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DECEMBER 2013  
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A white silhouette of a hand reaching out from the left side of the page, set against a dark blue background with a subtle, textured pattern.

# *Raising the Mindful Family*

Busy schedules, digital devices, long commutes—all of this leads to family members who are disconnected from each other as never before. Psychologists **Stefanie and Elisha Goldstein** show us ways to strengthen relationships, increase everyone's well-being, and bring the family back together.

### An unsettling shift is happening in our culture

today: there's less and less intimate connection in modern families, as the bonds between partners, and between parents and children, weaken through distraction and busyness. Too many family members spend dinner hour (if it lasts that long) looking at their phones and tablets instead of connecting with each other. We convey our love on the fly, in sound bites and cursory text messages like "luv u." That's no substitute for looking into one another's eyes, feeling each other's touch, taking time for a real conversation, and saying "I love you" with meaning. It's easy to imagine a future in which disconnected families are the norm, as habitual routines blind us to the connections, choices, and wonders that make family life so rich.

Through our therapeutic work with hundreds of children, adolescents, adults, couples, and families, we have seen how deep and heartbreaking the growing disconnection in families can be. We've watched family after family give up trying to reconnect because it feels too hard and painful to try to reverse the direction of something that has been eroding for too long.

Seeing the depth of these challenges has inspired us to develop some principles and guidelines that might be helpful in raising a mindful family. We have done this not only to work with disconnected families—and help others not end up that way—but also because we wanted to discover how to raise our own children with love, understanding, playfulness, humor, and trust, and maintain a strong relationship in the midst of it all.

All of us start out with such high aspirations, but we run into difficulties along the way. When the inevitable challenges arise, we have learned over and over again (sometimes the hard way) that looking first to what *others* need to do to change is not the most effective place to start.

That's why our first principle is "raising the mindful self," which doesn't mean cultivating any special "self." It simply means that each of us has to do our own work first. The next natural place to put our attention is on our relationship with our partner, which will not do well on autopilot. We need to nurture and tend to it regularly. If that's happening, we're well on our way to giving our children what *they* need, because they will take their lead from us. How they see us *live* is more powerful than anything we *say* to them about mindfulness.

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**Elisha Goldstein**, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist who conducts a private practice in West Los Angeles. He is author of *The Now Effect* (Atria Books, 2012). **Stefanie Goldstein**, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist who works with adolescents, adults, couples, and families. They're the parents of two boys, ages 2 and 4.

## Raising the Mindful Self

### Years ago we were invited

to a private talk by the famous pediatrician and author Berry Brazelton. There were lots of questions from parents and professionals, including us, who were searching for "how to" answers to everyday parenting quandaries. Toward the end of his talk Brazelton said, "You know, it may be that the enormous field of child development and parenting has actually done parents a disservice. It has sent them the message that they need to look to experts to find the answers, when oftentimes the answers lie within. They always have."

Looking within is where we believe raising a mindful family starts—with each of us learning how to pause, listen deeply to ourselves, and trust our own wisdom. Finding spaces in our day to slow down, take a breath, and check in trains our minds to shift to a larger perspective in the midst of emotional reactions and see more clearly what we and others need in any given moment.

Raising a family is anything but simple. It offers multiple inputs coming at us from multiple directions, and if we get overwhelmed, our brain will operate on default. We will draw on our childhood emotional history to make quick

judgments about how to react to our own children and our partner. In our best moments, we can find the breathing space to see the bigger picture and consider healthy ways to respond. But as life becomes increasingly stressful and hectic, it's easy to fall into a routine of unhealthy, impulsive patterns that we may have inherited from our parents—despite the fact that we swore we would do it differently with our own family. Now we feel bad. Ashamed, we label ourselves "bad parent" or maybe "not good enough parent." Learning how to pause more frequently through the day can help you notice these patterns and provide insight into how you can reconnect to yourself, your partner (if you have one), and your children.

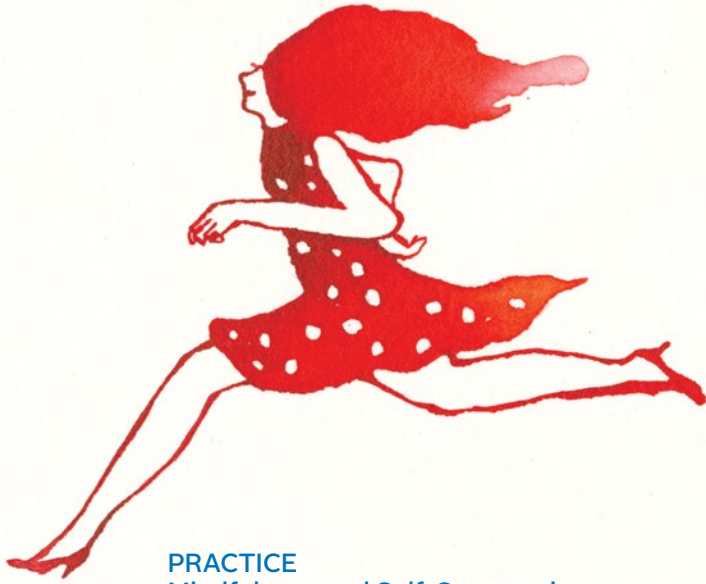
As parents, we're all imperfect. One of the most important practices we've found for raising a mindful family is applying self-compassion during the stressful moments: being aware of our own moments of struggling, with an inclination to help ourselves with kindness.

We recommend any of the many short mindfulness practices that teach you how to stop and quickly shift your perspective. We also encourage using practices that help you trust your inner wisdom as a parent—something we so often tend to doubt. Here's one practice that we've found particularly helpful.

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As parents, we're all imperfect. Remember that, and be kind to yourself during the stressful moments.





## PRACTICE Mindfulness and Self-Compassion

When you recognize you're in a stressful moment, acknowledge the difficulty by saying, "This is hard right now." Then ask yourself, "What do I need?"

Acknowledging and querying allow you to open up to wisdom you have within and build self-trust. Maybe you find that you want to have more patience or be free from the stress that's hitting you in the moment. Try placing your hand on your heart as a gesture of caring and say to yourself, "May I be at ease, have more patience, and be free from this stress."

If you want, you can take this deeper. You can imagine all of the other parents out there who have experienced this struggle and wish them the same. We're all connected on this imperfect journey of parenting. Recognizing that helps us drop the burden of self-judgment, feel more connected, and open up to what really matters. →



## Raising the Mindful Couple

**Like most parents, we've** experienced times when the quantity and quality of our connection has waned. In those periods we felt irritable, restless, and hungry to connect. But rather than find refuge in each other's companionship, we would numb the longing with distractions like television, work, or pouring an extra glass of wine—none of which quench the longing for loving connection. Whether you're in a partnership, recently out of one, or looking to be in one, setting the intention to nurture loving connections in your life is paramount for your own health and happiness.

A partnership is its own entity, almost like a person. It needs attention and nourishment in the same way your own body and mind do. But what's the best way to give it the kind of attention it needs?

Researcher and author Barbara Fredrickson recently defined love in a more subtle way than most of us tend to view it. "Love, as your body experiences it," she says, "is a micro-moment of connection shared with another."

That accords with our experience. Each day gives us many opportunities to create and share micro-moments of

connection with each other, yet we often fall into the trap of brushing past our loved one, seeing them as a static object. We miss the opportunity to *see the person*, with all their strengths, beauty, joys, and triumphs, and also their perceived failures and accumulated sufferings. Ultimately, when we see the person, we feel our shared humanity, in all its complexity. Creating micro-moments of connection can counteract the disconnection that so often creeps into a relationship and can help sustain our love. In fact, these moments *are* love.

According to many researchers, when we attend to these moments, we're not as activated by life's inevitable stressors. Because of that, old unhealthy patterns are not triggered so often by chaos and disruption—and we become a happier and more resilient person, partner, and parent. It may be hard to believe that moments of positive connection can actually sustain us during the disconnected times, but they can and they do. Love is a renewable energy source and can be found in the tiniest of moments.

### PRACTICE Cultivating Mindful Micro-Moments

Decide to create at least one micro-moment of connection this week, both verbally and physically. If judgments or fears arise, just notice them and recommit to your intention. Notice how you feel when you hold hands or give a gentle caress on the arm or cheek. Let a hug last until you both feel your bodies relax, indicating that the nervous systems have been connected and calmed. See if you can linger a bit longer than normal, taking in the feeling of each moment.



## Raising the Mindful Child (and Parent)

**Small children are so present** with their experience that they usually don't need help connecting to the moment. As children grow older, though, the complexities of social engagement, the pressures of school, and the distractions of technology play a significant role in their daily lives. They, like us, need all the help they can get coming home to themselves with awareness and compassion. What they've learned from their parents over the years can make a significant contribution to their ability to do so.

It is difficult to separate raising a mindful child from raising a mindful parent, since we are often, without even realizing it, passively teaching our kids to be mindful or mindless. We can be so focused on "teaching" our kids how to be responsible

and compassionate adults that we forget that they're learning the most by watching how *we are being* in the world.

If you're staring at your phone while answering your child's questions, you're teaching them that fully listening isn't that important. If you're hyper-stressed and snap at the driver who just cut you off, you're teaching them that acting out aggression is a healthy response to perceived slights. On the other hand, when you stop to help someone who dropped something on the street, you're teaching them to give thought to others, the root of compassion. When you're willing to talk openly about emotions—both yours and theirs—and you treat yourself with kindness in difficult times, you inspire emotional intelligence and self-compassion. When →

you rebound from your mistakes instead of spiraling into shame, you're modeling resilience.

There are also more active ways we can teach our children mindfulness. We can find creative ways to inspire it in them—not trying to impose it but simply planting the seeds. You can start by working with mindfulness of emotions. Even when children as young as two are upset or happy, you can nurture self-reflection and emotional intelligence in them. You can help them identify and label their emotions and where they feel them in

the body. That will lay the foundation for doing this on their own. That may take a while, so just remember—you are simply *planting seeds*. Be sure to take it slow and check in: How are you feeling right now? How do you imagine your child is feeling?

“Breathing Buddy” is a practice used by many people who work with children and mindfulness. In our CALM (Connecting Adolescents to Learning Mindfulness) program, we have had success using it with young children, tweens, and teens. It's very easy to do with your own children.

### PRACTICE Breathing Buddy

This is a fun practice you can do together as a family. To begin, get a small weighted stuffed animal for your toddler or school-age child, or a smooth river rock for a tween or teen. This is their “breathing buddy.” Then, everyone lies down, places a breathing buddy on their belly, and tries to make it rise and fall with every inhalation and exhalation. It's helpful to encourage everyone to slow their breathing by counting to three on the inhale and back down to one on the exhale.

This is a tool your children can use to calm themselves in stressful moments, such as when they are feeling anxious before a test or after a tension-filled spat with a friend. For smaller children it can be helpful to create a story incorporating the breathing buddy to get them more engaged.

**Our most meaningful** moments occur when we slow down and tune in to the simple things in life. That's not always easy to do—other things in life can seem so important—but when you do stop and regain your perspective, it benefits you, your partner, and your children. It helps family members regulate emotions during trying times, creates flexibility and creativity, and cultivates gratitude, empathy, and compassion.

When we learn to be grateful for the good times and graceful during the tough times, it opens us up to real life, not a distracted and automatic version of it. Remember, raising a mindful family that includes yourself, your partnership, and your children is a practice: *you will not be perfect*. When you stray from your intention, forgive yourself. In that moment you can discover something vital: you can always choose to begin again. ●

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