



*Connected
Communication*

MINDFUL INTERACTIONS:

help your child to talk
using 5 mindfulness
techniques



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TABLE OF CONTENTS:

Introduction.....	4
Mindful parenting, mindful interactions..	5
Stopping.....	8
Creating a mindful environment.....	10
Be curious.....	13
Listening mindfully.....	15
Responding mindfully.....	17
Concluding thoughts.....	22
References.....	23

INTRODUCTION

Welcome! This is a book that I wrote for parents, carers and educators of young children. It is about how we can use mindfulness to improve our child's speech and language development, and how it can result in better conversations. While I have focused on children who have difficulty with learning to speak, I think that many of the ideas can be applied to communicating with any child.

Throughout this book, I have referred to a child as 'he'. This is for ease of reading, and also because there is a higher incidence of speech and language problems in boys, but this does not disregard the presence of speech and language problems in girls.

If you think that this book would be useful to other people that you know, please direct them to www.speechtherapycork.ie so that they can access their own copy. I am always interested in feedback, and suggestions for other topics, so do share your thoughts!

MINDFUL PARENTING, MINDFUL INTERACTIONS

For many children, speaking, listening and understanding language happens smoothly. But sometimes, the path is not so smooth. For many reasons, or frequently for no specific reason, a child may experience some difficulty with starting to talk. When all is well, we don't really need to think about how we speak to our child, but when they experience difficulties, we want to help them, and in so doing, try a range of different strategies to fix the problem. Sometimes these strategies help, but sometimes they can disrupt the finely tuned dance between the parent and child interaction.

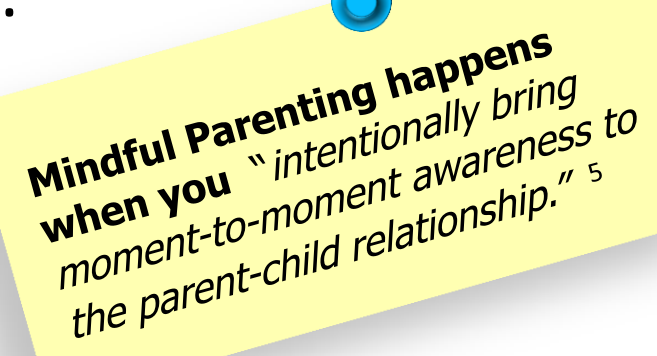
When it comes to encouraging children's speech and language development, less is more...not less time, but rather doing less, saying less, thinking less, planning less. As I reflected on this recently, I realised that much of this advice can be looked at within the context of mindfulness.

Mindfulness is an approach which I have been drawn to on a personal level over the last number of years, and has become particularly relevant to me in my role of parent to two exuberant children. It is about being present, and letting go of the past and the future.¹

While mindfulness has its roots in Buddhism, it has become part of mainstream culture particularly through the writing of Kabat-Zinn² and also Thich Nhat Hahn.³ It has also been scientifically proven to provide a range of benefits to physical, mental and spiritual health.⁴ So, given these benefits, mindfulness clearly has a place in the parent-child dialogue.

The concept of mindful parenting is one application of mindfulness. It has been described as a way that "Parents intentionally bring moment-to-moment awareness to the parent-child relationship."⁵ This is the key to encouraging a child's speech and language development....

BEING PRESENT,
BEING MINDFUL.



Mindful Parenting happens when you *"intentionally bring moment-to-moment awareness to the parent-child relationship."*⁵

In this book, I have drawn on five aspects of mindfulness and linked them to strategies which promote speech and language development. These are:

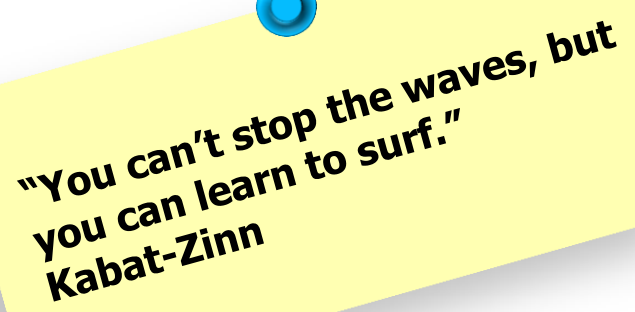
- **Stopping**
- **Creating a mindful environment**
- **Being curious**
- **Listening mindfully**
- **Responding mindfully**

STOPPING

Stop, and picture when you first stared into your child's eyes, how at that moment in time, you were ever present to each other. Flashback to the present moment of juggling chaos, mess, sorting out fights, getting organised, a perpetual lack of time...Stop?....impossible!

It can be really difficult to stop, to let go of all the pressures and demands on us, and just be in the moment, but this is so important. Stopping is the key to being present and connecting with our child. It is the starting point when you are focusing on encouraging language.

You need to find time to stop, not just what you are doing, but also the constant stream of thoughts running through your head.



**"You can't stop the waves, but
you can learn to surf."
Kabat-Zinn**

When your child is experiencing difficulties with an aspect of his development, you can find yourself worrying about them, "what should I do?" "What will happen when he starts school?" "He's not talking like his peers." These are understandable thoughts and feelings, and it is important to acknowledge them, however, we need to take our focus away from these worries when you are trying to be present with your child.

When a child is not talking, you want to do something to help. However, if you try too hard, you can potentially disrupt the natural flow of interaction. Take for example, getting a child to repeat what you say, e.g. "Say ball." The logical reasoning is, "Well he's not saying the word, so if I get him to repeat, then he'll start speaking." Unfortunately, this doesn't tend to work. At best, the child will repeat the word, but will not spontaneously use it the next time he wants a ball, at worst, he realises that you're trying to get him to do something, and completely digs his heels in. So, what is the alternative?

The first step is stopping and giving each other some space. Here are some tips to help with you:

Become present using your senses.

Tuning in to one of your senses, can quickly bring you to the present moment. You can:

Look around you, or watch what your child is doing.

Listen to the sounds around you.

Feel your body connected to the floor, what you are sitting on, wearing.

Notice the **thoughts** that you are having. If they're not helpful, let them drift by.

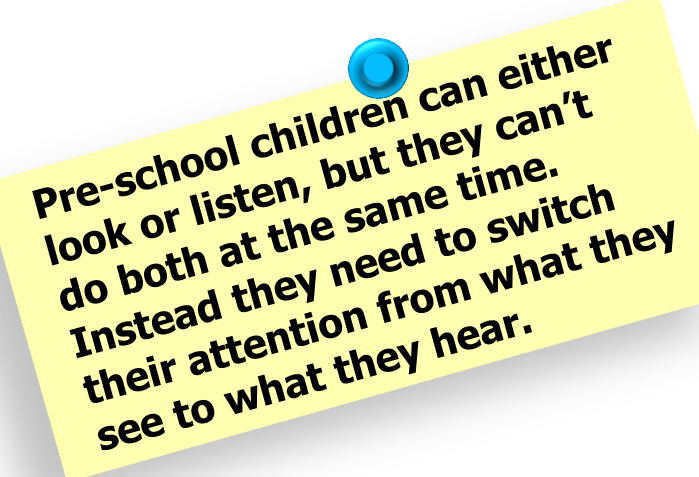
Tune in to your **body** and notice how you are physically feeling.

Notice your **breathing** as it flows in and out.

CREATING A MINDFUL ENVIRONMENT

Children are open and curious individuals, and take in so much from their environment. Try going anywhere in a hurry with a toddler, and that's very clear, the fascination with a twig, something sparkling in a shop window, the possibilities are endless! As adults, we would certainly benefit from stepping into those shoes more often, however, there is a flip side to this. Children can't tune out lots of stimulation, so a busy environment can create problems for encouraging language. This can make a child less available to hear what we are saying as they:

- Become over-stimulated
- Tune in to what catches their attention
- Tune out from the person speaking to them



Pre-school children can either look or listen, but they can't do both at the same time. Instead they need to switch their attention from what they see to what they hear.

What creates a mindful environment?

Reducing background noise

Background sounds can be anything from a T.V. left on in the background, a radio down low, a washing machine going, the phone frequently ringing, or the 'bing' of an email. We often talk about reducing background noise for children, as they find it harder to tune out background sounds. I think that it's equally as important for the parent or caregiver. If we are taking in background sounds, we may not fully be present with our child. It's not about having a clinically quiet environment, but it is about being aware of the effect of sounds on our own awareness, listening and stress levels.

Unplugging from technology

We know that children are naturally drawn to, and easily distracted by gadgets, but so are we! If we are trying to create a mindful space, then turn off or put away phones, laptops, etc. It's not just about the sound, but it's the draw that it has away from the present moment.

Reducing the amount of toys within easy reach

I am amazed at how quickly my children can move into a 'reasonably' tidy room and can spread out to fill that space with toys, drawings, snacks, or gatherings from their recent expedition into the garden....So, I'm certainly the last person to be giving advice on having a tidy space! However...

...I think it's important to be aware of how much visual stimulation is surrounding our child, and whether this is affecting their ability to tune into us.

When trying to encourage a child, less is more, so having less things available to them, creates more of an opportunity to have a shared focus. Doing practical things such as rotating the amount of toys within easy reach, can reduce a tendency for a child to move from one thing to the next.

Reduce visual distractions

We notice decorations at celebrations, such as Halloween and Christmas, but it is also worth noticing how much visual stimulation is present in our day to day environment, be it at home, at pre-school or school, or out and about in the community. What is on the walls, hanging from the ceiling? Does it distract our child, and draw them away from us, or is it an opportunity for a shared interaction.

Create a mindful environment through:

- **Reducing background noise**
- **Unplugging from technology**
- **Limiting the amount of toys within easy reach**
- **Reducing visual distractions**

BE CURIOUS

Being curious is a chance to look at the world through your child's eyes. As adults, we can be guilty of unintentionally hurrying along our child towards adulthood. We've done it before, know how it works, recognise the pitfalls... "It goes this way," "Put it in there," "That's for..." "Careful!..." Being curious allows you to imagine that you had never experienced these things before.

When we stop, and observe with an open curiosity, we can really value what a unique perspective our child has on the world. Stop what you are doing, and follow your child's gaze...

What is he looking at, touching, feeling?

How is he moving?

What is he saying?

I find it fascinating when I watch my daughter bend her body in perfect synchrony as she goes to pick a dandelion. Her world is focused on this act, and when I watch this, it reminds me of the value in becoming more present.

When you follow your child's interests, you create the natural 'activity' to encourage language. Your child is more likely to listen, ask questions, and take in what you are talking about.

For the child who is harder to reach, following their interests is often the only way that you can connect.

Being curious also includes stepping back from your automatic responses to your child. It's about imagining that you don't know what your child wants, and allowing a space for your child to actively communicate. Think about how a toddler sidles up to a parent, and how instantly the parent tunes in to the child's desire to be picked up, even when no words are spoken and there is barely a sideways glance. While this is part of being responsive to a child's needs, it is also a missed opportunity to be curious, to not anticipate the child's needs, and to give the child an opportunity to communicate.

How to be curious:

Notice what your child is interested in.

Wait before you intervene. Is there a genuine risk to your child's safety, or is the risk more to do with mess and chaos.

Stop leading, and **follow your child**...you may be surprised where the journey takes you.

Don't anticipate what your child needs, give them a chance to show you.

Use **everyday situations** as mindful moments, and opportunities for communication.

LISTENING MINDFULLY

When we listen mindfully, we are open, we listen without judging, we take everything in. We hear sound and we hear silence. We hear through our ears, but also our eyes. Through listening mindfully, we send a clear message of "I hear what you're saying, I'm interested."

When we are busy it can be hard to listen mindfully. When our 'to do' list runs wild, we can find it hard to physically stop, or even if we do appear to stop, and become physically present, we may not fully be in the moment, instead pulled to thoughts and feelings relating to the past or the future.

When we are not present, it's hard to listen openly, we are not curious and open to the possibilities of what are child is sharing with us. Our responses can close doors to communication instead of opening them. We can be quick to correct, "No you need to..." instil politeness "Say thank you', give an opinion "It needs to go here," move onwards, "Right...", ask a question, "and what colour is it?" We can also miss the message being sent by our child.

A personal experience of this was when my son, at around 16 months, was playing by the door of the dishwasher. He suddenly shouted and started pulling at the door frantically.

While this wasn't typical of him, I assumed he was 'messaging', and I promptly closed the door, amidst further crying, shouting and pointing. While this quickly passed, the true message later became clear. The next morning, when I unloaded the dishwasher, I came across the remote control for the TV at the bottom. Suddenly it all made sense. His favourite game at the time was posting, and he had posted the remote through the gap in the dishwasher door, then realised the situation, but had been robbed of the opportunity to communicate it to me.

Practical tips for listening mindfully

Stop what you are doing.

Get down to your child's level so that you can talk face to face.

Let your body show that you are interested and available, as if you have all the time in the world.

Follow your child's interest.

Focus on what your child is trying to say, and not how he is saying it.

Stay in the present moment, and don't focus on other thoughts, feelings or worries.

RESPONDING MINDFULLY

From the roots of mindful listening, mindful responses grow. When we respond mindfully, our child feels heard. A mindful response creates an opening for our child to continue the conversation. A delicate dance between speaker and listener develops, in which each partner has an equal role. When language is delayed, this dance can become disrupted, and we can be unsure of the next step, so here are some tips:

Acknowledging

The first step is to acknowledge what your child has said. For example, Laura says, “soup hot,” and Dad says, “Oh the soup is hot!” By doing not only does your child feel heard, but he also hears a clear language model. Even if your child isn’t speaking much, and merely makes a sound, you put words on what you think he’s trying to say.


Waiting

If you are continuing to let your child lead, by first acknowledging what he says, and then waiting, you are allowing space where your child can have a chance to share more with you, be it a word, gesture, or something that he’s doing. Allow enough time, count at least 5 seconds in your head. If you are too quick to say more, you may miss an opportunity.

Think about the balance of how much you speak in comparison to your child, when you wait, you give your child space, an opportunity, and also an expectation that he now has a turn to speak.

Adding language or ideas

Add language that relates to what your child is doing or interested in. If your child is twirling a leaf between his fingers, you may say, "Oh...a leaf!" or, "The leaf goes round and round." Then wait, and see what happens. If your child says, "leaf," you can add more language, such as, "it's a *big* leaf," or "the leaf *feels rough*." These sorts of comments are more engaging than saying, "it's *green*," as learning about colours is a language skill which comes later.



**Respond; don't react.
Listen; don't talk.
Think; don't assume."
Raji Lukkoor**

Mindful speaking: Using intonation

When I think of a mindfulness leader, such as Thich Nhat Hahn, I think of someone who draws people to listen, often speaking in a quiet, calm, focused manner, in a way that you hang onto every word that he says.

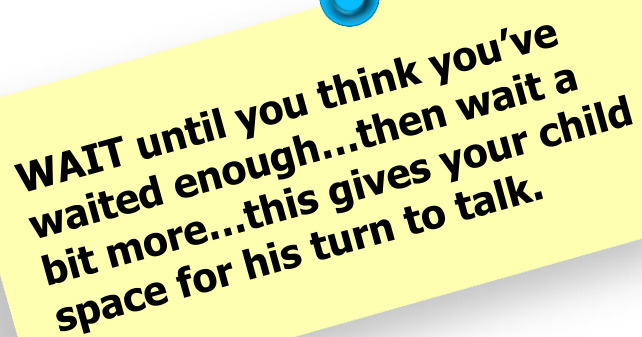
How you speak, can draw your child to become interested, and stay interested in what you say. It can also help him to tune into what is relevant in what you say. So, what draws a child to be more connected to you? You can:

- **PAUSE** more frequently than you usually would. This allows time for your child to process what you have said. It also allows space for your child to respond.
- **EXAGGERATE YOUR INTONATION** so that your voice is more sing song like. This can help to increase your child's interest in what you are saying. We naturally use infant directed speech when talking to babies. We use shorter phrases, a higher speaking pitch and sing-song intonation. As a child gets older we naturally do this less, however, these features have great value in connecting our child to what we are saying or doing.

Reducing questions

Questions are a natural part of conversation. When a child isn't saying much, it is natural to start asking questions. Unfortunately, the less a child speaks, the more likely that more questions will be asked. This can result in quite a one sided conversation, in which the parent leads and the child (perhaps) follows. There are alternatives to questions:

- Make an **interested** or puzzled sound, "Oh?"
- **Pause.** When you wait, you give your child a chance to talk.
- **Allow** your child a chance to finish your sentence, "We'll put it in the..."



WAIT until you think you've waited enough...then wait a bit more...this gives your child space for his turn to talk.

Practical tips for responding mindfully

- Acknowledging
- Waiting
- Adding language or ideas
- Mindful speaking: using intonation
- Reducing questions

And finally...when you don't understand

Sometimes you don't know what your child is trying to say. It can be tempting to just pretend that you've understood, but children have this amazing ability to know when we're just fobbing them off.

When you don't understand, listen carefully to what your child is trying to say see if you can pick out even one word which helps you to make a reasonable guess. Try and get an idea of what topic he's speaking about, such as "Are you talking about.....? Get him to show you if possible.

Sometimes, despite your best efforts, you may not understand the message, and it's important to acknowledge this, such as "I don't understand," or "I don't know what you're telling me," or "I'll try again next time."

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I hope that you find the ideas in this book useful, and that it helps you along the path to encourage your child to speak. As a parent, you have the skills to support your child in developing his or her speech and language, but you may need some guidance along the way. If you are worried about your child's speech and language development, contact your local public speech and language therapy service, or a private provider of speech and language therapy. It is never too early to refer a child, and better to be reassured that all is going well, than to live with doubts, and miss opportunities for support.

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