

Mindfulness in family communication: an overview of mechanisms, recent findings, and applications

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Mindfulness in family communication: An overview of mechanisms, recent findings, and applications

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Abstract

As an important aspect of healthy family functioning, positive family communication not only contributes to better family relationships, but also plays a pivotal role in facilitating children's social, emotional, and behavioral development. Mindfulness can facilitate positive family communication. With greater mindfulness, family members have a greater nonjudgmental awareness of the present-moment experience and make skillful responses to various challenges in the family setting. This chapter reviews the literature of mindfulness and family dynamics and discusses how they may be applied to everyday family communication. In addition, the chapter provides examples to illustrate how mindfulness may be beneficial to family communication, alongside practical implications and a brief recommendation for future research.

Keywords: Family communication; family conflict; mindfulness

Extensive literature has revealed that warm and supportive family relationships not only contribute to greater satisfaction with family life (Akhlaq et al., 2013; Jiménez-Iglesias et al., 2017), but also facilitate positive parenting (Grych, 2002; Li & Liu, 2019) and child outcomes (e.g., academic achievement, psychological adjustment; Hakvoort et al., 2010; Terrett et al., 2012). To maintain healthy family relationships, positive family communication is pivotal (Sillars et al., 2004). However, conflict is common and inevitable in families and it can sometimes be destructive and intense (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006). Thus, conflict expression and management are of paramount importance to family functioning and child outcomes (Flora & Segrin, 2014; Laursen & Hafen, 2010). Indeed, parent-child conflict is common across developmental periods (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006). For example, parent-child conflict may arise from young children's anger over denied desires (e.g., not being able to have the snack or the toy they want) and parents' anger over children's misbehavior (Flora & Segrin, 2014). In adolescence, parent-child conflict may be more frequent and challenging over daily matters such as clothing choices, dating, and curfew partly due to adolescents' increasing need for independence and autonomy (Arnett, 1999; Steinberg, 1990, 2001). Notably, parents may sometimes view adolescents as young children and impose restrictions that are no longer developmentally appropriate (Arnett, 1999). The negative

interactions can elicit recurring and destructive parent-adolescent conflict (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006). Beyond adolescence, parent-child conflict continues into adulthood, arising from different needs, opinions, or other experiences (e.g., preexisting conflict and unresolved issues, contact frequency; Birditt et al., 2009; Cheung et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2010; Usita & Du Bois, 2005).

Destructive parent-child conflict, as characterized by verbal aggression, physical violence, and withdrawal from interactions, is often associated with adverse child outcomes (Curran et al., 2019; Ouyang & Cheung, 2023; Skinner et al., 2021). For example, children who experience destructive parent-child conflict tactics such as verbal aggression are likely to suffer from internalizing and externalizing problems (Curran et al., 2019; Skinner et al., 2021). On the contrary, constructive parent-child communication, such as taking others' perspectives, collaborating, negotiating, and proposing plans to resolve an ongoing conflict, is often associated with positive child outcomes, such as children's greater self-esteem, better school adjustment, and fewer internalizing and externalizing problems (Bireda & Pilay, 2018; Branje et al., 2010; Nelson, 2015).

Similarly, interparental conflict arising from a difference in opinion is inevitable and is considered as part of family life (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006). Conflict between parents may stem from nonfamilial and familial issues, such as financial issues, parenting disagreement, and household responsibilities (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000; Papp et al., 2009). Greater destructive interparental conflict is linked to negative family functioning and child outcomes, such as greater negative parenting, lower mindful parenting, children's greater emotional insecurity, and children's greater internalizing and externalizing problems (Brock & Kochanska, 2016; Cheung & Chung, 2022; Cummings & Davies, 2011; Cummings et al., 2014). On the contrary, constructive interparental communication has a positive effect on parent as well as child outcomes, such as children's greater emotional security and fewer behavioral problems (Barthassat, 2014; Cheung et al., 2016; Jouriles et al., 2014; Warmuth et al., 2020). Taken together, it is crucial to minimize destructive family conflict and facilitate constructive family communication to promote family well-being.

The role of mindfulness: Decentering and meta-cognitive awareness

Cultivating mindfulness may ease destructive family conflict and foster constructive family communication. According to Kabat-Zinn (1994), mindfulness refers to the awareness of paying attention purposefully and nonjudgmentally to the present moment. It involves full awareness of the inner experience (e.g., feelings, thoughts, and body sensations) and outer environment (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). To explain the underlying mechanisms of mindfulness, Garland et al. (2015) postulated in Mindfulness-to-Meaning Theory that mindfulness enables decentering from stressful experiences, which is crucial for positive psychological functioning. Decentering refers to the process of looking objectively at one's own feelings and thoughts from a distance, rather than viewing the experience as necessarily true and identifying with them (Safran & Segal, 1990). Decentering creates an opportunity for disengagement from autopilot in the face of stressful life events (Garland et al., 2015; Safran & Segal, 1990) and it could be applied to family communication. Take the following scenario as an example: A teenage boy wrote in his diary, "mom really annoys me these days! She keeps nagging me over dinner to spend more time on studying. She stops me from playing basketball with Jesse and Joe. In fact, she doesn't care about

me at all. Today she told me to quit basketball entirely... I yelled at her, stormed out of the dining area, and slammed my door. As usual, I felt bad afterwards... These days I get stressed whenever we chat. Not sure how to talk to her again.” From this scenario, the boy burst into anger and reacted immediately when the mother asked him to spend more time on studying. With the practice of mindfulness, the boy may instead pause, breathe mindfully, and notice his emotions, so that he could disengage himself from the automatic reactions, such as lashing out in anger. In response to the boy’s anger, the mother may also mindfully notice her thoughts and feelings arising from the incident. By viewing her experience objectively, she may be able to engage with the child skillfully. In Mindfulness-to-Meaning Theory, Garland et al. (2015) suggested that decentering sets the stage for broadened meta-cognitive awareness of the subtle and constantly changing experiences, such as feelings, thoughts, body sensations, and the environment (see also Bernstein et al., 2015). Through an increasing awareness of the constantly changing experiences, individuals may come to realize that these experiences are impermanent (Garland et al., 2015; Safran & Segal, 1990). Returning to the scenario of the teenage boy, being mindful could help him bring his attention to the present moment. For instance, the boy may be aware of the tension in his body, such as clenched jaws, racing heart, and tightened fists, when his mother mentioned schoolwork and basketball. He may then pay attention to these emotions and name them, for example, “I notice that I am feeling overwhelmed and frustrated.” Identifying the emotions may help him regulate and think more clearly (Gross, 2015). Also, he may notice his automatic thoughts such as “mom doesn’t care about my well-being at all” in the face of stressful situations. With increased curiosity and nonjudgmental awareness, he is more likely to notice that the feelings and thoughts are not facts and realize the impermanent nature of these experiences.

Extensive empirical studies conducted in Eastern and Western societies have identified the associations between parents’ greater mindfulness and their lower levels of parenting stress and anxiety, especially during parent-child interactions (e.g., Boekhorst et al., 2020; Burke et al., 2020; Cheung et al., 2022; Corthorn & Milicic, 2016; Wang et al., 2022). For instance, Boekhorst et al. (2020) reported that parents with greater awareness of the present moment are more capable of responding to inner and outer experiences in a non-reacting manner, rather than reacting impulsively or automatically. As such, they are less likely to be stressed when they engage with their children (Boekhorst et al., 2020). Similarly, parents who have greater mindful awareness of their child’s feelings and thoughts tend to experience lower levels of stress and frustration in parent-child relationships (Siu et al., 2016). On the contrary, parents with lower self-awareness tend to be over-reactive during parent-child interactions by shouting at their child (Bi et al., 2022). Furthermore, previous research found that mindfulness moderated the relation between children’s problem behavior and parental stress (Chan & Lam, 2017). Specifically, parents’ greater awareness and nonjudgmental acceptance buffer the negative effects of their child’s problem behavior on their stress about parent-child relationships (Chan & Lam, 2017). In another study, Haydicky et al. (2017) conducted interviews with adolescents and their parents at 1 to 3 months after they had attended an 8-week mindfulness-based intervention. The adolescents and parents reported improvements in recognizing emotional reactions and inhibiting automatic impulses in the face of family conflict (Haydicky et al., 2017). Besides, they engaged in mindfulness practices such as mindful breathing during family conflict and reported reductions in the intensity and duration of hostile arguments (Haydicky et al., 2017). Similar findings were reported by other qualitative studies on mindfulness-based interventions for children and their parents (Dariotis et al., 2016; Tobin et al., 2021). That is, mindfulness enables both parents and children to pause with greater

awareness and fosters healthier parent-child communication (Dariotis et al., 2016; Haydicky et al., 2017; Tobin et al., 2021). The positive effect of mindfulness on parent-child communication was also supported by intervention studies involving children and families from diverse backgrounds, including families with economic disadvantages (Lo et al., 2019), families with parents having a history of depression (Bailie et al., 2012), families with children with developmental disabilities (Lo et al., 2017), families with children with autism spectrum disorder (Conner & White, 2014), and families with children with attention deficit hyperactivity symptoms (Naseh et al., 2016).

In the same vein, studies on interparental conflict and communication have identified the benefits of decentering from stressors and broadening mindful awareness (Kimmes et al., 2018; Parent et al., 2014, 2016a; Yekta et al., 2022). For instance, when parents are more mindful, they are more able to maintain awareness while interacting with their spouse, show non-judgmental acceptance of their spouse's emotional and verbal expressions, and regulate their own reactions to their spouse's behavior (DiMarzio et al., 2022; Parent et al., 2016a). On the contrary, when parents are less mindful, they are less likely to disengage themselves from stressful interparental conflict and discuss calmly. They are also more likely to participate in destructive interparental conflict (e.g., arguing and shouting at each other) in front of children (Parent et al., 2014). Besides, Kimmes et al. (2018) identified actor and partner effects between married couples' mindfulness and the activation of cardiovascular reactivity markers (e.g., beat-to-beat blood pressure) during marital conflict. In the face of stressful marital conflict, wives' and husbands' lower mindfulness is linked to their own and their spouse's higher levels of cardiovascular reactivity (Kimmes et al., 2018). Furthermore, a study on mindfulness-based intervention for couples showed that mindfulness practice improves couples' ability to recognize and regulate emotions, which, in turn, results in increased satisfaction with couple relationships (Yekta et al., 2022). Taken together, mindfulness in both parents and children is linked to constructive family communication through the cultivation of decentering and broadened awareness.

The role of mindfulness: Adaptive and prosocial actions

Returning to the Mindfulness-to-Meaning Theory (Garland et al., 2015), mindfulness further enables individuals to view their experiences through different perspectives. For example, they may disengage themselves from automatic reactions to stressors and be aware of the positive aspects of their experiences that are previously undetected. By moving beyond habitual reactions and being aware of the greater context, mindfulness assists individuals to reframe challenging experiences in a more positive light (Cheung & Ng, 2020; Garland et al., 2015, 2017; Teper et al., 2013). The positive reappraisal may foster positive emotions, resulting in a greater motivation to participate in adaptive and prosocial actions (Garland et al., 2015). Taking the teenage boy as an example, mindful awareness enables him to notice his habitual emotions and thoughts during mother-son interactions. By acknowledging the struggles, allowing himself to simply be in that moment without judgment, and decentering from the stressful experiences, he gains a broader awareness and understanding of the situation. As such, he may realize that his anger may be coming from negative attributions (e.g., "mom doesn't want me to play basketball because she doesn't care about me at all"). Besides, he may assess and reappraise the situation from different angles. For instance, he may consider the possibility that his mother's suggestions stem from concern, rather than criticism. Instead of allowing the automatic reactions to take control, viewing

the situation from a distance and from different angles may enable him to take actions that foster positive communication.

Supporting the Mindfulness-to-Meaning theory (Garland et al., 2015), studies on family communication suggested that greater mindfulness is associated with more adaptive and prosocial actions among family members (e.g., Barata et al., 2022; Kil & Grusec, 2020; Xie et al., 2021). For instance, parents with greater mindfulness are more capable of taking children's perspectives during parent-child interactions, which is further linked to children's greater disclosure to parents and less destructive parent-child conflict (Kil & Grusec, 2020). Having greater nonjudgmental awareness, parents are also more motivated to listen to their child with acceptance and display greater responsiveness to their child's needs (Campbell et al., 2017). Similarly, parents who are more mindful are more likely to take their child's perspectives, validate their child's feelings, and apply constructive conflict strategies toward resolution (Bird et al., 2021). Besides, they are less likely to engage in destructive parent-child conflict such as sarcasm and dismissal (Bird et al., 2021). On the contrary, a lower level of mindfulness is associated with more negative attributions (e.g., attributing the child's misbehavior to a lack of parenting skills and ability), which, in turn, are associated with greater negative parenting behavior during parent-child conflict, such as physical punishment and avoidance of confrontations (Kil et al., 2023).

Parents with greater mindfulness also tend to engage in mindful parenting (Han et al., 2021; Kil et al., 2022; Lippold et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2019). Mindful parenting is conceptualized as an extension of mindfulness to the context of parent-child relationships (Duncan et al., 2009). Mindful parenting overarches five dimensions, including attentive listening, emotional awareness of the self and the child, non-judgmental acceptance, self-regulation, and compassion (Duncan et al., 2009). By integrating mindfulness into parenting, such as attentively listening to their child with acceptance and showing compassion for themselves and their child, parents tend to engage in positive parenting (e.g., expressing affection and encouraging children to disclose their troubles; Han et al., 2021; Parent et al., 2016b). Besides, they are less likely to react negatively to their child's disclosure (Lippold et al., 2015). The effect of mindful parenting is far-reaching, as it not only is associated with parents' own behavior, but also with child outcomes including children's better self-regulation, greater mindfulness, greater prosocial behavior, and fewer internalizing and externalizing problems (Chan et al., 2022; Cheung & Wang, 2022; Cheung et al., 2021; Kil et al., 2022; Parent et al., 2021).

In terms of interparental communication, a study on married couples showed that people who are more mindful are also less likely to view their spouse's behavior as hostile or unpleasant (Xie et al., 2021). Similarly, parents with greater mindfulness also reported greater satisfaction with interparental relationships and a greater ability to resolve disagreement (Parent et al., 2014). As for sibling communication, adolescents with greater mindfulness are more capable of understanding other people's feelings and viewpoints, which, in turn, are related to more positive sibling interactions (Barata et al., 2022). Taken together, when family members are more mindful, they tend to take other people's perspectives, engage in positive family communication, and apply constructive communication strategies.

Application of mindfulness to family conflict and communication

The application of mindfulness in family conflict, parenting, and parent-child and interparental relationships may be further demonstrated through the following two scenarios: A father urges his son to get ready for school, as he needs to attend an urgent meeting after sending him off. However, his son dislikes being rushed and starts kicking and crying. The father then loses his temper and yells at the son, who is beginning to react to him with anger. In this situation, the father could employ mindfulness techniques such as breathing mindfully and becoming aware of his automatic reactions toward his son. By refocusing on the present and decentering from the stressful father-son dynamics, the father may then be able to respond skillfully. For instance, with a greater awareness of the present moment, he may notice that his child is getting anxious and angry. He may also see that he is simply attributing his son's kicking and crying to attention-seeking or misbehavior. By viewing the situation from different perspectives, the father may then be able to express his needs to the child in a calm and clear manner.

In the following second example, a couple argues over child discipline. The mother claims that her spouse is too lenient and sets a bad example for their children, whereas the father says the mother is too harsh and prevents the children from having any fun. They are both furious and are raising their voice in the argument. To resolve the conflict, the parents may practice mindfulness by taking a step back and becoming aware of the present. For instance, they may notice tight muscles and shallow breathing, the tension between them, and their terrified children. Recognizing their habitual responses to similar situations, such as criticizing and shouting at one another, they may then take a few moments to pause and decide, potentially, to return to the discussion a few hours later. By engaging in empathic listening and calm discussion, the couple can understand each other's viewpoints and set expectations for child discipline.

Conclusion

The present chapter reviewed recent empirical evidence (e.g., Bird et al., 2021; Chan & Lam, 2017; Kil et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022) and provided examples to elucidate the positive effect of mindfulness on family communication. This chapter informs researchers, practitioners, and families about the importance of mindfulness in everyday family communication and conflict. To enrich the literature, researchers may further investigate the role of mindfulness in family communication in both qualitative and quantitative studies across cultures to enlighten evidence-based practices. Ultimately, evidence-based practices can further inform practitioners and families of the utility of mindfulness in family counseling, therapy, and everyday family communication.

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