my kids and expressing daily gratitude.

B

Bryn Askwith 02:03

I agree with you. Parenting can be one of those things that's incredibly rewarding, but also really nervewracking at the same time. And you know, that's where mindfulness can be helpful. It can be a remedy to the parenting stress we sometimes experience and it can really increase our ability to cope as parents and caregivers. Today on *Where You Are*, we'll talk about what we mean by mindfulness in parenting, how mindfulness can support your overall wellbeing and help during common stressors that parents experience. We'll also debunk some common myths and misconceptions that surround mindfulness, like mindfulness is the same as meditation or just a relaxation strategy where you have to sit and be still. And of course, offer tips on how you can weave mindfulness moments into parenting and caregiving if this is an approach that you're curious about. Let's get into that conversation.

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Bryn Askwith 02:55

Our first guest on the podcast with us today is Dr. Joanna McDermid, a psychiatrist at BC Children's Hospital, and the associate director of the BC Children's Centre for Mindfulness, where she's developed mindfulness programs for parents and caregivers. Welcome to the podcast.

D

Dr. McDermid 03:10

Thanks so much, Bryn. I'm delighted to be here today.

B

Bryn Askwith 03:12

Dr. McDermid, with mindfulness being the focus of today's show, perhaps I could invite you to lead a short mindfulness moment just to start us off, maybe one that you often use with parents and caregivers that you connect with?

D

Dr. McDermid 03:22

Absolutely, thanks for the opportunity. So wherever you are in this moment, I'm just going to invite you to create a mindful pause, by perhaps just slowing down or stopping what you're doing. Maybe taking a seat, softening the eyes or closing them if you wish. And just allowing yourself to settle into, ease into the present moment by becoming aware of your breath. Maybe by silently saying to yourself, "Breathing in, I know I'm breathing in. And breathing out, I know I'm breathing out." Maybe one or two more breaths in your own time. And then when you're ready, just releasing the practice, allowing a little more movement back into the body, opening the eyes if they were closed. Thanks, Bryn.

D

Dr. McDermid 03:23

Oh, thank you so much. What a great way to ground us before we get started together.

Focusing in on some questions now. Dr. McDermid, while mindfulness is a term that parents are

Focusing in on some questions now, Dr. McDermid, while mindfulness is a term that parents are hearing more about these days, it still may be unfamiliar to some. Can you begin by explaining what mindfulness is, and why it's an approach that can be relevant to parenting and caregiving?

D Dr. McDermid 04:48

I think there's a lot of definitions about mindfulness, and some people may or may not already have some experience with it. And so the way I understand mindfulness is that it's an awareness that arises when we pay attention in the present moment. And also with a sense of openness. And I like to think of mindfulness as a way of being, not something that I'm doing, but that I am allowing myself to just be here, and now, as I am. And that's enough. So this awareness, this attitude, can help us, particularly with with parenting. We mentioned that there can be very stressful moments. Life can get a little bit messy in parenting and caregiving. And as such, we've mentioned that mindfulness can really be a powerful remedy to that parenting stress, and also increase our ability to cope. So, with mindfulness, we can respond skillfully to what's needed in the moment, in the here and now. And whether it's practicing one mindful breath—we actually practiced a few just now—or practicing a mindful step, holding our silence for a moment or giving ourselves a little bit of a pause or just a rest. It's possible to remain centred and calm as we interact with our loved ones, particularly during these times of stress.

C Char Black 06:15

So we also have Alison with us today on Where You Are. And Alison is a mother, health scientist, PhD, and parenting coach for neurodiverse families. Alison began learning about and using mindfulness practices more than 20 years ago, and she uses these in her daily life as a mother who supports her brilliant neurodiverse child. Great to have you join us, Alison,

A Alison 06:38

Thank you so much for having me!

C Char Black 06:40

So Alison, how did you first come across mindfulness? And how did it become part of your world as a parent?

A Alison 06:46

My very first, I guess, exposure to mindfulness was as a research scientist in the late 90s. So it was a while ago now, when I did my dissertation. And I actually studied...it was a program that was based on Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program. So it was from a research interest, and then that I developed into a personal practice. And then I've just continued on from there to train and learn more about it. It's come in really handy in my life for

a number of reasons, I found that, as I was parenting, and as, uh-huh, Dr. McDermid mentioned, it can be a little messy at times, that it was really handy. And I found that I was drawn to train more. And I also dealt with some anxiety myself. I found it useful for that. It's been a really useful part of my life, but also having a neurodiverse child, I think that the parenting experience has been a little bit more intense. And I found that the mindfulness practices have really helped me to cope. And I've learned a lot and been able to apply them in a lot of different ways that have really helped.

C

Char Black 07:51

Great. Thanks, Alison, for sharing.

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Bryn Askwith 07:53

Dr. McDermid, what are the main components of mindfulness that you highlight with the families that you work with? And as well, what are some of the benefits?

D

Dr. McDermid 08:01

I think one of the main components that we highlight for for caregivers and for parents is this idea of inner or self compassion. So really discovering the power of compassion and how we can apply it to ourselves as well as to our children. And sometimes we talk about how we can take a lesson from our own heart, in that the heart, has coronary arteries and pumps blood to itself first, before distributing out to the rest of the body. And so I believe our heart is a, you know, pretty smart. And so I think we can kind of honor our biology and understand that there are ways to put this compassion to strengthen it and to grow it in ourselves so that we can be nourished and also to be there for our loved ones. The other piece is that it can also help us to remember that in parenting, it's definitely not about being perfect. And mindfulness is not about being perfect. We talk to families and to caregivers about softening our judgments, you know. We can think about it this way. When we make a mistake, or when we fall short of our parenting standards, it's a little bit like, oh, no, how could I have done that? What's wrong with me? Or maybe like, oh, I'm such a bad parent, other parents would have done a much better job than me. And we can think about the action that we're feeling upset about. And then the added kind of pain or suffering that's added by our own judgment on top of that, a little bit like that analogy or metaphor of salt in a wound. There's already pain there. And then we add our own judgment on top of it. So this idea of understanding how we judge ourselves, it doesn't mean we don't care. Like of course, we want to be skillful in our actions. But being aware of our judgments, aware of what we bring to the experience, in addition to the things that have happened, can help us to respond more skillfully in the moment. Another aspect, Bryn, is this ideaâ€”and I love this so muchâ€”this idea of mindful communication. So really bring our full awareness to the way in which we communicate, be it with our words, our capacity to listen, our silence, as well as our nonverbal communication. And the peace around that as well is that we can be loving and kind and respectful. And also still set some important limits that can create psychological and physical safety for our children.

B

Bryn Askwith 10:18

Thanks so much. You know, I think your your summary of kind of the main components are really interesting. But I also think that piece about, you know, being human is in there, too. So I really appreciate you kind of bringing that forward. I know there's that self compassion piece and reminding myself that, you know, I'm already probably doing some mindfulness in my day, maybe I just need to slow down and do a little more where and when I can. Alison, what benefits about mindfulness have you noticed for yourself as a parent, and with your relationship with your child?

A

Alison 10:46

This piece of awareness. I really feel like I am so much more aware of the good and the bad in parenting. And I think that when we're having just a really great moment, I feel like I have this ability to really see it. I mean, I certainly have times when I let things pass by and we're busy, and I am absolutely, I absolutely do that a lot. But every once in a while you have that moment where you're just right there watching something happen. And I just feel like, I'm so glad I'm here right now and I see this. And I think the mindfulness really helps me to do that, that I really can pay attention. I also pay attention to when things don't go well. I think, I mean, one of my intentions of parenting is being really curious, because I find that just a great practice as a parent. Especially when things are challenging, curiosity is something that really helps us to work things through. Rather than having judgment or fear about something that's not going well, having this sort of lens of curiosity. And so in that way, I can be aware of things that aren't going well without having so much distress, if I can be curious about it. And the whole co-regulation piece is so critical, because, I mean, our household has been quite emotionally intense. And so having to deal with intense emotions, his and mine at times, you know, I'd love to say, always respond and not react. But that hasn't always been the case. And when I do react, I find that I need to try and get myself to become calm and back in the moment again. And so I always rely on my breath. I rely on some of the principles that I have learned, getting back into my body. There's just been so many different ways that it's really helped. And...actually, another example would be preparing myself, not knowing maybe what mood he might be in. And that might be when I'm picking him up from school, you know, not knowing if he's had a good day or a bad day. I found that it was really helpful to sort of take the time to centre myself, feel really grounded, when I was waiting in the car lineup. It was best if I wasn't on social media and having a really busy mind and thinking about 100 things before I got in the car. I would put my phone down when I got close to the front of the line, take some breaths, really kind of get into the present moment. And I was so much better able to deal with whatever and whoever was getting in the car. So there's been lots of different ways that it's really, that it's really helped. I've also been able to share some of the mindfulness practices with my son. And I have to say it's been easier when he was younger now that he's a teenager, he's a little less interested in some of it! But I'm hoping that it's gonna come back again, I think we're just in a little bit of a phase right now!

C

Char Black 13:39

Thanks, Alison. There was so many nuggets there. I can't even tell you how great that was. And I think the the pieces that really resonated with me was, obviously, the co-regulation piece and I find that that I'm working on that all the time and continuously being curious.

B**Bryn Askwith 14:02**

You're listening to Where You Are. I'm Bryn Askwith. Looking to learn more about mindfulness in parenting? Find information and resources on this very topic on our website at kelymentalhealth.ca and click on "A Mindful Approach."

C**Char Black 14:26**

So now that we've heard a few of the many of the benefits about mindfulness in parenting, we want to explore some common myths and misconceptions that we sometimes hear with mindfulness. Alison and Dr. McDermid, we're hoping you can talk through some of these with us and maybe offer some examples to help dispel a few of these myths. So the first myth is that mindfulness is just one more thing parents would have to fit in into their already very full days and busy lives. Alison, what would you say to a parent who shared this thought with you?

A**Alison 14:59**

First of all, I would understand their concern, because everyone feels really full up right now, so it can be overwhelming to think about that. I think the good news is that mindfulness doesn't have to take up a lot of time, it doesn't have to be an hour long meditation practice done every single day. Having a meditation practice can be really helpful, and some people, I would say, start that way. And some people find it really useful at times. But I would say that there's a lot of ways to integrate these practices and principles into your life without it being a really time consuming venture. I think there's some time investment in learning about it, and practicing some of these skills. But I think it's a very doable thing to do without a huge time commitment. And the benefits are so great. And as you practice them, they become second nature. So it's not...you stop really even realizing that you're doing it as time goes on.

B**Bryn Askwith 15:55**

Dr. McDermid, if I could engage you on the second myth that we sometimes hear, mindfulness is just the same as meditation. Have you ever encountered this in your conversations with families? And what do you say to them?

D**Dr. McDermid 16:05**

Yes, I have. And thank you for bringing up this idea about what mindfulness is and isn't. Being still and quiet and practicing meditation by yourself is one way of bringing more awareness. But there are so many other ways to bring mindfulness into our lives. And so mindfulness is a type of meditation where we're paying attention to the present moment as it is in the here and the now—“not yesterday, not tomorrow, but what's happening right now? The way we can become aware and mindful, is by noticing what's happening on the inside: our feelings, our thoughts, our perceptions, our body sensations, our emotions, right? And then we can also become aware through our senses: mindfully, what's happening on the outside? What's happening right in front of us? What can we notice with our eyes? What are we hearing? Et cetera. And so this mindful awareness can be brought to any moment in our day. Some of the practices we share

with our parents and caregivers include mindful practices that you can do in any position. So for example, you could be standing and feeling your feet, bringing awareness to that as you're waiting in line. You could bring mindful awareness to your movement and walking. That's one of actually some of the favorite practices of some of our parents is just, there's so much movement, so much moving around, you can bring awareness to that. It might be enjoying a meal together, just really bringing the awareness to the textures, the food, the sharing of a meal together with your child or a loved one. It could also be preparing the food, and really noticing what it feels like to wash the vegetables, to prepare the food and put it on the plate. So there are many ways to be mindful in our lives that don't require us to sit and to be still, although that is another way for us to have a formal practice, which is actually something that Alison mentioned earlier. There are a lot of benefits to that as well.

A

Alison 17:59

Oh, I really agree with that. And now that I've started to do that more, it's become kind of second nature. It took a long time, though, from the time I started learning about mindfulness until I learned to do that. It wasn't sort of "it didn't happen immediately. So I should say that it took a while to learn how to integrate it into my life every day. And I used to think that if I wasn't meditating, then I wasn't doing it properly, or I wasn't trying hard enough. I really thought that for a long time, and I would get, I'd be hard on myself because I thought, oh, I know all these things, and how come I'm not doing them? And clearly, I wasn't practicing the compassion piece of this very well! And when I finally like, realized how many things that I could do, and I actually was doing, I was able to be a lot more compassionate with myself and realize how it had started to become just a part of who I am and my way of being.

C

Char Black 18:55

Thanks, Alison, that's similar to my experience as well. And, and really, it's really around recognizing that we all are doing some form of mindfulness already. It's it's really recognizing that and supporting that practice. As busy parents with lots on our minds, we sometimes show up on autopilot. And I know I do that, like I'm always multitasking and thinking kind of ahead, but then just always planning and organizing. So for example, I'm making dinner, but the kids are pulling at my clothes and asking for a snack, or need help with opening something, or some, any "they're high needs right now because they're under six, so! So Dr. McDermid, what about mindfulness can be helpful to us as parents in these moments as we communicate with our kids. And do you have any tips to offer to our listeners?

D

Dr. McDermid 19:48

Definitely. So we've we've mentioned that there are endless reasons to feel overwhelmed as a parent. And uncertainty and stress are a given. And also, with life as busy as it is these days, it's not surprising that we're frequently distracted or pulled away from the present moment. Sometimes strong emotions and distractions can impact our connection with our loved ones, and then also if we're tired or rushing, that can be a very difficult thing. I was actually just thinking of a practice that I really enjoy is "we can actually just sort of think about it right now. When we're really rushing "I don't know how many people are rushing "but most of us are busy, busy, busy, going super fast. So breathing in, I'm aware I'm

rushing, breathing out, I'm in the flow. Now, how many times have we thought about rushing as like being in a flow? Normally, we're kind of feeling this aversion or like, oh, no, I can't get this all done. But just with that slight shift. Now we might not remember it because when we're rushing, we're usually on automatic pilot, right? We're just trying to get from A to B. But if we're able to bring that type of awareness, or some semblance, some seed of that type of awareness, it really, really can make a difference. And I think the the other part of that is our communication, right? Sometimes we conceive of mindful communication as two wings of the bird. The first wing is, of the bird is deep listening. And with deep listening, we open our hearts and our minds to receive the words and the messages of the other person. So it's our child, or our partner, or a friend or whoever it is. And then we listen without interrupting. We listen without already planning what to say next. We can notice those urges come up as we're communicating with others. Like, oh, this too, or that too, or oh, watch out for that! And so we steer away from giving advice. And when we're really truly listening, we don't tell our own story, we just listen with the intention of being fully, fully there. And the other wing of the bird is loving speech. We know that our thoughts are connected to our speech. So when we're thinking about things that can get reflected in what we say. So we want to choose to align our words thoughtfully, with our values of compassion, and non-judgment, allowing openness and we can build our relationships and trust through through how we show up and speak, as well as listen. In none of this is there any judgment, right? Oh, no, I'm not engaged enough. Or, oh, I was too distracted. No, no. Am I engaged? Am I distracted? Bringing the curiosity into the connection. And then there's also situations where our silence is also very powerful and needed. And so our awareness can let us know when that might be the case, too.

B

Bryn Askwith 22:36

Thanks for that, Dr. McDermid. At the Kelty Centre, part of our work is to connect parents and caregivers to mental health and wellness resources. Dr. McDermid, are there any mindfulness resources you would highlight for our listeners? We'd be happy to add them to our podcast episode page.

D

Dr. McDermid 22:51

Bryn, yes! Resources for parents and caregivers. My goodness, there's so much wonderful information out there. I think, first, I would probably guide any of our listeners to our BC Children's Hospital Centre for Mindfulness webpage. And that is a nice landing spot for more information in general, about mindfulness—mindfulness for staff, mindfulness for children and youth, mindfulness for caregivers and parents. For the older child, as a teen, Dr. Dzung Vo has a wonderful book called *The Mindful Teen*, that parents may wish to gift to their child, if they feel that that would be an appropriate thing to do. And we also have a really nice app that we've developed together with Kelty, which is called the *Breathr* app. And so that's not only for youth and teens, but actually it's also something that adults may benefit from as well. Some really lovely short practices that can help people get started in their own mindfulness practice, if they're so inclined.

B

Bryn Askwith 23:53

And Alison, do you have any resources you'd like to share?

A

Alison 23:56

Sure, I think the the one book that we just loved was, it was called *Sitting Still Like A Frog*. And it's mindfulness exercises for kids and their parents. It's just a short little book. It's a really easy read. So you can get through it quite quickly. It came with a CD when we bought it. I don't know if that's changed now. Or if you download something, I'm not sure. But that's something I just I really recommended.

B

Bryn Askwith 24:18

So now that we're getting close to the end of our time together here on the podcast today, we often ask our guests if they have any final thoughts or words of wisdom that they'd like to share with our listeners. Dr. McDermid, anything you'd like to share?

D

Dr. McDermid 24:30

Thanks, Bryn. Yes, we can recognize that we're actually already being mindful. That we don't have to try hard at this and to sort of shift our understanding that these capacities are innate, they're in us. And we can water them just like beautiful seeds in a garden. When we're more calm, have more equanimity, are less reactive, our children really pick up on that, as we know that stress, as well as positive emotions, and a sense of calmness can be contagious. So our children are kind of picking up on our presence. We don't have to be perfect. Modeling perfection obviously is not the idea here. But just trying to bring our best with a sense of authenticity and kindness and awareness of our own needs, can actually model those qualities for our children, too.

C

Char Black 25:15

Thanks, Joanna. And Alison, do you have any final thoughts for our listeners, some words of wisdom to share?

A

Alison 25:22

I think it has, mindfulness just has a really powerful opportunity to change the way that we parent. You don't need to become a meditation master. I think that there are lots of principles and practices that are very doable to use in everyday life. I think it can have a very transformative effect on the whole family when they're used.

C

Char Black 25:44

Thanks to you both for coming and sharing your stories and your expertise, and your experience around mindfulness in parenting. Thank you for your time today.

A

Alison 25:56

Yeah, thank you so much. It's been a pleasure to be here.

D

Dr. McDermid 25:59

Thank you so much for the opportunity and what a delightful conversation and it's a beautiful important job that you're doing and thank you for all that you do.

C

Char Black 26:11

Bryn, it's been so great co-hosting with you today on this episode, and I really hope we get to do it again sometime soon. And thank you as well to our listeners. This episode of where you are is brought to you by BC Children's Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre. Our show is produced and edited by Emily Morantz with audio engineering by Patrick Emile and Sam Seguin. Audio production by JAR Audio. If you enjoyed this episode, please leave us a rating on Apple Podcasts or wherever you might be listening now.

B

Bryn Askwith 26:43

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