

MBCT for Parents

What is MBCT for Parents?

A mindfulness course with the specific intention of supporting one of the most rewarding, challenging and stressful jobs in the world, that of the parent. It is:

- an 8-week skills-based course that teaches the practice of mindfulness meditation and specifically explores how this might relate to the role of parenting
- adapted from the Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) course, which has already been taught to the general public for many years at The Oxford Mindfulness Centre, University of Oxford
- a combination of mindfulness meditation, and discussion about experiences of this, with psycho-education, cognitive exercises and the science of parenting
- designed to cultivate skillful parenting through awareness of body and mind.

Rather than a 'how to parent' course this experiential programme focuses on cultivating a better understanding of our own patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving and learning new ways of relating to these. This can enhance our ability to regulate our own emotions and behaviours as parents and as individuals, as well as our capacity for acceptance, patience, kindness and compassion in relation to our children and ourselves.

It is not group therapy, even though the word therapy is in the title, instead it teaches us practical skills, helps us to navigate the emotional and physical challenges of life and parenting, enabling us to tap into our own inner wisdom and to stay centered in this work.

Why should I sign-up?

People undertake a mindfulness course for a variety of reasons, including to improve their physical and / or mental health and being a parent can have an impact on both of these. As well as bringing us much joy and love, parenting is also a highly demanding role which comes with a great sense of responsibility, namely the wellbeing of the next generation, which in turn has an impact upon the world around us.

Perhaps as a result of this, it is also a role which society takes very seriously and there is much advice and many schools of thought and theories about how to parent, some of which can seem completely opposite to one another. Added to this is the age we live in and so these ideas and theories on parenting are constantly communicated to us through traditional media such as newspapers, books, magazines and billboards and now also digitally through social media, email, blogs etc.

So it is little wonder, therefore, that parents can feel an enormous amount of pressure and maybe sometimes also stressed, lost and overwhelmed. Mindfulness can help us as parents to learn how to stay centered in the midst of all this, enabling us to tap into our own inner wisdom and existing resources which are typically so easy to overlook. It can also help us to see the bigger picture and thus to parent in a way that is more consistent with our deeper values and beliefs.

Aims and intentions of MBCT for Parents:

The aim and intention of the programme is to increase skillful parenting through:

- Enabling us to explore how the practice of mindfulness might support us in our role of parent
- An increased understanding of our own patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving, and learning new ways of relating to these
- A greater ability to manage emotions and respond skillfully to our child / children and their experiences, situation and / or behaviours
- Exploring how mindfulness might relate to discipline and how to cultivate a gentle discipline in relation to ourselves and our children
- Increasing our capacity as parents, and as individuals, for acceptance, patience, kindness and compassion
- Increasing our understanding of child emotional and psychological development
- Learning tools to draw upon in stressful situations so that we can be more available for our child / children
- Learning how to be present without being lost in or caught up with our own or our loved ones distress
- Helping our children to learn skillful behaviour *through* our examples as parents

What are the potential benefits?

Potential general benefits of the course:

High quality evidence shows benefits of 8-week mindfulness courses for a variety of life challenges including stress, anxiety, low mood, chronic pain, depression, addiction and insomnia. There is also evidence to suggest that mindfulness meditation can boost immune system functioning and can change the structure of the brain, developing the areas of the brain that are important for focus, empathy and compassion and emotional regulation and decreasing the area responsible for fear and perceived stress.

Potential parenting-related benefits of the course:

Evidence is emerging that mindfulness meditation programmes can be helpful for childbirth and parenting and mindfulness is increasingly being taught in schools for both pupils and teachers.

Recent research in 2015 and 2016, including a review of 22 studies in 2015, showed that increased mindful awareness predicted better mental health in parents and their children and that mindful parenting was associated with significantly lower levels of parenting stress, more helpful / effective parenting styles and discipline strategies.

More studies, conducted over longer periods of time with larger, more diverse populations are needed to discover why and how these results occur. However, our initial qualitative research with new parents who took a mindfulness course in pregnancy showed that they felt that a mindfulness course helped them to get 'closer to really living' and to develop 'greater connectedness and attunement' with each other and with their babies.