



GARRISON INSTITUTE REPORT

MINDFUL PARENTING: CONCEPTUALIZATION AND MEASUREMENT

**A Symposium of the Garrison Institute's
Initiative on Contemplation and Education**

September 2010

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Conceptualization and Measurement

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ABOUT THE GARRISON INSTITUTE

Founded in 2003, the Garrison Institute is a non-profit, non-sectarian organization exploring the intersection of contemplation and engaged action in the world.

Our mission is to apply the transformative power of contemplation to today's pressing social and environmental problems, helping build a more compassionate, resilient future.

We envision and work to build a future in which contemplative ideas and approaches are increasingly mainstream, and are applied at scale to create the conditions for positive, systemic social and environmental change.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Co-sponsored by The Garrison Institute and the Kirlin Charitable Foundation, this meeting convened twenty researchers, clinicians and other leaders interested in and working with family intervention programs that integrate mindfulness-based techniques and practices. The group was gathered to conceptualize around the topics of Mindful Parenting and Reflective Functioning in Parenting, in order to move forward with clinical research trials and defining possible systems of measurement. This meeting grew out of a gathering of experts on mindful parenting and stakeholders from other sectors held in Seattle in 2009. The discussions at the 2009 meeting provided the springboard for shaping and convening the 2010 Mindful Parenting meeting with a focus on research and measurement.

The following working definition of mindful parenting was used during the meeting:

Mindful parenting is the ongoing process of intentionally bringing moment-to-moment, non-judgmental awareness as best one can to the unfolding of one's own lived experience, including parenting. Cultivating mindfulness in parenting starts with self-awareness. It grows to include:

1. recognizing and keeping in mind each child's unique nature, temperament, and needs;
2. developing the capacity to listen and creatively engage with full attention when interacting with one's children;
3. holding in awareness with kindness and sensitivity, to whatever degree possible, both one's child's and one's own physical, emotional and mental states and motivations—including inner feelings, thoughts, body sensations, intentions, expectations, and desires;
4. developing the reflective capacity to make links between physical/emotional/mental states and behavior in self and others;
5. developing an effective set of parenting skills, including greater self-regulation, which in turn can positively affect one's child's ability to self-regulate, and can lead to more positive parent-child interactions;
6. bringing greater compassion and non-judgmental acceptance to oneself and one's children while establishing a relational foundation that is thoughtful and discerning;
7. recognizing and protecting against one's own reactive impulses in relationship to one's children and their behavior, and responding in ways that are decisive and

developmentally appropriate to a child's needs.

This approach invites parents to hold their present-moment parenting experiences within the context of the long-term relationship they have with their child, and a vision of relational health, trust and happiness.

Facilitated by Ron Rabin of the Kirlin Charitable Foundation and Nancy Ashely of Heliotrope, the agenda for this meeting was considered an 'emergent curricula', in order to allow for discussion to develop and adapt to the needs and issues the group determined were most pertinent for future research. As such, the tentative goals of exploring the definition of mindful parenting and its correlating observable behaviors and defining a research agenda were set. Discussions were focused around the following core areas:

1. Defining and identifying observable behaviors that constitute mindful parenting.
2. Defining systems of measurement for future research and clinical trials.
3. Identifying key research questions to move forward in collaborative work.

The discussions took on a natural flow as participants discovered the richness of their collective work and possible connections upon which to build. The focus on trying to identify the observable and measureable indicators of mindful parenting and reflective function served as both a container for the group process and a way to inspire people's creative imaginations. At the end of the 2 ½ day period, the group's rich discussions led to the identification of several key research areas for next steps and future collaborative work. The group was also able to identify areas of concern that need to be addressed in order for mindful parenting programs to best meet the needs of specific populations. There was a consensus that the following areas were most pertinent to be addressed:

1. Determine whether 'mindful parenting' is an emerging field or an approach.
2. Consider the impact that cultural differences will have in the effectiveness of mindful parenting programs, and that adaptability to contextual factors will be necessary for programs to have the highest rate of effectiveness.
3. Establishing a system of measurement for mindful parenting behaviors will require a collaborative research approach.

The format of the meeting included large group presentations; large group discussion; small group discussions on the question of how to identify observable behaviors; small group sessions of viewing video clips to identify observable behaviors; participants sharing one another's work; and planning for future work.

Keeping in line with the Garrison Institute's mission to explore the intersection of contemplation and engaged action, several meeting participants shared mindfulness and awareness activities with the group throughout the meetings.

I. REPORTING

1) PROGRAM MAPPING AND LITERATURE REVIEW

A report and literature review was provided by Larissa Duncan during the opening session to give the group an overview of current parenting inter- and prevention programs that incorporate mindfulness techniques. This information was provided in hard copy to all participants in advance. Much emergent literature has begun to look at the effects of mindfulness practices on relationships, including parenting. It was with the publication of Jon and Myla Kabat-Zinn's book *Everyday Blessings* in 1997 that the subject of mindful parenting was first seriously undertaken, stemming from their previous work and their own experiences as parents. Then, in 2005, a call was made for an empirical evaluation/evidence-based approach to mindful parenting by Dumas. The literature review was put together to provide all participants with common language and a sense of what resources and research are currently available. The mapping project was conducted looking at current programs whose work is available via the internet, recognizing that such a project leaves out a large body of work that has not yet been published or is otherwise not available online.

Currently there are two perspectives: Mindful Parenting and Parental Reflective Functioning. Based on a study by Duncan, Coatsworth and Greenberg (2009), Mindful Parenting includes the following five core concepts: being fully present; non-judgmental awareness; emotional awareness; self-regulation; and compassion. Much of the available information on Mindful Parenting programs is taken more from intervention assessments and less from observational research. Programs have been developed both for general populations and for clinical trials with at-risk populations. At present, the only assessment scale that has been developed is the Interpersonal Mindfulness in Parenting (IM-P) Scale, which is available in 31-item and 10-item versions.

Conversely, in Parental Reflective Functioning programs most of the research that has been done has been observational research versus intervention assessment. The construct of Reflective Functioning has been greatly developed, but interventional research has only just begun. Much of the construct of

Parental Reflective Functioning grew out of work on maternal attachment and mentalization, defined by Fonagy and Target. Mentalization is the ability to understand behavior with the use of underlying mental states and intentions, which allows one to make sense of and to anticipate one's own and others' actions. Several measures have been created with little intervention research having been done, developed for both general populations and high-risk populations.

During the presentation it was noted that cultural differences between groups of parents will greatly vary in determining a set of observable behaviors that constitutes mindful parenting. It was also noted that observed mindful behaviors may be explicit or implicit, and that there is also a difference in parents' ability to articulate their process of handling a situation a particular way and the responses/behaviors that may be observed. As such, self-reporting is often a contested form of assessment within Mindful Parenting research, thus highlighting the need for establishing a system of measuring observable behaviors.

2) DEFINING AND IDENTIFYING MINDFUL PARENTING BEHAVIORS

Mark Greenberg opened this discussion with a presentation on 'What is Mindfulness?' in order to set the stage for a larger discussion on identifying mindful behaviors in parents. Much of the group discussions revolved around attempting to identify and define measurable behaviors that could be used broadly in research and clinical trials and between child age groups/developmental stages. Noting that the two theoretical frameworks of Mindful Parenting (MP) and Parental Reflective Functioning (RF) are distinct, the group began discussions with the prospect of identifying a taxonomy of constituent parts. Much discussion was also had regarding how to speak about mindfulness practices with groups of parents - explicitly or implicitly - and the potential of such language to distance some parent groups from accepting a program's methodologies. Further, more than simply listing similarities and differences, the group proposed to consider the quality of connections between the two frameworks in order to best define a shared system of measurement.

Selected statements from participants:

Tom Dishion – How can we, aside from whether or not this is secular or deeper, take some key notions that are probably the underpinnings of mindfulness and translate them to our clients in a way that is useful to them; that doesn't turn them off with all the baggage of the terms? I think this group is good to brainstorm, to generate those strategies that worked in our work, and that might be a set of tools for others to draw on.

John Grienenberger – When it comes to direct working with parents, there is a lot that you can do about how explicitly we acknowledge the sources of our approaches...it is very tricky, because as soon as you start to speak to that it triggers all kinds of positive and defensive reactions. At the same time there is something that I feel is disingenuous being the ‘wizard behind the curtain’ in drawing from all kinds of ideas and not making that explicit, in the implementation in saying what you are doing, where it comes from and why you are doing it.

Arietta Slade - We have to keep in mind what they, those parents, think they need from us, and what they are asking for. One of the things is so challenging about the work - which I would call regulated compassionate parenting - what we are dealing with in the context of working with them is a great deal of pain, of suffering. For those of us working in really traumatized, challenged, highly stressed populations, these kinds of abstract terms do not quite do justice to what we are faced with on a daily basis; the more so the more stressed the communities. How do we help people manage intense pain? Nothing is really more charged than parenting, in terms of its intensity; we talk about mindfulness, reflectiveness, but it’s so challenging. I do not think we have talked enough about how the populations we are encountering are people who are really struggling with so much anguish, which makes anything that we do quite difficult.

Tish Jennings – We are so prone in our lives to repeat the pain we have experienced. We have our own ‘ghosts of the nursery’ that we impose on our kids, unconsciously, and our kids reflect that pain to us in what they are doing. Mindfulness helps us see that that is what is happening, and helps us not pass on that pain from generation to generation.

Observable Parenting Behaviors

Along with large group discussion, the group also broke out into two small groups to watch video clips from parenting interventions in order to determine what behaviors may be observed that would constitute mindful parenting behavior. The small groups were divided based on participants’ expertise within childhood developmental stages, either infant/early childhood or young child/adolescence, and the video clips shown to each group corresponded to that age group with one video clip that overlapped both age groups. The two groups reconvened to share with one another what possible observable behaviors and areas of measurement were viewed, in order to move towards establishing the parameters of a research agenda for the group’s future work.

Selected statements from participants:

Doug Coatsworth (speaking on behalf of adolescent small group)- We talked about a broad aspect of interaction called mutuality, something that Tom [Dishion] brought up. Mutuality has to do with a patterning of interaction between parent and adolescent over time, so that they are one the same page as they move forward. It is in the moment, but it is also over time, so that the judgment is made over time...this is another dimension of how a mindful parent would stay attuned, or in tuned, with their adolescent.

Alfiee Breland-Noble – How do we gain clarity around how these concepts and constructs are going to look across different populations? We need to be clear that we have a framework that we use in multiple contexts. We would still be looking for universals knowing that they might manifest themselves differently depending on the context. We need a participatory process for developing codes; something that fits the majority of people in that group but knowing that it will not be universal.

Mark Greenberg (speaking on behalf of early childhood group) – We got into a lot of discussion talking about the cultural piece, and noting what in this [list of observable behaviors] might be common, without necessarily looking the same, but also what might be different across different cultural contexts. We spent less time trying to add dimensions and spent a lot of time talking about the dyad interactions we watched, and where we would put them on a dimension of mindfulness.

Tom Dishion – One exercise that is useful is to take these scenarios [the video clips] and say “that was a 7, but what would make it a 10?” Then you could role play it out and give out transcripts, so that you would have some examples of the continuum. Also, “what would be a 2?” That might help clarify our thinking of what would be the behavior that we are trying to code.

Betty Emarita – It is interesting that we [the two groups] came to the same conclusion, the same kind of statement that this work needs to be a collaborative process. So that we are able to see what people across different cultures would say about the commune, how they would describe them, that that would be a very useful tool.

Nancy Ashley – We also had a lot of discussion about our own lenses, our own biases...and a lot of awareness about how our own perceptions' history was effecting our interpretation of what

we were seeing.

It was noted that seeking commonalities across parenting techniques is not the same as seeking sameness in parenting techniques. Noting that cultural differences play such a large role in creating a system of measurement and a codable list of behaviors, the large group discussed the possibility of collaborative work between researchers and groups of parents. The goal of such collaboration, however, would not be to define a single scientific measure that would cross all cultural divides, but a measure and a coding scheme that would speak to a broad range of cultures and that would be adaptable.

3) CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

Differences in Age/Developmental Stage

As part of the conceptualization discussion the group divided into two smaller groups in order to assess the differences to mindful parenting approaches based on child age groups and developmental stages. From these small groups the discussions related to the notion that many challenges face parents throughout the parenting process, and emphasis was placed on parenting being a continuum, where each developmental stage brings its own challenges. With this in mind, both groups discussed the needs of parents to be able to handle the variety of stresses and challenges of caring for a child, while also maintaining their own autonomy and self care.

Some key points from the small groups included:

- Children are changing day-to-day, and so are parents
- MP and RF programs place value on adult development, which is often overlooked as most parenting and family programs emphasize the child's development
- Noting the importance of response flexibility; avoiding auto-pilot responses
- Staying aware of the changing nature of extended families and communities of support
- Noting that mindful parenting will look different within and through different cultural settings
- Navigating moments of rupture and having the tools to repair, both in the child's life and within the parent's life.

Cultural Differences

One of the greatest potential challenges to defining areas of measurement for mindful parenting programs lies in determining what cultural factors must

be taken into consideration if the goal is to produce a set of criteria that can be used the most broadly. Group members voiced several concerns around this topic, as it was made apparent that establishing a set of measurable behaviors will be extremely difficult given the wide variety of culture-specific parenting techniques. As mentioned above, the group discussed possibilities of collaborative research methods in order to define a set of codable and observable mindful parenting behaviors. Parenting has developed across cultures for millennia, and the approach from modern science should not be a hierarchical, top-down approach, but open and aware of multiple ways of knowing. It was also noted that using quantitative language, such as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ descriptors of a behavior, could be highly alienating to certain parenting groups, and to seek out more qualitative language. Another important note was made regarding the cultural biases of the researchers and coders who would be conducting an observation or intervention, as the group was reminded that differences in a data survey may reflect as much the recorders’ differences as actual differences between the research subjects.

II. ACTION STEPS

The major working goal of the meeting was to identify top research questions and areas of possible measurement for moving forward. Meeting participants agreed to establish teams working parallel to one another, focusing on different methodologies in order to best encompass all the pertinent components of a mindfulness-based parenting approach. The following areas were identified as key points to be addressed:

- Determine whether Mindful Parenting and Parental Reflective Functioning should be one field or separate approaches under a larger umbrella field.
- Identify the core principles of mindful/reflective parenting that can be used to enhance other existing parenting programs.
- Explore and identify existing practices and beliefs with kinship to mindful parenting.
- Utilize a mixed methods approach to identifying core behaviors the group is interested in understanding, coding and measuring.
- Conduct a qualitative assessment study of ‘mindfulness’ across different spiritual traditions.
- Develop parallel coding systems for mindful parenting with teen/adolescent and early childhood age groups, drawing upon codes from existing videotapes.

APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANTS

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Alfiee Breland-Noble, Duke University
Doug Coatsworth, Penn State University
Tom Dishion, University of Oregon
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