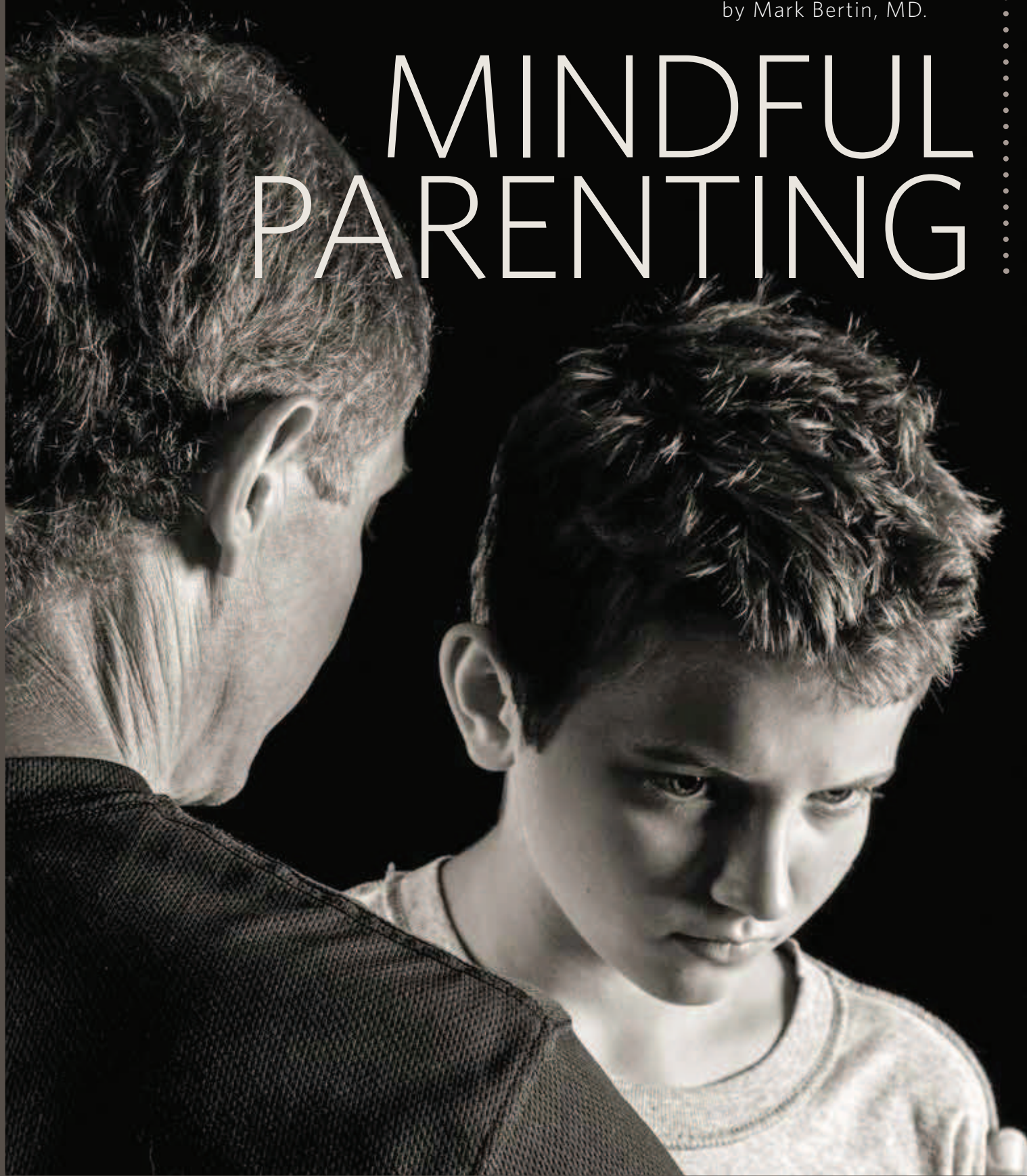


by Mark Bertin, MD.

MINDFUL PARENTING



OUR MINDS PRODUCE A CONSTANT PATTERN—or deluge—of thoughts, not all of which are entirely useful. Many ideas and assumptions we have about ourselves, others, and the world around us feel like facts. Maybe we believe the judgmental inner voice that says, *I blew it again* or *Everyone is watching me*. Maybe we suspect a hidden agenda when our teen says, “Can I stay at Joey’s house on Saturday night?” We often give even the most random thoughts and emotions free rein to influence our lives.

ADHD and Communication

When you attend to your mental chatter, you’ll begin to notice when you’ve been triggered before a series of reactions tumble forth. You might then pause for a moment and avoid well-worn neurological ruts, realizing, *I’m feeling rattled right now. I’d better take care with what I say next*. You can also begin to see the difference between your inner critic beating you up (*I’m awful; what was I thinking?*) and acknowledging that you’ve erred (*I said that poorly*).

When you don’t attend to your experience in this way, something can fluster you and initiate a stress response without you ever noticing what started it. You can end up trapped in impotent silence or reacting to scattershot emotions and entirely unable to engage in creative problem solving, all because of something outside your awareness that sent you into stress mode.

When you’re on autopilot, habitual patterns will inevitably influence how you act and speak. An unconscious expectation that all seven-year-old boys can sit through a meal will lead to frustration each and every time yours gets up from his seat. But if you notice that trigger, you can set off down a different path, maybe allowing him a break from the table, rewarding him if he does stay seated, or letting the behavior slide for a while. Suddenly, everyone gets along better at dinnertime. That type of change starts from being aware in the first place.

No matter how out of control, uninterested, or irrational your child acts at a given point in time, what you do or say can potentially escalate or de-escalate the situation. These choices also teach your child lessons in conflict management and influence how he communicates. You can always dominate by yelling louder, or by resorting to sarcasm or silence, but that will teach your child that the loudest voice, or the most biting or least responsive, wins. Yet not standing your ground reinforces another set of maladaptive patterns. A middle ground exists where you can both stand up for your beliefs and conduct yourself in a way that facilitates effective, calm communication.

From *Mindful Parenting for ADHD: A Guide to Cultivating Calm, Reducing Stress & Helping Children Thrive*, published by New Harbinger Publications. Copyright 2015 by Mark Bertin and reprinted by permission. This is the second of a two-part series dealing with ADHD and mindful communication.

Communication repair

So you have a child whom you love without bounds, and yet sometimes he infuriates you. He wakes to read at five in the morning even though you know he would be happier with more sleep. You mostly manage to ignore his whining and tantrums, but they persist for months, always about the exact same things.

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Check in with your own experience. Pause and let the situation de-escalate. Take a moment to consider your child's perspective.

On and on it goes, and at some point you max out. You do exactly what you promised yourself you'd never do. You shut down, get angry, or just feel completely at a loss. You may then fall back on old, less effective communication habits or even toss the entire idea of managing your child's ADHD right out the window.

What's the answer? There is no perfect, singular solution much of the time. The first step toward mending such situations, before addressing them with your child, is to check in with your own experience. Pause and let the situation de-escalate. Then take a moment to consider your child's perspective. Perhaps apologize and make amends if

it's needed. And then set an intention, in words at first and afterward through your actions, to compromise and try something new in guiding your child forward.

Mindfulness and communication

As a reminder, being mindful doesn't mean having idyllic images of yourself that put you in a position to chronically fall short. Rather, by pausing and paying attention, you can identify personal traits you'd like to develop and habits you want to discourage. You can notice when you miss the mark and, without giving yourself a hard time, aim back toward your intentions.

Bringing mindfulness into communication starts with awareness and responsiveness. As you move out of autopilot, you can notice all the nuances of whatever is going on. Then you can pause briefly to settle your thoughts. That centered point can be challenging to maintain in the midst of an intense discussion, but it will help you stay in touch with your best intentions.

To be more genuinely responsive, you have to tune in to all the things you may be reacting to in the first place. You might discover a judgmental inner voice, find yourself lost in dense thoughts about the future or the past, or simply notice that you woke up in an awful mood that's darkening your outlook.

Gut reactions to even seemingly straightforward experiences in life often reflect layers of thoughts



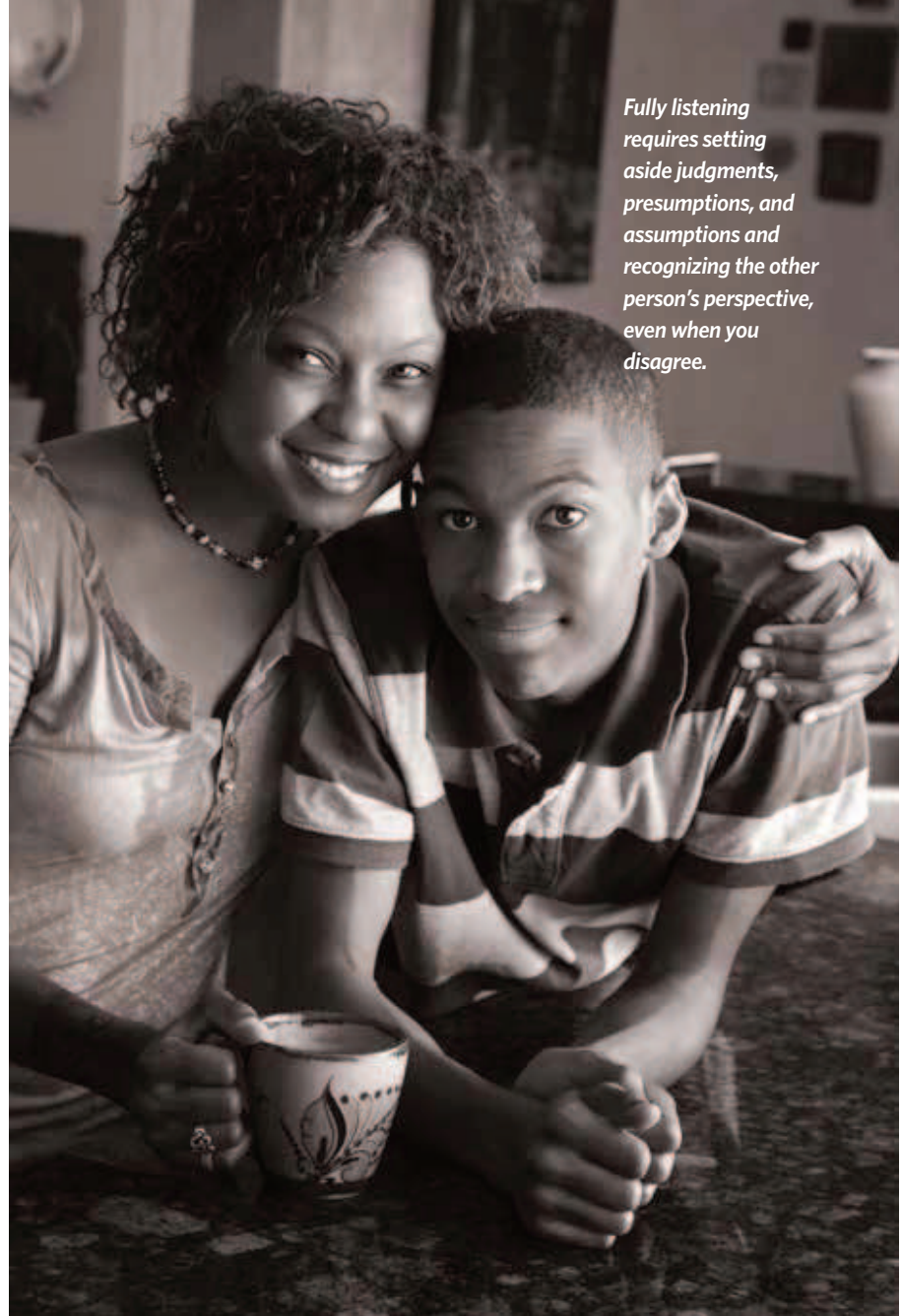
How Do You Communicate with Your Child?



OVER THE NEXT SEVERAL DAYS, observe how you communicate with your child, noticing both more effective and less effective communication patterns. Here are some examples of approaches that typically don't encourage successful communication. Attend to how often you communicate in these ways, and if you notice that you're about to do so, pause and consider taking a different approach:

- Starting to speak before your child finishes
- Finishing your child's statements
- Using overly long sentences (more than about ten words) without a pause
- Speaking without pausing to listen
- Giving instructions with multiple parts or asking questions with multiple parts
- Speaking to your child reactively, rather than intentionally
- Using barbed comments meant to correct your child: "For the thousandth time, get started on your homework!!"
- Making hurtful, reactive comments that reflect your disappointment, frustration, or anger: "I can't take care of you forever."

At the same time, monitor how often you offer your child encouragement and actively work toward increasing this type of communication. Make an effort to point out and label what goes well when it happens, both verbally and with physical affection. Note these moments before your child has a chance to take off in another direction. Begin to focus on providing more positive feedback than negative every day. To increase your chances of success, spend some time coming up with positive comments that feel natural to you and list them on a piece of paper so they'll come to you more easily in the moment.



Fully listening requires setting aside judgments, presumptions, and assumptions and recognizing the other person's perspective, even when you disagree.

and emotions. So although you may be angry because your child hasn't done his homework, perhaps there are deeper layers of fear about what could happen five years from now if his academic performance doesn't improve. Or perhaps you struggled with homework yourself as a child, and that memory is coloring your present experience.

To support yourself in becoming more genuinely responsive, especially with your child, it's helpful to bring awareness to the many facets of your experience as you communicate, especially your thoughts, emotions, body language, and sensations, as outlined below.

AWARENESS OF THOUGHTS. As you enter a conversation with your child, you may have already decided how he'll react and what he'll say. You may make assumptions about his culpability based on what you've seen in the past, but maybe this time it isn't his fault. Nothing shuts

down a conversation more quickly than an assumption of guilt, such as entering the room stating, "Out with it! You'd better have a good explanation for why you aren't doing your homework." You may be anticipating excuses and denials, yet perhaps this will be the time he charts a new path. Remember, thoughts are just thoughts, sometimes accurate, sometimes inaccurate. Fully listening requires setting aside judgments, presumptions, and assumptions and recognizing the other person's perspective, even when you disagree.

AWARENESS OF EMOTIONS. Under stress, the brain's fear center takes over and shuts down flexible thinking and responding. Physical and mental reflexes take over. Being excessively angry, upset, anxious, or exhausted is likely to prevent a productive, intentional conversation. At these times, the best bet is to take a break and do what

you can to ground yourself and allow for more skillful communication. Doing a brief mindfulness practice can be very helpful. But sometimes you won't have an opportunity to settle yourself before continuing. Mindfulness can help here as well: Remain aware that you're rattled and not at your best.

interacting with your child, monitor your facial expressions, how close you're standing, how you're holding your arms, and any other body language. Along similar lines, monitor what your tone of voice may be conveying.

AWARENESS OF PHYSICAL SENSATIONS. Also tune in to physical sensations. This may allow you to notice when an interaction is starting to go awry and redirect yourself. For example, if you pick up the vague nausea you feel when you're nervous, that may be the first sign that you're getting overwhelmed, and it may show up long before your conscious mind typically figures it out. By noticing your tense hands, furrowed brow, or whatever other warning flag has arisen, you can intervene early and break a cycle of reactivity.

AWARENESS OF ADHD. Awareness of ADHD isn't technically a component of your inner experience, given that it's an awareness that is itself

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AWARENESS OF BODY LANGUAGE. Our bodies often disclose far more than the words we say. Any good poker player can tell you that facial expressions, mannerisms, and how people hold themselves reveal what they're thinking. When

Practicing Mindful Communication

So much of how any conversation goes is steered by how each person conducts himself or herself. In even the tensest moment, you have an opportunity to de-escalate the situation by listening and expressing yourself in ways that make successful communication more likely. Even when your child seems to be intentionally oppositional, managing your side of the conversation well can set the stage for change. Here are some specific steps to take in that direction:

- Listen first. When you feel a serious conversation is needed, allow your child the opportunity to express his perspective first. Then, if you disagree, pause and explain why.
- Notice your expectations about how conversations with your child will go or assumptions about his thoughts, and set them aside while listening.
- Monitor your body language, posture, tone of voice, and facial expression and make sure they're in alignment with what you want to convey.
- Monitor your emotional state and its influence on the situation. If you're feeling strong emotions, consider taking a break or having the discussion at another time.
- Pause before and during speaking. Make sure your child is done speaking before you respond, and make sure you're being heard when it's your turn. Ask for repetition or rephrasing periodically if you are uncertain.
- Monitor yourself in any discussion by using the STOP or Fifteen Breaths practice. For challenging conversations, pause, take a few mindful breaths, and observe both before starting and periodically throughout. Then refocus on your intentions for communicating with your child.

The STOP Practice

S = Stop what you're doing.

T = Take a few breaths.

O = Observe what's going on, both internally and externally.

P = Proceed with intention, choosing what would be best to do next.

The Fifteen Breaths Practice

When you begin feeling rattled or exhausted, or when transitioning from one part of your day to the next, take a break for a minute and use this practice.

- Focus on your next fifteen breaths without striving to make anything happen beyond observing and letting go.
- Expect distracted thoughts and everything else that tugs at you.
- When your mind drifts, come back to wherever you left off counting. In an unforced way, bring your attention back to the moment and your breathing as often as need be.

comprised of thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations. But in your efforts to communicate more effectively with your child, awareness of his ADHD can be quite useful. For example, distractibility, impulsiveness, interrupting, talking too loudly, or being overly talkative can all disrupt discussions. Recognizing them as ADHD symptoms may help reduce your frustration and reactivity and increase your ability to facilitate effective communication.

Using an ADHD plan to support mindful communication

Like most people, you probably have a vision of how you'd ideally manage confrontations, and you probably recognize the benefits of a measured, dispassionate approach. You may remember to pause and bring your intentions to mind. But what happens when, after pausing, you still find yourself in the midst of that challenging situation with no clear idea about what to do next?


It's hard to remain responsive when you don't have a solid plan for handling ADHD. You may eventually find yourself shouting, giving in, or whatever else you set out

not to do. Identifying direct communication strategies to use with your child will make it easier to stick to your intentions. You need both mindfulness and a skillfully constructed plan.

During a calmer moment, with time to reflect, use the skills you've learned to establish a new strategy. Come up with targeted solutions for the situations that trigger you most. Then, next time those situations arise, when you pause you'll have another option: *I feel like exploding, but instead I'll remind my child of the consequence for this behavior.* Then write that solution down and post it where it can serve as a reminder.

Over time, continue to monitor communications with your child. Use the STOP practice frequently, pausing and making a conscious effort to act and speak in accordance with your intentions. Remind yourself of your intentions, perhaps posting them as a visible reminder as well. 🗨

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A black and white photograph of a man and a woman in a kitchen. The man, on the left, is wearing a checkered button-down shirt and is gesturing with his hands while speaking. The woman, on the right, is seen in profile, wearing a white top, and appears to be listening. In the background, there is a kitchen counter with a sink and a range hood.

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