

Mindfulness in Behavioral Health

Series Editor: Nirbhay N. Singh

Susan Bögels
Kathleen Restifo

Mindful Parenting

A Guide for Mental Health Practitioners

 Springer

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Susan Bögels • Kathleen Restifo

Mindful Parenting

A Guide for Mental Health Practitioners

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Foreword

This book and the program it offers the world are a pioneering effort to bring mindfulness into the domain of parenting and the mental health care of stressed families, for the benefit of both the children and their parents.

When we wrote the first edition of our book on mindful parenting, published in 1997, it did not include a formal program for parents, nor a curriculum for training health professionals to teach parents. Such a curriculum is long overdue. We are grateful to the authors for bringing it to life in this form. Their program is both profoundly practical and, at the same time, potentially transformative and healing. One of its main virtues is that it spans and unifies two different ways of knowing: that of empirical scientific understanding, in this case clinical and behavioral psychology research, and that of contemplative mindfulness-based programs and practices, which are themselves increasingly resting on a firm scientific foundation. At the same time, these mindfulness-based programs tap into an orthogonal dimension of wisdom and compassion going back several thousand years, mostly derived from the universal elements underlying Buddhist meditation, of which mindfulness is often said to be the heart.

The authors and their colleagues have done research in the field of stress and parenting and have conducted a number of studies to validate their clinical program in mindful parenting. The curriculum is presented here in a remarkably accessible, clear, and detailed way. It builds on other mindfulness-based clinical approaches such as MBSR (mindfulness-based stress reduction) and MBCT (mindfulness-based cognitive therapy) and broadens their reach to the complex realm of family interactions and the particular challenges of parenting children with psychiatric diagnoses. Here you will find both the formal and informal mindfulness practices utilized by MBSR and MBCT, adapted and extended in imaginative ways to the domain of parenting.

This work rests on a powerful foundation of compassion and kindness, for both parents and children, essential in the face of the inevitable suffering of families. These qualities of heart are not some kind of superficial window-dressing or façade, but in fact constitute the ground of all mindfulness practices and their clinical

applications. For the word *mindfulness* equally implies *heartfulness*. Without that visceral understanding and embodiment, the power of this approach would be lost. Happily, the authors emphasize this critical point throughout the book, as they do the fact that to really understand mindfulness and be able to use it creatively to help others, one must actually cultivate it in one's own life as a way of being. In both these critical regards, the authors' own lived experience and wisdom are evident and palpable. Their articulation of this way of being called mindful parenting will be an inspiration to those seeking to adapt this curriculum in their own settings and in their own lives.

We are delighted that Susan Bögels and Kathleen Restifo have brought this profound and nuanced curriculum into the world in this way. Admittedly, it asks a lot of all involved. Mindfulness always does. But you will find, through actual practice, that it does not ask more of parents than they are capable of giving for the sake of their children and themselves.

We hope that this book, with its refined perspective and skillful guidance, benefits families of all kinds, far and wide.

Lexington, Massachusetts

Jon and Myla Kabat-Zinn

Endorsements

“Compelling, grounded and utterly human. Susan and Kathleen present the mindful parenting program that has emerged out of their sustained engagement with their mindfulness practice, with their daily lives as parents, and with the lives of the parents who have participated in their classes. The result is a personal, practical and informative description of the program and its background.

A parent training program that focuses on enabling participants to parent their children from the place they and their children are in moment-by-moment, rather than striving towards some idea of how things could or should be. What a relief!”

Rebecca Crane

Director, Centre for Mindfulness Research and Practice, Bangor University
Author of *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, Distinctive Features*

“Parenting is often the greatest challenge in the “full catastrophe” of daily life. In this elegant training manual, parents learn to strengthen their capacity for mindfulness and compassion regardless of the conditions of their lives, past or present. Essential mindfulness skills are gently woven into group exercises and psychoeducation about parenting and stress. This “how-to” program will surely be an important resource for couples and family therapists, and a refuge for distressed parents, for many years to come.”

Christopher Germer, Ph.D.

Clinical Instructor, Harvard Medical School
Author of *The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion*

“A brilliant book with enormous practical implications for all parents. Written with great skill and clarity, Susan Bögels and Kathleen Restifo bring together insights from the evolution of parenting with the latest psychological science on compassion, attachment, and schemas. But then they go further, giving us a step-by-step guide through their unique and evidence-based mindful parenting program.

This book is a must-read for child and family practitioners but it will also be on the shelves of all mindfulness teachers who wish to understand how to recollect and explore their own experience as a parent or a child, and in doing so, to understand more deeply the entanglements of those who come to them for help.”

Mark Williams
Professor of Clinical Psychology, University of Oxford
Author of *Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy
for preventing relapse in depression*

“Grounded in evidence-based mindful parenting practices, this book will enable therapists to help parents bring full awareness to *raising* their children with joy, selfless love, compassion and wisdom. It presents a program on mindful parenting in an engaging and elegant style that incorporates personal reflections by the authors and parents who have gone through this course, mindfulness practices, and gentle encouragement to adhere to these practices. Those of us who are parents or grandparents intuitively know that children are little Buddhas who come to teach us patience. This book is a fine preparation for this adventure.”

Nirbhay N. Singh
Editor-in-Chief, *Mindfulness*

Acknowledgments

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First of all, I'm grateful to Mark Williams who was my first teacher in mindfulness, gave me the freedom to adapt the MBCT program to groups I wanted to use it with, and always supported me in my clinical and research steps in this area. Guido Sijbers taught me the basics of Vipassana meditation, and it was a joy to run the first mindfulness groups in the adult clinic with him, and in the child clinic with Bert Hoogstad. Nirbhay Singh, Jon Kabat-Zinn, and Myla Kabat-Zinn have been of great inspiration and support in our work in Mindful Parenting. Christopher Germer gave more recent inspiration in self-compassion practice. I have learned tremendously from the teachings and retreats of Martine Batchelor, Stephan Batchelor, Trish Bartley, Susan Woods, and Ferris Urbanowski.

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I am very grateful to the team of the academic treatment center for parent and child *UvA minds*. Sacha Lucassen, the team leader of *UvA minds*, who through her energy and enthusiasm created the flexible and dynamic infrastructure of our clinic so that parents could find their way to the Mindful Parenting course. I am thankful to mindfulness trainers Dorreke Peijnenburg, Rachel van der Meulen, Anne Formsma, Eva van de Weijer-Bergsma, and Eva Potharst, who co-led the Mindful Parenting groups; Esther de Bruin for the energy, enthusiasm, and ideas she put in the research; Nynke Wagenaar and the many master students that have supported

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The University of Amsterdam supports our research in Mindful Parenting in many ways. My thanks go to the rector magnificus and the dean, Dymph van der Boom and Edward de Haan, for their support in setting up the academic clinic; to Jan Randsdorp and Piet Scholten from UvA Holding for their support of *UvA minds*; Frans Oort in his role of research director and for his statistical support; and the whole team of Rearing and Developmental Problems for their passion for research and teaching.

My gratitude goes to my parents, for having facilitated my creative and intellectual development, to become a free mind. Their examples have helped me to become who I am. I am grateful to my siblings, Paul, Gert, Corien, and Ceciel, for their love and companionship.

My children, Thomas, Renate, and Leyla, thank you for the happiness you bring in my life, and for reminding me each and every day that there is more to life than work. Sofia, thanks for your trust when you were growing up.

I thank the fathers of my children, Rudolf and Enrico, and their partners, Ingrid and Ingrid, and our child minders, Annie and Margreet, for sharing the task of raising our children to maturity. And Jelle, we met when I was writing this book. Thanks for distracting and supporting me.

Kathleen's Acknowledgments

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One of the unexpected pleasures of writing this book was the correspondence with the many readers, all of whom had no time, and all of whom nonetheless managed to read through earlier versions of this manuscript. In particular, I want to thank Myla Kabat-Zinn, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Mark Williams, and Nirbhay Singh for their thoughtful comments on two versions of the manuscript. I want to thank Franca Warmenhoven and Rebecca Crane for their detailed comments on two difficult chapters. Christopher Germer and Paul Gilbert helped me to understand how to work with strong emotional reactions to loving-kindness practice. Joke Hellemans tried out many of the newer practices in this program and provided valuable feedback on them. I would like to thank Sarah Hrdy for clarifying her ideas about evolution of parenting, and Paul Gilbert for helping me put evolutionary processes in the context of mindfulness. Marisol Voncken helped me to write about the neuroendocrine basis of attachment from a more personal point of view.

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Together

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to become more mindful in their relations to family members, and have responded to that in ways that reinforced their first steps in Mindful Parenting.

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Part I
Theoretical and Empirical Background

Chapter 1

Introduction to Mindful Parenting

*Every baby can be seen as a little Buddha or Zen Master,
your own private mindfulness teacher...*

Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go, There You Are* (1994), pg. 248

1.1 Why Parenting Can Be Stressful

Parenting is one of the most consuming and responsible tasks in a lifetime for many parents, yet parents do it with love, joy, pride, and a sense of fulfillment. In fact, raising children, and having grandchildren, may be the most fulfilling “job” that we ever have and being a good father or a good mother our highest ambition in life. If we would be asked what we want people to say about us at our funeral, having been a good parent (and grandparent) is what comes up for most of us who have had the fortune to be a parent (and have grandchildren).

Wanting to do it so well – to be the best parent possible – may in itself be a source of stress. Many other challenges and obstacles on the way may make parenting stressful. To start with, the transition in adult life of taking care of our own lives, to giving birth to children and taking care of their lives as well, requires an enormous change in how we divide our time, attention, energy, and resources (e.g., Bardacke, 2012). Life will never be the same after having children. In taking care of children and organizing family life, and balancing that with our working lives, we may forget to take care of ourselves. When inner resources get depleted, this may result in irritable or depressed mood, fatigue, somatic complaints, and eventually in mental or physical disorders, interfering with parenting qualities.

Children’s as well as parents’ possible behavior problems or psychopathology symptoms represent a challenge or obstacle that can make parenting more stressful, and these are the families for which the Mindful Parenting course as described in this book is developed. A child who, for example, becomes highly stressed or oppositional when confronted with novelty, who cannot play on his or her own or cannot

organize school work, who cannot be left alone with siblings because of aggressive behavior, or who cannot sleep at night, can represent an extra burden for parenting. Parents' own symptoms of psychopathology may also add stress to the parenting task. For example, a parent who is suffering from depression may experience the parenting task as too heavy and himself or herself as a bad parent, a parent suffering from anxieties may be overly concerned and overprotective with the child, a parent suffering from obsessive–compulsive traits may not be able to let go of or share the parenting task, and a parent with problems in executive functioning may react impulsively and inconsistently to the child.

Even if no specific psychopathology in children or parents is present, parents encounter many sources of stress. Children develop, and therefore constantly change, challenging parents to keep adapting to these ongoing changes: a baby that starts to walk, an adolescent that does not obey the family rules anymore, and an adult child leaving home. Parents, even when the children are long grown up, feel a strong sense of responsibility for the safety and well-being of their children, and may worry and feel stressed in phases when their children meet new challenges on their own.

Stress in parenting may also arise from unexpected family changes such as divorce. Nowadays, the majority of children live in a situation with stepparents or stepchildren, in which issues about boundaries and loyalties are likely to arise. Stepparents and stepchildren can be a source of support and joy but may also add stress to parenting. Moreover, many parents raise children as a single parent, and the lack of support of another parent who is co-responsible for the parenting task can be a source of stress.

Marital problems, and problems in the co-parental relationship, are another source of stress related to parenting. While the reliance on social communities has decreased in Western, individualistic cultures, marital relationships have become more and more important as a source of social connectedness and support, and the expectations of marital relationships have become higher (Johnson, 2008). As a result, problems in the marital relationship form an important source of stress for parents. This stress has been found to negatively affect parenting, in fathers even more so than in mothers (Bögels, Lehtonen, & Restifo, 2010).

1.2 Why Mindful Parenting Can Help

When under stress, parenting skills are found to collapse (e.g., Belsky, 1984; Webster-Stratton, 1990a). Parents may have learned parenting skills from parenting courses, parenting books, or television programs on parenting. However, when under stress or other intense emotions, parents of all socioeconomical levels will tend to yell at their children, threaten, and even beat them. Courses and knowledge about how a good parent should handle difficulties may even have the effect of parents being more harsh with themselves for having lost it.

Not only may parents forget to apply skills they have learned in parenting courses when under stress, parental psychopathology may also hinder parents, and their children, in benefiting from such courses. To illustrate, Parent Management Training is an effective training for parents of children with ADHD, decreasing children's behavior problems. However, children of parents who themselves have ADHD as well do not benefit as well from such parent training (e.g., Sonuga-Barke, Daley, Thompson, 2002). Interestingly, precisely in families in which child and parent share symptoms of psychopathology, such as inattentive or impulsive behavior, children are at the highest risk of developing mental health disorders such as ADHD (Sonuga-Barke, 2010). In a similar vein, children of depressed mothers are found to benefit less from parent training (Forehand, Furey, & McMahan, 1984; Owens et al., 2003; Reyno & McGrath, 2006; Webster-Stratton, 1990b). Also, parents with marital problems may benefit less from parent training (Reisinger, Frangia, & Hoffman, 1976; Webster-Stratton, 1985), although other studies failed to find an association between marital distress/dissatisfaction and parent training outcomes (Brody & Forehand, 1985; Firestone & Witt, 1982). Therefore, there is a need for parent training in which parents' own stress, suffering, and symptoms of psychopathology have an important place in the process of improving family functioning.

Mindful Parenting offers another way of approaching parenting in high stress times, and for parents with psychopathology themselves. In Mindful Parenting, parents' own stress, suffering, and, if present, psychopathology are the primary focus of the training rather than the problem behavior of the child. Clearly, the problem behavior of the child can be the major source of stress in the family, but the resulting stress in the parent is what we work with. Dealing differently with stress, or stress reduction, is at the heart of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program.

Mindfulness is a form of meditation based on the Buddhist tradition and involves being present in the moment, focusing on the reality and accepting it for what it is. Jon Kabat-Zinn developed the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program to address the unmet needs of chronically ill people to participate in their own healing, cope with their illness, and for dealing with life stress in general. Zindel Segal, Mark Williams, and John Teasdale, based on this work, developed the Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), an approach specifically for depressed patients. Over the last two decades, mindfulness-based interventions have been used to successfully bring change in a multitude of physical, stress-related, and mental health problems. Bringing mindfulness into the situation of parenting, children, and family life ("Mindful Parenting") is one of the newer applications of mindfulness.

This book is about Mindful Parenting in the context of mental health care, that is, when parents seek or are advised help with their parenting because their child or they themselves have a mental health problem. In the following, we will describe the evolution of the Mindful Parenting program, as outlined in this book, from the start more than 10 years ago until now.

1.3 The Evolution of the Mindful Parenting Course

1.3.1 *The First Steps: Mindful Parenting for Parents of Youth Who Take a Mindfulness Course – Susan’s Story*

As an attention researcher, I had gotten interested in task concentration training for people with social anxiety disorder and particularly fear of blushing. Scientific research had shown that individuals with social anxiety disorder suffer from heightened self-focused attention during social situations and as a result they have little attention for their environment and other people (Bögels & Mansell, 2006). This was found to have many negative consequences for their social behavior, how they would come across, and heighten their negative emotions and thoughts and physiological arousal. The idea behind this training was that if we could train people to focus their attention outside, on the task at hand, at moments of social fear when their attention naturally would go to themselves, their social anxiety would reduce. When we published our first paper on task concentration training back in 1997 (Bögels, Mulkens, & de Jong, 1997, later papers Bögels, 2006; Mulkens, Bögels, Louwers, & de Jong, 2001), Isaac Marks, a well-known anxiety researcher, mailed me: “Isn’t this the same as mindfulness?” No, it was not the same, but we did observe the positive effects that task concentration training practices, like walking in a forest while paying attention to all senses, had on getting people out of their (anxious) head and into experiencing life from moment to moment and how it helped them to be more present with other people rather than self-absorbed in their social fears, which is the same as mindfulness. The seed of mindfulness was planted, at least in my research head.

In 2000 I invited Mark Williams to provide our adult and child mental health center teams in Maastricht with an introductory training in MBCT. We were very impressed by the mindfulness approach to mental health problems, which was so different from what we were used to do, being trained as cognitive-behavior therapists. We immediately planned a randomized clinical trial to compare mindfulness with cognitive-behavior therapy for adults suffering from social anxiety disorder. However, inspired by Mark Williams’ training, my colleagues from the child mental health-care center asked if I could start a mindfulness course for anxious youth. As highly effective cognitive-behavioral programs were available for these youth (e.g., Boddien et al., 2008), this was not the most obvious start of mindfulness in a child and youth mental health-care setting. But what about youth suffering from externalizing problems, that is, problems of behavioral control, inattention, and impulsivity that are primarily manifested in children’s outward behavior rather than in their internal thoughts and feelings? These youth may have been classified as suffering from attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autistic spectrum disorders, and oppositional defiant or conduct disorders. Few evidence-based approaches were available for them, and youth with these disorders, which are often comorbid in clinical settings, typically present with attention and impulsivity problems.

Although mindfulness training was not originally developed for these kinds of attention and impulsivity problems, there were reasons to believe that mindfulness practices could help. Children with externalizing disorders may have in common certain attention problems, such as maintaining attention over prolonged periods of time, paying attention to various aspects simultaneously, inhibiting their first response when needed, or a too narrow attention span. Children with externalizing disorders also have certain behaviors in common such as impulsivity and hyperactivity or restlessness, which may result from the same underlying information processing problems. In mindfulness, attention skills such as focusing, becoming aware of the wandering mind, widening attention, and being aware of restlessness and action tendencies without doing them are trained, and therefore, mindfulness training may directly intervene in the attention and hyperactivity or impulsivity problem of these children.

While developing a program for these youth, I felt that at least one of their parents should be included in a parallel mindfulness program for parents. The idea was that as these youth still lived with their family, the mindfulness skills that they would learn in order to deal better with their attention and behavioral and social problems would have to be embedded in a family context in which mindfulness is somehow installed, in the way a family eats dinner and spends time together, in family relations, and in dealing with family stress and conflicts. Moreover, some of the parents had similar attention and impulsivity issues as their child, and mindfulness could help them become less impulsive and more attentive in their contact with their child. Also, raising a child with one or more of these disorders is inherently stressful. Many parents had stressful years behind them where they were often called by school because of the difficulties school encountered with their child, by other parents because of the misbehavior of their child, or even by the police. Their child would not meet their expectations and hopes they had for their child in terms of performance at school, having friends or the “right” friends, and being engaged in leisure time activities. Or, the relationship they had built with this child would not meet their expectations for closeness, as their child would avoid contact with the parent; expectations of reciprocity, as their child had difficulties seeing the world from the perspective of the parent; or expectations of honesty, as the child had developed a pattern of lying or even stealing from the parent. Or, parents could not sleep at night, because their adolescent would come home very late or not at all, and they would worry about alcohol and drug abuse, and aggression they would meet on the street at night. Mindfulness could perhaps help parents deal with such stress and develop acceptance towards the, often severe, problems of their youth, of which it was unclear whether they would be susceptible to change, given the chronic history and lack of success of previous treatment. The idea was that if we cannot change the problem, we can at least work on our own relation towards the problem, by taking care of ourselves as parents, and practice an open, mild, and nonjudgmental attitude towards the problem.

We called the parallel mindfulness training for parents Mindful Parenting. The term Mindful Parenting was first used by Myla and Jon Kabat-Zinn in their book, *Everyday Blessings: The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting*, from 1997. They

described how intentionally bringing here and now nonjudgmental attention to parenting, children, and the family leads to deeper understanding of our children and ourselves. They suggested how Mindful Parenting can be healing and transformative for both children and parents.

Most of the parents participating had never heard about mindfulness back in 2000. Some were intrigued and motivated; others were just there because parental participation was a requirement for their child to participate in the training. Many parents were impressed by the effects of the practices on their parenting, family, and personal lives. For example, simply allowing themselves to feel how tired they were made a difference in their day. Some stated afterwards that they wished to have taken a Mindful Parenting course when their child was younger, as they now were dealing with sometimes very oppositional youth in a very critical period, almost leaving home.

Annette Heffels, a marital and family therapist, was a participant observer in one of my early Mindful Parenting courses, in order to write about it for a popular magazine targeting mothers. She commented on the strong group cohesion and safety she felt in the group, early in the 8-week process. She noticed that parents could not do it wrong in the group, even if they were late or had not done their home practice; they were just as welcome and accepted, simply for being present. Her observations made me think about what Jon Kabat-Zinn calls “heart-fulness” or Jeffrey Young “reparenting”: the feeling of being taken care of (by the group, the teacher, the meditations), and learning to take better care of yourself as a parent, may be essential for parents, who are carrying the heavy task of taking care of their children, sometimes in very difficult circumstances.

The combined effects of these first mindfulness groups for adolescents with externalizing disorders, and parallel Mindful Parenting for their parents, were that adolescents had improved in their externalizing and attention problems in important ways (Bögels, Hoogstad, van Dun, Schutter, & Restifo, 2008), but it remained unclear whether this was the result of their own mindfulness training, or the Mindfulness training for the parents, or both.

1.3.2 Mindful Parenting as a Course on Its Own

When I started to work in Amsterdam in 2008, I had the chance to collaborate with Joke Hellemans, a clinical psychologist and experienced mindfulness teacher, trained by Jon Kabat-Zinn’s group in the Center for Mindfulness of the University of Massachusetts medical school. We benefited greatly from Joke’s expertise and depth of experience with, and embodiment of, MBSR and MBCT and their clinical use with adults suffering from stress (MBSR) and from depression (MBCT). Thus, she was able to contribute significantly to the curriculum of Mindful Parenting around the essential elements of these two approaches, namely, (1) their emphasis on the systematic formal and informal practice of mindfulness and (2) group discussion about the participants’ life experiences with the practice.

Joke and I started our first Mindful Parenting course without a parallel mindfulness training for their children. The advantage of this approach was that we could now

include parents of children of all ages and all kinds of psychopathology and also parents whose children had no particular problems but who themselves were suffering from problems that interfered with their parenting. Parents that were interested in taking this course had encountered a wide variety of issues in their parenting. Some had difficulties related to their marriage, such as having gone through a divorce and their children not accepting their new partner. Others had parenting issues related to their own mental health, such as having suffered from postnatal depression and feeling guilty towards their child as a result. Some had parenting problems related to their background, such as having experienced trauma as a child and revisiting that while having children themselves. Still others had problems related to balancing parenting with other tasks, such as being ill from work since having children. And finally, others confronted parenting problems around mental health-related difficulties of their children, such as separation anxiety disorder, autistic spectrum disorder, and ADHD.

The duration of the sessions was now twice as long: 3 hours instead of the 1.5 hours of the Mindful Parenting course that was offered parallel to a child mindfulness course (Since for children 1.5 hours was found to be the ideal duration for the mindfulness course; we kept the time the same for their parents for practical reasons of bringing and taking the children and also to make the Mindful Parenting intervention more acceptable for parents who simply participated because it was required). Around two-third of the new 3 hours course was based on the 8-session MBSR and MBCT program. Around one-third was Mindful Parenting, relying on our own previous protocols and experience in the shorter Mindful Parenting parallel to child mindfulness groups and on newly developed practices for which the book *Parenting from the Inside Out* of Dan Siegel and Mary Hartzell (2003) gave much inspiration. We were touched and impressed by the results. Parents described transformational changes in their own lives and in the ways they related to their children and partners. On questionnaire measures, they reported large improvements on their children's as well as their own psychopathology symptoms as well as on parenting and family functioning measures (Bögels et al., 2010).

Joke and I each ran many more Mindful Parenting groups, using the same program, in the academic mental health center for parents and children *UvA minds* in Amsterdam. Many child and family therapists, and mindfulness trainers, accompanied us in this process by sitting in as a participant observer during one of the courses and giving us feedback on what they observed and how the Mindful Parenting helped them in their own lives, balancing family and other obligations. In 2010, Kathleen and I ran a Mindful Parenting course together, for English language parents. From her background as a child and family therapist, her training as a mindfulness trainer, her research into family factors in child depression, and her interest in evolutionary psychology and compassion-focused approaches, we started to rewrite the program, integrating our thinking about mechanisms of change in Mindful Parenting as well as important theories and mindfulness-related interventions for preventing intergenerational transmission of psychopathology and negative parenting practices (e.g., Bögels & Brechman-Toussaint, 2008; Bögels et al., 2010; Restifo & Bögels, 2009).

1.3.3 Compassion, Loving Kindness, and Mindful Parenting – Kathleen’s Story

During the course of my training in mindfulness practice, I was influenced by exposure to loving kindness meditation, which I first came across in Sara Naphthali’s (2003) book *Buddhism for Mothers*. I recognized myself in Naphthali’s constant struggle to be a “good” mother, measuring herself up to some inchoate but absolute standard, and the inevitable failure to live up to it. As a psychologist, I had worked for many years with people struggling with self-esteem issues, perfectionism, self-hatred, and suicidal thoughts or attempts. I had also struggled with my own perfectionism and high standards, which could leave me feeling inadequate in my work and in my role of being a mother. Here was a practice which had love and kindness at the center of it and which assumed that kindness, love, and compassion can be cultivated by anyone. In my training as a psychologist, I had learned to emphasize the deficits that people had rather than looking at their inborn potential as human beings. Loving kindness meditation offered a different possibility: by intentionally practicing kind, compassionate, and loving wishes towards oneself and others, we can cultivate our innate capacity for these positive states, towards ourselves and towards others.

Shortly after this, I had my first guided experience with this practice during a silent retreat with Martine and Stephan Batchelor. Martine Batchelor’s (2001) simple and poetic phrasing touched me and became the foundation for my own loving kindness practice. A year later, when I co-led my first Mindful Parenting group with Susan, we were struck by how self-critical and depleted the mothers seemed. Despite their obvious strengths professionally and as parents, they seemed to all struggle with feelings of guilt, of failure, and of not succeeding as parents. At the same time, these were clearly devoted mothers who loved their children and who wanted to do their best with them. I wondered if loving kindness meditation would speak to them as well, especially since the metaphor that the Buddha invoked to describe the attitude of kindness was a mother’s love for her only child. We introduced loving kindness practice, and many parents responded positively to it.

Soon after, I learned of Kristin Neff’s work on self-compassion. A developmental psychologist as well as long-time mindfulness practitioner, Neff has translated self-compassion practice into psychological terms and has conducted research on it. Her idea of using self-compassion practice to help deal with self-esteem issues fit into our sense of what was missing in the parents we saw in our group: self-compassion for their difficulties and struggles as parents (Neff, 2011). At the same time, I became aware of Gilbert’s (2009) work on compassion-focused therapy. His description of patients who suffered from feeling shame and self-judgment and who could understand intellectually that their thoughts were not facts, but who could not feel loving or kind towards themselves, matched what we were seeing. Gilbert’s point that we can cultivate compassionate states with certain kinds of practices and imagery, and that these practices may activate the underlying neuroendocrine processes subserving feelings of contentment and affiliation, was exciting. I also read Christopher Germer’s work on compassion and mindfulness, and Susan and I

attended a workshop with him to learn some of the self-compassion techniques which he and Kristin Neff had developed, to see if we could integrate them in the Mindful Parenting course (Germer, 2009; Neff, 2011).

We began to wonder how we could incorporate these practices into the Mindful Parenting course from the beginning, so that it would become a red thread through the entire course, since we felt that parents would need to practice this over time. We struggled to understand the relationship between compassion and mindfulness. Through conversations with mindfulness trainers and psychologists – Nirbay Singh, Joke Hellemans, Mark Williams, Christopher Germer, Christina Feldman, John Teasdale, Myla Kabat-Zinn, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Rebecca Crane, and Franca Warmenhoven – we began to understand loving kindness as the basic underlying attitude of all mindfulness practice, something which cannot be separated from mindfulness practice. At the same time, we felt that teaching the specific practices of self-compassion and loving kindness might help parents cultivate this attitude.

1.3.4 Schema Modes and Mindful Parenting

In our Mindful Parenting groups, and in our own parenting experiences, we noticed how a stressful situation between a parent and child could sometimes erupt into a very emotional interaction. The hallmarks of these interactions were quick, automatic, and often angry emotional reactions as well as quick escalation of the conflict between parent and child. Many parents describe these interactions as “losing it” with their child and afterwards feel remorse and shame about having lost control of themselves and having behaved in a destructive manner towards their child.

We began to think about what exactly was going on in these situations. Clearly, parents were becoming emotionally triggered by something in the interaction with their child; once triggered, they seemed to go into an almost altered state of consciousness from which there was no turning back. In this “altered state,” they reacted quickly, automatically, and with strong emotions. This would often lead to the child responding in anger and hurt, which further escalated the strong negative emotions. We wondered (1) what is it about the parent–child relationship which seems so ripe for this kind of interaction, and (2) what is the parent’s experience during these interactions and (3) how can we help parents interact more wisely in these situations?

We were very much helped by psychiatrist Dan Siegel and early childhood educator Mary Hartzell’s description of “low-road” parenting in their book “Parenting from the Inside Out.” This refers to fast, automatic reactions to perceived threat which can be triggered in stressful interactions with our children which we discussed above. These reactions are mediated by the limbic system and amygdala, and bypass higher cortical involvement. Dan Siegel describes such a low-road moment between himself and his 12-year-old son, which began over a dispute about a video game his son wanted to purchase. His example of “losing it” matched what we were seeing clinically and what we had sometimes experienced in our own relationships with children and partners (Siegel & Hartzell, 2003). We saw that mindfulness practice, especially