

# Family Well-Being for the Greater Good

A science-based workbook  
for people supporting parents

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A science-based workbook  
for people supporting parents

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Thank you to all of the practitioners and researchers who contributed insights, suggestions, and feedback. We could not have been able to create this workbook without the collective wisdom and insights of so many who work to serve families every day.

Many, many thanks to our Greater Good Science Center colleagues and advisory board members, and our broader Greater Good Parenting community of readers and partners. A special thank you to Jeremy Adam Smith, editor, and Kira M. Newman, managing editor at the Greater Good Science Center—this workbook includes adaptations of *Greater Good* magazine articles and Greater Good in Action practices, which have been beautifully crafted by their editorial prowess. For the encouragement of the kernel of the idea for this workbook and for the practical and heartening support during its planning and writing, we express sincere gratitude to Jason Marsh, founding editor in chief of *Greater Good* magazine and executive director of the Greater Good Science Center.

The Family Well-Being for the Greater Good workbook was made possible through the generous support of the John Templeton Foundation and from the Mindfulness & Wellbeing grant, funded by the California Department of Health Care Services and in partnership with the Sacramento County Office of Education and the CalHOPE Student Support Project (CalHOPE) project.

## Dear California School-based Parenting Practitioners,

Deep gratitude to you for all you do to support families in our communities across California. We recognize that we are all interconnected, and your commitment to tending to parents and children uplifts all of us. As you go about your work caring for others, it is essential that you are also the recipient of care because you need tending, too. The Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley strives to share science-based insights for a meaningful life. We sincerely hope that we can provide resources that will help nurture your social and emotional well-being. Toward this end, we aim to create a resource for parenting practitioners just like you.

Before we embarked upon developing this resource for you, we reached out to school-based parenting practitioners across California to understand your roles and how we could serve you. We listened to you and learned from you how to create a resource that you would find beneficial. You shared with us that a key aspect of your role—parent and family engagement specialists and coordinators, school counselors, community liaisons, and wellness leaders—is to support families by communicating and engaging with parents to ensure the well-being of students. One practitioner explained, “My focus is to serve students and their families by expressing empathy and compassion when discussing their situation. My goal is to remove barriers to the student’s education. This is done by connecting families to resources.” We learned from you that bringing parents together to nurture connection and providing them resources that have concrete steps or advice were central qualities of successful programming. When we asked what we could create to support you as professionals, you shared that social connection with your colleagues was vital. Many of you also shared that reconnecting with your own sense of purpose in your work is essential and that mindfulness would help cultivate your well-being at work.

Using your insights, we developed this practitioner workbook for you. It distills the latest research and practical tips for nurturing five keys to well-being: social connection, empathy, mindfulness, compassion, and purpose. The guiding principle of this workbook is to care for the caregivers. It is designed for you to use personally and professionally, and contains resources to share with the parents and families you serve. In addition to this workbook, we've created accompanying Parent and Family Engagement online modules on Greater Good in Education, where you'll find resources for individual exploration and group facilitation. The group facilitation resources include an adaptable slide deck with suggested scripts in the speaker notes for you to use in your gatherings with parents and printable handouts to pass out for parents to take home.

**May this workbook contribute to your and your community's flourishing.**

With gratitude,

Maryam Abdullah and Megan Bander  
Parenting Program  
Greater Good Science Center

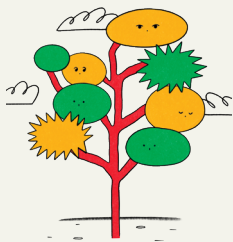
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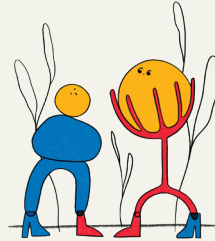
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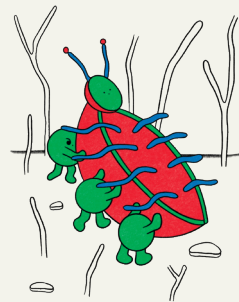


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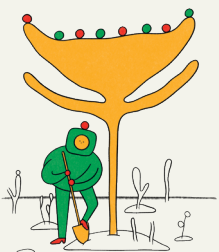


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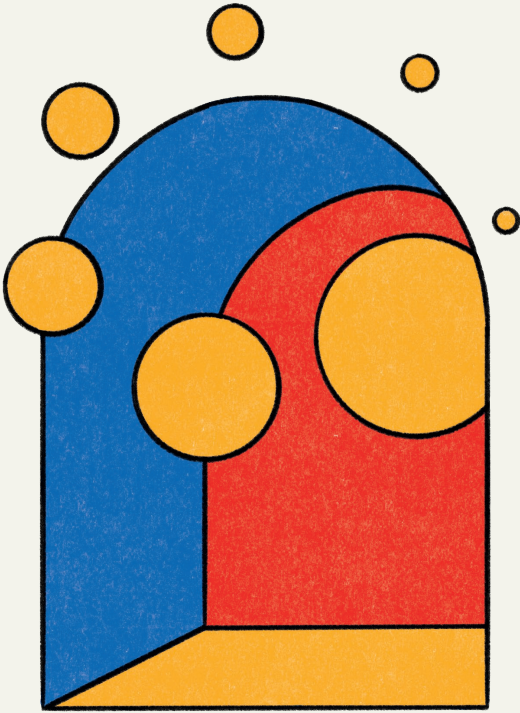
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Parenting is a collective effort made by a community of caregivers, including you, a parenting practitioner. We need a community of caregivers who are well so that our children are well.



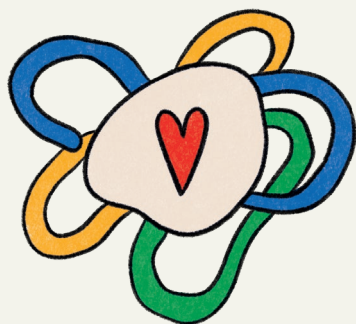
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## Care for the Caregivers

Welcome! We are so glad our shared efforts to support parents, children, and families have led us to cross paths. Supporting families on their parenting journey means you can be a companion to their greatest joys and struggles as they do their best to nurture their children. Being a reliable presence as parents navigate their way through both small and big moments with their children can be profoundly fulfilling work. Parents are uplifted when they know that practitioners show up in their cheering sections to be sources of encouragement and support.

We broadly use “parents” to refer to primary caregivers who care for and help raise a child. In other words, parents are any adults with a primary caregiving role for a child and are not limited to fathers and mothers, including adoptive, foster, and stepparents. Parents also include grandparents, uncles, aunts, and other adult family or community members who are primary caregivers to a child.

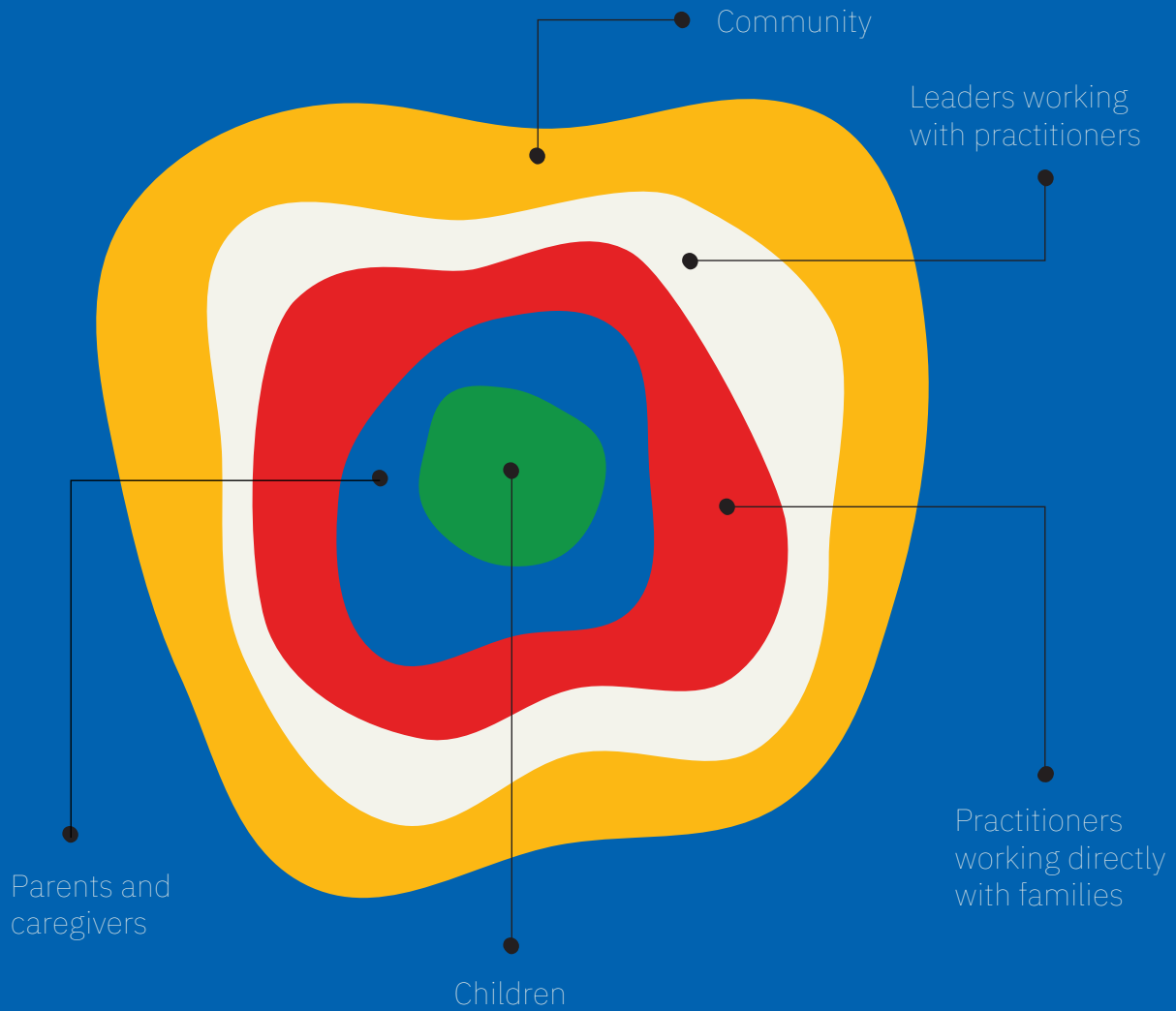


## **Well-Being: The Heart of This Workbook**

Why did we write this workbook? Parenting is a collective effort made by a community of caregivers, including you, a parenting practitioner. We need a community of caregivers who are well so that our children are well. This workbook provides resources to “care for the caregivers,”<sup>1</sup> which research summarized in the National Academies of Sciences 2019 report *Vibrant and Healthy Kids* shows is vital for the healthy development of children.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, this workbook provides resources for you to use for yourself and to share with parents to care for themselves and their children.

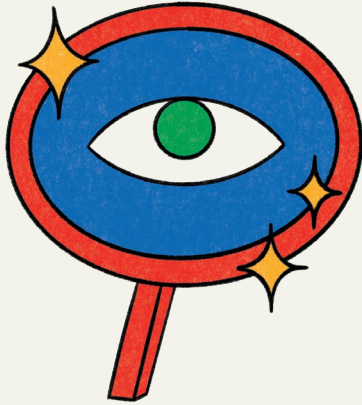
The mix of ease and hardship in our work requires that we, as practitioners, are nurtured, too. Our social and emotional well-being is intricately connected to our ability to support the well-being of the parents and children we work with. What’s more, the well-being of our community both gives rise to and depends on the well-being of parents, children, and families as well as our well-being. This workbook offers parenting practitioners practical lessons and activities to help the reader prioritize cultivating your social and emotional well-being while additionally supporting you in sharing these insights and practices with the parents and families you serve.

## Who Can Benefit From This Workbook?



We wrote this workbook for a range of practitioners who support parents and caregivers of children between preschool and high school. Your professional role may be within a community organization—a parent educator, social worker, or faith leader. You may be a practitioner supporting parents and families in a school setting—a parent and family engagement specialist or counselor. This workbook can also support healthcare providers working with

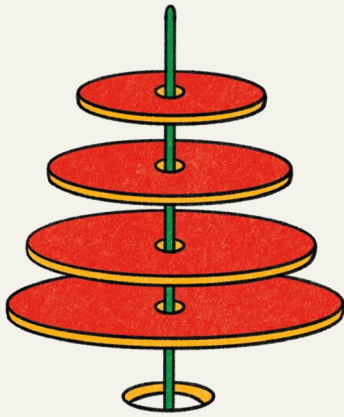
parents—a nurse practitioner, physician, or psychologist. We also wrote it for leaders who train practitioners working directly with parents and families—a “train-the-trainer” model. You will find this workbook includes the voices of parenting practitioners across a variety of roles and settings to help you identify where to integrate these resources within your work.



## Our Approach

We draw on several parenting education approaches to help us understand the connection between our well-being and the well-being of those around us in our community. First, the attunement perspective “focuses on family’s lives and experiences from their own point of view, on the impact of culture and societal forces on families, and on bringing about better alignment and well-being of both families and society by changing the society and culture and supporting families in changing themselves”.<sup>3</sup> Second, social learning describes how and why people learn through observation and modeling,<sup>4</sup> which can help us recognize that both parenting practitioners and parents watch and grasp ways to nurture themselves and their families from one another.

What’s more, we lift up several other theoretical perspectives. Chiefly, this workbook is grounded in positive psychology, which centers on the science behind how and why people and communities thrive. Positive psychology focuses on understanding three things: positive emotions and experiences, positive individual strengths and capacities, and positive institutions and communities.<sup>5</sup> We also draw from the ecological model of development, which explores how people grow and change through a dynamic process between the person and their environment across multiple settings and time.<sup>6</sup> For example, a child is embedded within an immediate ecology—family, school, neighborhood—and increasingly distant—parents’ workplace, mass media, laws, broader culture, society, and history. The ecological development model recognizes that all of these components influence one another, and the person also influences them. Finally, we also integrate research on attachment theory,<sup>7</sup> which highlights the importance of early child and caregiver interactions. When a child and a trusted adult become attuned to one another, they can form a bond, and the child perceives the caregiver as a dependable source of warmth, support, and protection during stressful experiences. These early caregiving interactions inform how children come to understand the world and how they relate to it, and in the long term, guide how they approach their future interpersonal relationships.

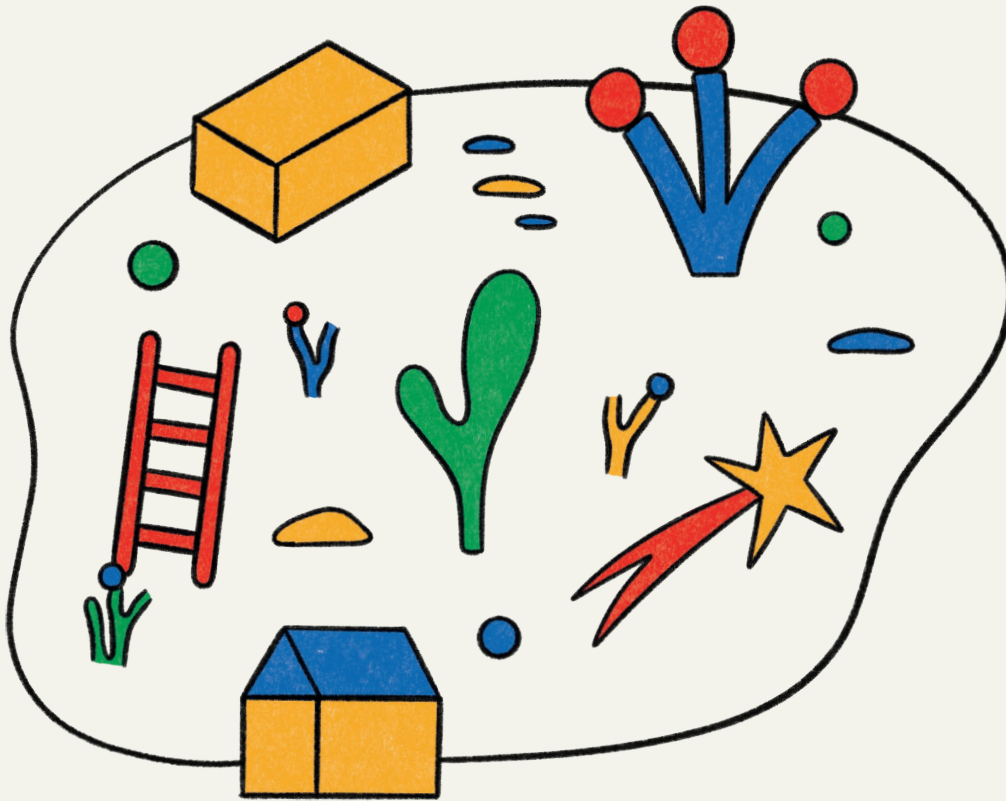


## Crafting This Workbook: Our Process

To develop this workbook, we contacted parenting practitioners nationwide to better understand what they found most helpful in their work. Based on their insights, we divided this workbook into two parts.

The first part of the workbook reviews a selection of essential keys to well-being for parenting, like social connection, empathy, mindfulness, compassion, and purpose. Each chapter in this section begins with an overview of the key to well-being that draws from the research behind it for children and parents. There is also guidance for you as the practitioner to explore this key to well-being for yourself and the community of parents you support. There are two types of practices within each key to well-being chapter. The first practice is adult-focused and designed to cultivate your well-being. Then, share it with parents so they can also try it to cultivate their well-being. The second type of practice is parenting-focused and designed for you to share with parents to cultivate the well-being of their children. Each chapter ends with guiding questions for reflection on what you learned, what you're curious about, and what actions you commit to take.

Part two of the workbook covers foundational topics that offer essential insights and tips for approaching work with parents. For example, the workbook delves into development across the lifespan; coparenting—the team of people with which fathers, mothers, and caregivers are on the parenting journey; cultural humility; and trauma and healing. There are also approaches and resources for evaluating your parenting programming and practical strategies for engaging parents and facilitating parenting gatherings.



## Discover

This workbook has six broad learning aims. You will:

- 1 Identify important keys to social and emotional well-being for yourself as a practitioner and for parents and children;
- 2 Understand the underlying research behind the development of these keys to well-being in practitioners, parents, and children;
- 3 Learn actionable practices to nurture these keys to well-being within yourself as a practitioner, as well as for parents and children that you can incorporate into your programs for parents;
- 4 Recognize critical developmental, cultural, and trauma-informed considerations when working with families and ways to be humble and responsive when adapting practices to best support families' needs;
- 5 Identify resources to support the creation and evaluation of parenting programs;
- 6 Glean real-world insights and practical tips from practitioners supporting social and emotional well-being within families in their communities.

# How to Use This Workbook

You can use this workbook as a professional development resource in multiple ways. One scenario is that you may be interested in learning about a few of the keys to well-being that you would like to share with parents. In this case, you can go straight into any of these chapters and selectively take what you need for your work. Another scenario is that you are interested in comprehensively understanding social and emotional well-being, so you read the chapters sequentially from cover to cover. We designed this workbook to allow you to engage in these topics with flexibility, so either approach is possible.



# Greater Good Science Center

## Who We Are

Based at the University of California, Berkeley, one of the world's leading institutions of research and higher education, the Greater Good Science Center is unique in its commitment to both science and practice: Not only do we sponsor groundbreaking scientific research into social and emotional well-being, we help people apply this research to their personal and professional lives.

Founded in 2001, the Greater Good Science Center has been at the fore of a new scientific movement to explore the roots of happy and compassionate individuals, strong social bonds, and altruistic behavior—the science of a meaningful life. We have been without peer in our efforts to translate and disseminate this science to the public, including through our award-winning online magazine, Greater Good.

Though much of our work draws on psychological research, its scope is broader than the individual. Instead, we try to support cultural shifts in how people view human nature, understand the sources of true happiness, and value their connections to one another—all to promote a kinder and more compassionate society.

## Our Mission

The Greater Good Science Center studies the psychology, sociology, and neuroscience of well-being and teaches skills that foster a thriving, resilient, and compassionate society.

## Our Core Beliefs

Our strategy to achieve our long-term outcomes is grounded in the following beliefs, which are grounded in the science we cover.

- Compassion is a fundamental human strength with deep psychological and evolutionary roots. By creating environments that promote care and cooperation and elevating people's beliefs about what they're capable of, we help nurture the positive side of human nature.
- People's genes do not solely determine happiness. Instead, individuals can learn and develop skills through teaching and practice.
- Happiness and altruism are intertwined--doing good is an essential ingredient to being happy, and happiness helps spur kindness and generosity.
- Science should do more than help us understand human behavior and emotion in the abstract; it should also improve people's personal and professional lives. By drawing on research suggesting the importance of social-emotional skills, we seed demand for high-quality resources that build those skills.
- Studying the roots of good, healthy, and positive behavior is as important as studying human pathologies. Science should advance individual and social well-being by exploring how people overcome challenging circumstances and develop positive emotions and relationships.
- Individual well-being promotes social well-being, and social well-being promotes individual well-being. The well-being of society as a whole, then, can be supported by providing information, tools, and skills to those people directly responsible for shaping the well-being of others.

## Our Work Supporting Parents, Children, and Families

Peace and well-being in the world often begin with peace and well-being at home. That’s why the Greater Good Science Center has been committed to nurturing peaceful, compassionate, joyful families since its founding.

Our *Greater Good* online magazine contains articles and videos for parents and families to help them foster strengths like gratitude, forgiveness, resilience, understanding, and generosity in themselves and their children. Those resources have reached millions of parents and affected countless families, and we continue to expand our offerings and outreach. Over the past two decades, researchers have expanded our understanding of the keys to developing strengths such as compassion and purpose in our children—to help parents raise children who are supportive of others and committed to something bigger than themselves.

To help bridge the gap between research and parents’ daily lives, the Greater Good Science Center launched an initiative, “Raising Caring, Courageous Kids,” in 2017. This initiative had two major components for the public. First, the Greater Good Science Center provided \$1 million in grant funding to 16 community-based organizations—schools, houses of worship, and community centers—with strong connections to school-age children’s parents. Their programs help parents nurture strengths like generosity, gratitude, and forgiveness in their kids. Second, building on its strong track record, the Greater Good Science Center developed a range of new multimedia resources for raising caring, courageous kids, and sharing top research and best practices with parents.

The insights we gained in our work with community-based organizations through our “Raising Caring, Courageous Kids” initiative led us to develop this workbook for you. We are grateful to be your partner in supporting your community’s parents, children, and families.



# Part one



## Cultivating Family and Community Well-Being

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Chapter 2.

### **Social Connection**

Strengthening Ties

Chapter 5.

### **Compassion**

Motivating Care

Chapter 3.

### **Empathy**

Cultivating  
Understanding

Chapter 6.

### **Purpose**

Contributing  
Meaningfully

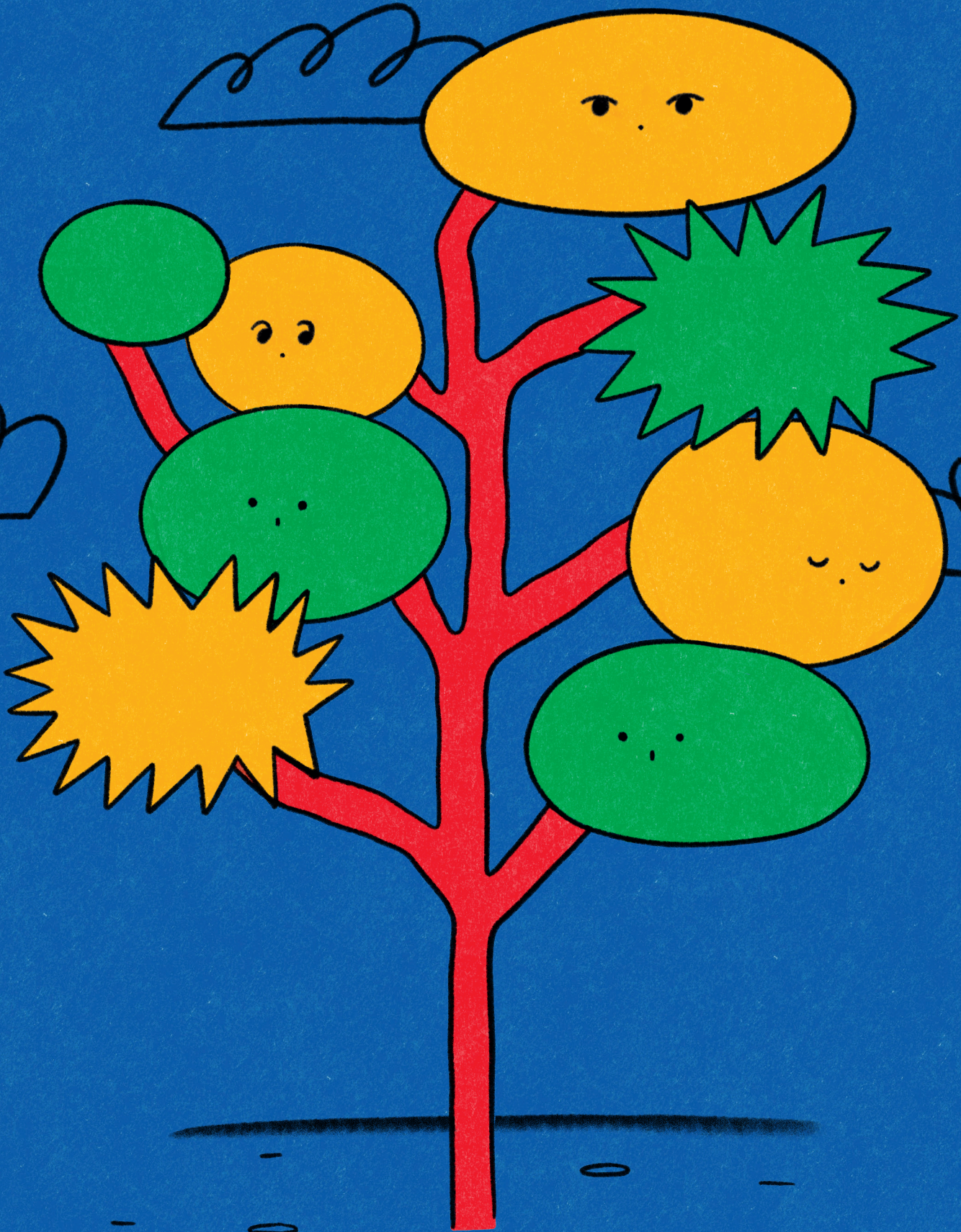
Chapter 4.

### **Mindfulness**

Nurturing Awareness

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# social con- nec- tion

“The interesting thing that surprised us when we started doing these classes for expectant fathers was how much they wanted to talk to each other. When we could get that social connection going, they could feel as good about that as the content. We deliver content and offer a place where new dads can talk, be vulnerable, ask questions, and receive skills training.”

– Steve, Hospital-Based Childbirth Educator in Ohio





# Social Connection in Context

In 2023, United States Surgeon General Vivek Murthy alerted<sup>1</sup> Americans that rising social disconnection is an urgent public health concern. His advisory report explained that an epidemic of loneliness and isolation poses significant risks not only for our individual well-being but for the well-being of our society. What's more, loneliness rises between childhood and adolescence—over half of teens experience recurring loneliness when social belonging becomes increasingly important, and connection is vital for healthy development.<sup>2</sup> Social connection is a basic human need and is crucial for our survival.<sup>3</sup>

In 2001, researcher Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone*<sup>4</sup> raised concerns about our deteriorating connections. Putnam explained how declining participation and membership in groups and teams, like bowling leagues or community organizations, parent-teacher associations, or faith congregations, had negative consequences for all of us. Community-building opportunities are where we can share our concerns and have meaningful conversations with people we are familiar with. Such regular contact builds trust and allows us to rely on one another. These in-person and real-time experiences can weave into the fabric of our daily lives the chance to connect, build our support networks, and feel a sense of commitment to one another.

# What is Social Connection?

Social connection encompasses our feelings of closeness to others during interactions and within relationships and our sense of belonging within groups. Researchers measure social connection in three main ways.<sup>5</sup>

- **Structure:** How many family connections or friendships do we have, and are there any links among these relationships?
- **Function:** Do any of these connections have the capacity to fulfill any needs in our lives, such as providing practical help or emotional support?
- **Quality:** What are the advantages and drawbacks of the connections we share with others, including factors like relationship satisfaction or strain?



Humans are highly social beings. Being connected and belonging to a group provides nurturance and protection from harm. The social connections for babies and young children are usually primary caregivers and close family members. As children age, it is developmentally appropriate for children and adolescents to make connections with peers and others outside of their immediate family network. Ideally, adults have strong connections with close family and friends (bonding capital) and strong connections outside their immediate network (bridging capital).

Decades of research have shown that people with stronger social connections tend to live longer compared to those with weaker social connections.<sup>6</sup> Strong connections to caregivers who provided safety, stability, and nurturance early on in life is a protective factor against general health problems and mental distress following multiple adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), like neglect, abuse, and household challenges<sup>7</sup> (see chapter 10). Our social connections can make flourishing possible.

# Social Connection in Childhood


 An illustration featuring three stylized, rounded figures with simple facial expressions. One figure is yellow, one is red, and one is blue. They are arranged in a loose circle. There are two green stars, one in the upper left and one in the lower right. A small green dot is also visible near the red figure.

Our early childhood experiences with social connection can profoundly impact our lives. Research on early attachment—the unique, loving bond between children and their caregivers—suggests that a key part of developing secure and loving relationships is spending time with our children to support their needs and emotions.<sup>8</sup> Secure attachments involve parents becoming a secure base from which children can explore the world and a haven to return to for safety and comfort.

Securely attached children tend to have higher self-esteem,<sup>9</sup> show better self-control,<sup>10</sup> and perform better in school.<sup>11</sup> Children who experience more loving relationships with their parents also tend to be more compassionate and helpful toward others later in life.<sup>12</sup> The empathy, love, kindness, and compassion that our children develop

can support them in building positive relationships with others. What's more, secure attachments can set us up with lasting benefits for our health and growth—people who grow up without these loving bonds may experience adverse health impacts such as immune system dysfunction<sup>13</sup> and chronic illness.<sup>14</sup>

Beyond social connections within the family, childhood friendships are essential to well-being.<sup>15</sup> Having just one friend can help children be more invested in their schoolwork<sup>16</sup> and protect them from being bullied.<sup>17</sup> Friendships across ethnicities are especially valuable and can help kids be more adaptable and socially confident. For example, children with cross-ethnicity friendships tend to be better liked by other kids, be more self-confident,<sup>18</sup> have a more positive mood,<sup>19</sup> and feel safer at school.<sup>20</sup>

# Social Connection in Parenthood



About one-third of parents feel chronically lonely, which can be detrimental to both our well-being and the well-being of our children.<sup>21</sup> What's more, parents of neurodivergent children tend to feel even more socially isolated. For example, fathers of children with autism tend to be lonelier and have less social support than other fathers.<sup>22</sup>

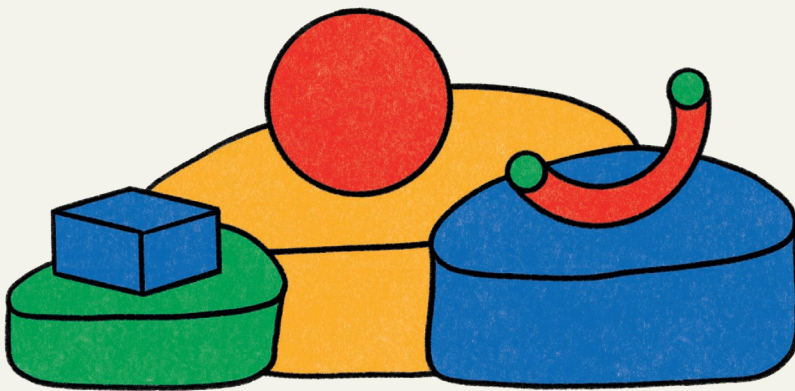
Like all parents, strong social connection can be a transformative way to nurture fathers' well-being. Researchers found that social support seemed to protect fathers who had difficult childhoods.<sup>23</sup> Among dads with greater adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), like abuse or witnessing domestic violence, those with higher social support had lower cortisol—a hormone that is secreted in the body as a response to stress—than those with lower social support. They had about the same cortisol level as those without difficult childhoods.

These findings are significant in light of a recent American Survey report, which showed that men have far fewer social ties overall compared to only a few decades ago.<sup>24</sup> In 2021, only 27% of men said they had at least six close friends, while 55% said so in 1990. Many men, and especially fathers, may be suffering from “friendship recession,” which can be detrimental to their health and happiness.<sup>25</sup> While prenatal and parent-and-me groups are widely available and socially acceptable for moms, many dads would benefit from similar opportunities to foster social ties,<sup>26</sup> which can help them cope with stressful parenting experiences.

What helps moms build stronger social connections? In a 2015 study exploring the keys that contribute to well-being in mothers,<sup>27</sup> the researchers found that four essential personal supports nourished moms:

- **Unconditional acceptance:**  
Do you feel seen and loved for the person that you are?
- **Reliable comfort:**  
When deeply distressed, do you feel comforted in the ways you need?
- **Authenticity in relationships:**  
How much of the “self” do you show to others—is your “outer self” very much the same as your “inner self”?
- **Friendship satisfaction:**  
How satisfied do you feel about the frequency of visiting with your friends?

It seems that moms don't have to travel far to nurture a network of supportive relationships. Research shows that moms who connect often with other moms in their neighborhood tend to have greater well-being.<sup>28</sup> Moms who have frequent and positive contact with one another feel more like they belong in the community, and in turn, they feel they receive emotional support, help, and advice from their peers. Further, those moms who feel supported by other neighborhood moms feel more satisfied with their daily lives. Social support for parents leads to greater emotional well-being and resilience in both parents and children.<sup>29</sup>



“When doing a group, I will say, ‘We’re going to go into small groups if you’re comfortable being with other people who have the same home language and would rather just meet in your small group and use your home language.’ I encourage them to do that. So that’s another way for families to connect socially because they can share a language or culture.”

– Debra, Educator in school-based Early Childhood Family Education program in Minnesota

# Nurturing Social Connection and a Support Network

In her recent book,<sup>30</sup> *Platonic: How the Science of Attachment Can Help You Make—and Keep—Friends*, researcher Marisa Franco offers practical ways to nurture meaningful social connections. If you want to make friends, consider these few tips:

## Take action

Put yourself in an environment where people meet regularly, assume that you're underestimating how much people like you, open up to people in the group, and invite someone to meet up.



### **Be vulnerable**

Take a chance to share the “truest parts” of yourself. This shows trust and care to someone, inviting them to show you their capacity for love.

### **Show love**

Greet a friend with affection, tell them you’re thinking of them, and celebrate their good news.

### **Find ways to be generous**

Share a meal, offer support to help them with their goals, spend time together, or take them to a doctor’s appointment.

Of course, parents are busy, especially when they already have limited social networks to support their children and are working long hours. Reaching out can be challenging, but practitioners working with parents can use these insights to offer opportunities to foster and support these types of interactions. We can share this guidance with parents and encourage them to feel at ease by practicing these tips during parenting workshops and circles. Being a parent has both highs and lows. It is crucial for parents to know that we’re not alone and to connect to others who can lift us up when we’re experiencing the hard parts of parenting.



# Self-Reflection

Social connections are vital to our lives. Take a moment to reflect on your social network and its role in your life before you bring the learning in this chapter to the parents you work with.

---

**a**

## **Read the list of statements and ask yourself these questions**

1. How much do you agree or disagree with each of the statements?
2. What do these statements make you aware of about your existing social connections?
3. Do any of these statements prompt you to see fulfillment and opportunities for growth in your social connections?

# Statements<sup>31</sup>

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- There are several people that I can talk to when I feel lonely.
  - I am willing to spend time to support general community activities.
  - There are people I interact with who would help me fight an injustice.
  - I interact with people who remind me that everyone in the world is connected.
  - I talk to people who make me curious about other places in the world.
- 

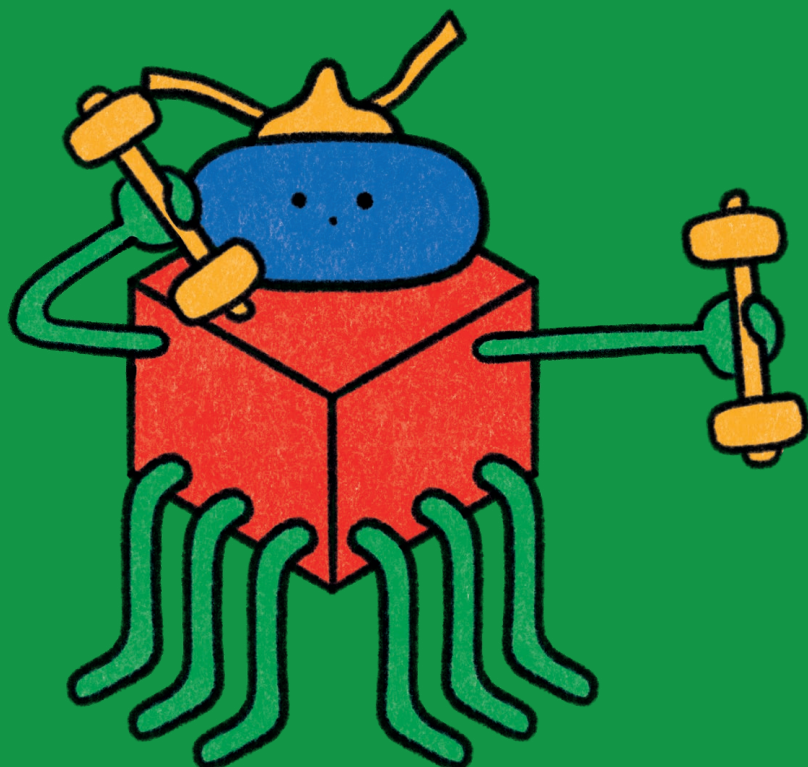


**Reread the statements as you seek to understand the presence or absence of social connections among the parents you support professionally.**

1. How much do you think the parents you work with agree or disagree with each statement?
2. What strengths are in the community that support connection among parents?
3. What could the community provide to help foster stronger social networks among parents?

“I think the social connection piece is so important. When I think about our well-being it’s so important to connect with others...It helps us realize and know that we’re not in this work alone and we have people that we can go to for additional support.”

—Karina, Counselor in a school-based Family Resource Center in California



# Practice

Now that you have been introduced to this topic, you can explore practices to nurture social connection. The first is a “Practitioner and Parent Practice.” Use it to nurture your well-being. Next, share the same practice with parents to guide them in fostering their well-being. The second is “Parent-Child Practices,” which you can share with parents. They are social connection activities for parents and children.



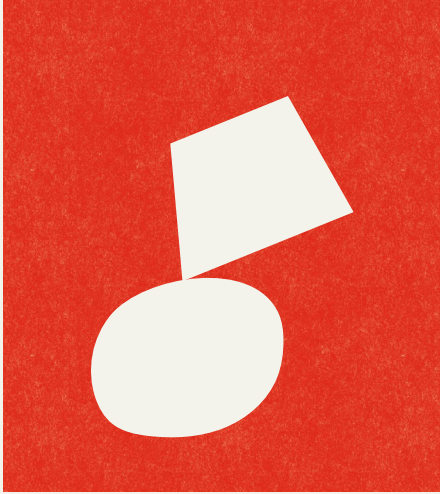
practitioner



parent



child



# Practitioner and Parent Practice



**Feeling Connected:** A writing exercise  
to foster connection and kindness.

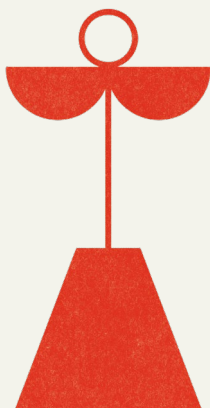
**Time Required:** 10 minutes

First, try this step-by-step activity for yourself and then guide the parents you support through the practice. During and after the activity, take a moment to pause and notice your thoughts, sensations, and feelings. Guide the parents you work with in doing the same.



## Why you should try it

Humans have a strong drive to be kind, but that drive is usually stronger when they feel connected to other people. This exercise asks you to think about a time when you felt a strong connection to another person and describe the experience in writing. Research suggests that reflecting on feelings of connection can increase people's motivation to help others. Helping others can, in turn, increase happiness and improve relationships.<sup>32</sup>



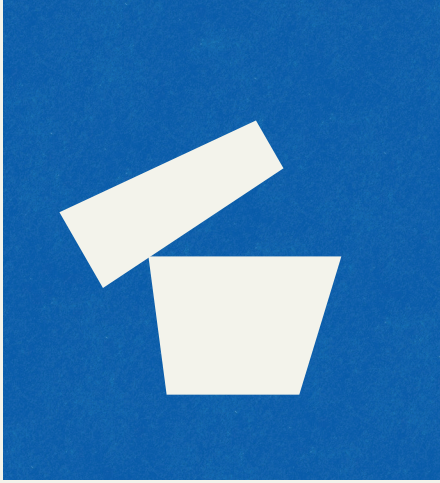
## Why it works

Feeling connected to others is a fundamental psychological need. When people feel connected and cared about, they can better spend energy helping and caring for others. By reflecting on times when you've felt a strong connection with others and striving to cultivate more of these experiences, you are fueling your drive to practice kindness and compassion.

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## How to do it

- 1** Think of a time when you felt a strong bond with someone. Choose a specific experience with this person that made you feel especially close and connected. This could be when you had a meaningful conversation, gave or received support, experienced a great loss or success together, or witnessed a historic moment together.
- 2** Write a short paragraph about what happened. In particular, consider how this experience made you feel close and connected to the other person.



# Parent-Child Practices



**Savoring Moments of Connection with Kids:**  
Reflect on caring memories to feel closer.

**Time Required:** 20 minutes

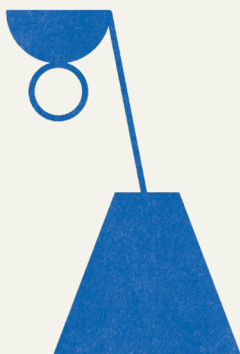
**Child Age Range:** All ages

This practice is a self-reflection exercise for parents. During and after the parenting activity, encourage the parents to pause to notice their thoughts, sensations, and feelings.



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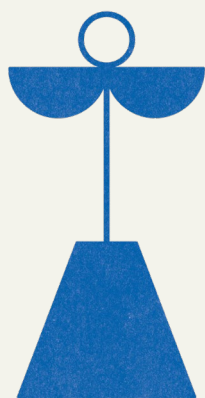
## Why you should try it



While being a parent can be deeply meaningful and hopeful, some moments can be overwhelming. Daily parenting hassles,<sup>33</sup> like messes or bedtime struggles, can accumulate and lead to tremendous stress. In contrast, positive emotions contribute to our well-being.<sup>34</sup> People who practice savoring positive experiences tend to be less depressed and experience more happiness.<sup>35</sup> Remembering a positive experience with your child can help you hold on to feelings of connection with your child that can become an enduring reservoir of positivity that you can dip into when you're under parenting stress.

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## Why it works



Reflecting on moments of care and closeness reminds us of our interconnection with others: our roles as caregivers and care receivers. Remembering times when you were sensitive to and cared for your child may help you see yourself as competent in supporting your child—and, in turn, as someone who can also receive support from others. Accumulating and savoring positive memories helps you to build up<sup>36</sup> your own personal resources, which can help you cope with hard moments in your relationship with your child in the future.

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## How to do it

You can harness the power of meaningful memories with your child by calling them to mind and savoring them. Not only does this feel good, but it also helps remind you of your ability to support and care for your child.

To begin, get as comfortable as possible. Take a minute to relax in a way that is most comfortable for you, such as engaging in deep breathing, mindfulness, or a grounding practice, like paying attention to the feeling of your feet on the floor.

Then, focus on when you felt really connected with your child. For example, this can be when you felt joy while helping your child grow or when you comforted, supported, soothed, or protected them. Think about this single memory of a positive relationship experience.

**Next, take about a minute for each of the following reflections.**

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- 1** Reflect on the sensory details of your memory, like touch, sight, taste, sound, and smell. What did your child look like? What was the air like?
- 2** Reflect on the emotions of your memory. How were you feeling at that time? For example, did you feel excited, proud, calm, or relaxed?
- 3** Reflect on the thoughts and meaning of your memory. What were you thinking during that time? Did you learn something about yourself?
- 4** Reflect on the significance your memory holds for your future. How close did you feel to your child at that time? How will it affect your relationship in the future?

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Finally, take about a minute to let your mind wander in any way related to this memory. For example, how is this memory related to other relationships in your life?

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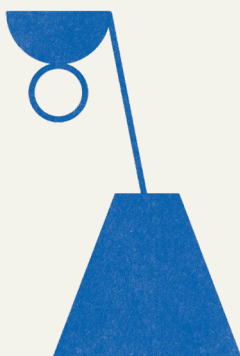
## 36 Questions to Help Kids Make Friends: Help children to build closeness.

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**Time Required:** 30 minutes

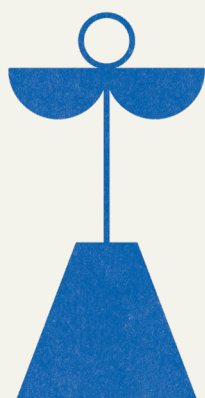
**Child Age Range:** Middle childhood and teens

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### Why you should try it

This 36-question activity can help children build closeness with someone they don't know well, including a child from a different ethnicity. Friendships—even just one—are essential for children's well-being.<sup>37</sup> Knowing how to talk to others in a way that fosters genuine connectivity and paves the way for real friendship—particularly with those different from us—is a valuable life skill.



### Why it works

The 36 questions are a mixture of opportunities for fun and self-disclosure. Mirroring the emotional journey of friendship, they become increasingly intimate, requiring partners to reveal more about themselves as they answer questions progressively. Taking turns listening with genuine interest and curiosity and the experience of feeling seen and heard allow feelings of closeness to develop.<sup>38</sup>

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## How to do it

- 1** Encourage your child to identify another child, perhaps of a different race or ethnicity, whom they don't know well and would be open to becoming friends with.
- 2** Find a 15-minute period when the children can meet up. During the meeting, have kids take turns asking and answering the questions below, which become more personal as the practice continues. Even if you can't schedule a time dedicated to this activity, you can share a couple of these questions with your child to help them prepare for meeting someone new.
- 3** Encourage children to spend the same amount of time talking and listening. At the outset, children can be reminded only to disclose information they feel comfortable with.
- 4** Your child can also use some of these questions to help them become closer to an existing friend or get to know an acquaintance better.

### Meeting One

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- 1.** What is your favorite subject in school?
- 2.** What is your favorite dessert or flavor of ice cream?
- 3.** What is your favorite pet?
- 4.** What's your favorite thing to do during summer vacation?
- 5.** What is your favorite TV show or movie?
- 6.** Do you like to get up early or sleep in on the weekends?
- 7.** What country would you most like to visit? Why?
- 8.** If you could have one superpower, what would it be?
- 9.** Describe your worst haircut ever.
- 10.** Describe your favorite person without saying their name.
- 11.** If you could be famous for something, what would it be?

- 
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|--|---|
| <p><b>12.</b> Describe one quality you wish you had.</p> <p><b>13.</b> What would a perfect day at school be like?</p> <p><b>14.</b> What would you like to change about your life if you could?</p> | <p><b>15.</b> What is your favorite holiday? Why?</p> <p><b>16.</b> What is your favorite thing to do after school?</p> <p><b>17.</b> What is your favorite song?</p> <p><b>18.</b> Name one thing we seem to have in common.</p> |
|--|---|

## Meeting Two

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- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <p><b>1.</b> Who was your favorite school teacher? Why?</p> <p><b>2.</b> What state in the USA would you most like to visit? Why?</p> <p><b>3.</b> Describe a time you got hurt (e.g., broke a bone).</p> <p><b>4.</b> What would your worst day at school be like?</p> <p><b>5.</b> How would you describe a true friend?</p> <p><b>6.</b> Name one thing you like about me.</p> <p><b>7.</b> What is your biggest obstacle in making your greatest wish come true?</p> <p><b>8.</b> Name one thing about school you think is unfair.</p> <p><b>9.</b> What is one thing you wish you were better at?</p> | <p><b>10.</b> What is your biggest regret?</p> <p><b>11.</b> What do you think your friends like most about you?</p> <p><b>12.</b> What would you do if you could be invisible for a day?</p> <p><b>13.</b> What is the hardest part of school?</p> <p><b>14.</b> What is one job you hope you never have as an adult?</p> <p><b>15.</b> What is your biggest fear?</p> <p><b>16.</b> What do you dislike most about yourself?</p> <p><b>17.</b> What is your proudest moment?</p> <p><b>18.</b> Name one reason we would be lucky to have each other as friends.</p> |
|--|---|

For additional questions, visit:



# Discoveries, Wonderings, and Commit- ments

## Discoveries

What are three to five key takeaways about social connection that are most relevant for you personally and professionally?

How much of a challenge is loneliness or isolation in your community?

## Wonderings

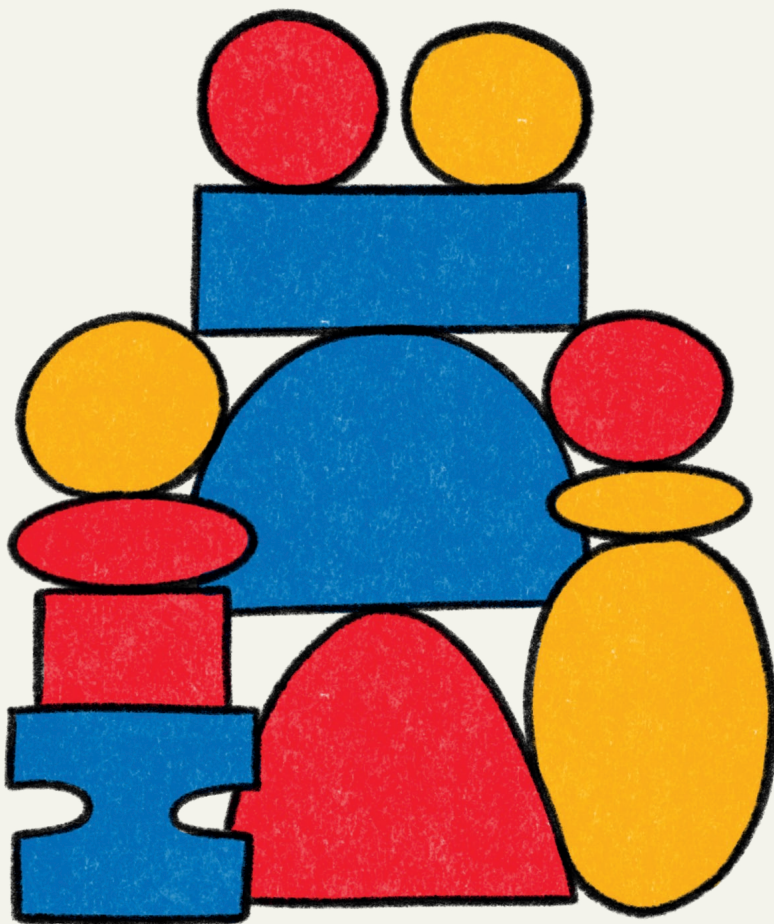
How might parents in your community respond to the practices to foster social connection?

What kinds of modifications to the social connection practices would you make to meet the specific needs of the parents in your community?

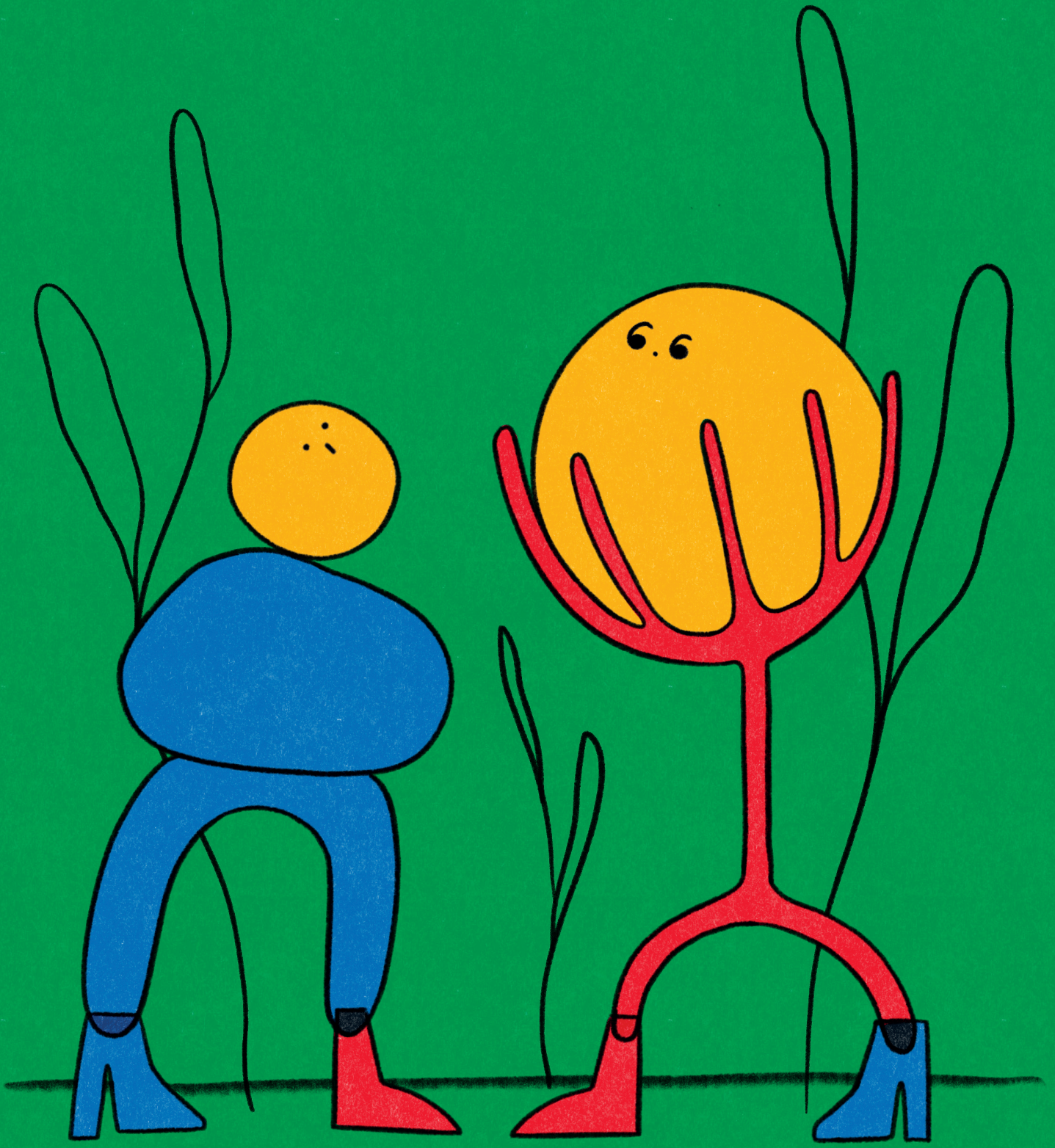
## Commitments

What actions do you intend to take based on your learnings about social connection for yourself? For the parents you work with?

Which social connection practice will you share with the parents you work with? What will you say and do to guide them in trying this practice?





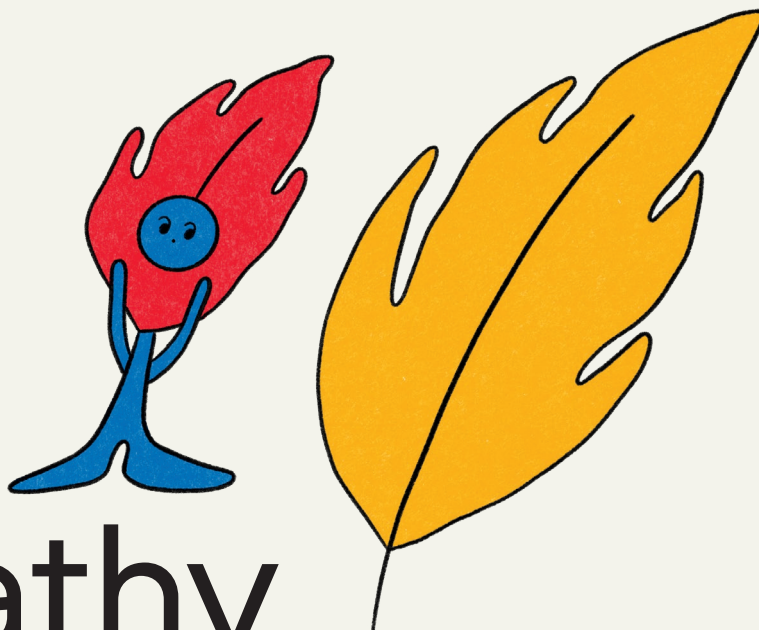




# em- pa- thy

“Something that I focus on with the parents who I work with is empathy. I try to get parents to try to remember what it was like to be a child at the age that their children are, and think about how they might have felt if that happened to them, to give them a little bit more of an understanding of what they can do to help their child.”

– Margaret, Parenting Programs Coordinator in a children’s advocacy center in North Carolina



# Empathy in Context

Empathy—the ability to perceive and try to understand another person’s emotions and thoughts—is a key to personal well-being, a necessary ingredient for thriving relationships, and a glue that helps hold society together. Unfortunately, evidence suggests Americans are becoming less empathic over time,<sup>1</sup> possibly due to modern life elements that aren’t conducive to fostering empathy. “[T]hese days, the rules that encourage empathy are being broken,” says empathy researcher Jamil Zaki.<sup>2</sup>

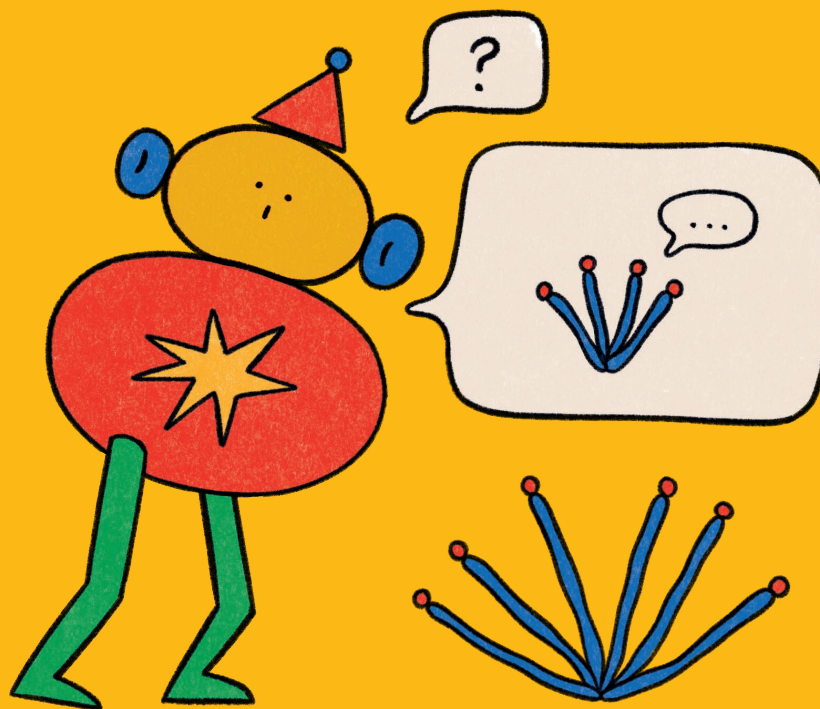
Humans evolved to experience empathy as a means of survival. Our Paleolithic ancestors lived in small groups of people they knew well and counted on—a situation ripe for empathy, explains Zaki. We, however, live in a very different world and are more socially isolated. We often interact with others online, and we cannot see their facial expressions. When we hear about people suffering worldwide, we see them impersonally as statistics. This context makes empathy more difficult. Fortunately, hundreds of studies demonstrate ways to foster a greater sense of empathy if we try.

# What is Empathy?

The term “empathy” describes a wide range of experiences. Emotion researchers generally define empathy as the ability to sense other people’s emotions and imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling. Contemporary researchers often differentiate between two types of empathy:

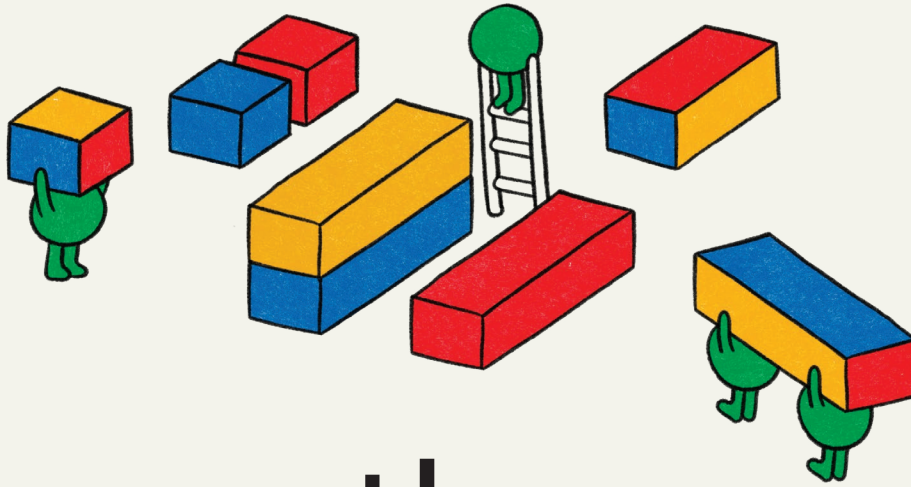
- **“Affective empathy”** refers to the sensations and feelings we get in response to others’ emotions; this can include mirroring what that person is feeling or feeling stressed when we detect another’s fear or anxiety.
- **“Cognitive empathy,”** sometimes called “perspective-taking,” refers to our ability to identify and understand other people’s emotions.

Empathy seems to have deep roots in our brains, bodies,<sup>3</sup> and in our evolutionary history.<sup>4</sup> Our primate relatives,<sup>5</sup> dogs,<sup>6</sup> and even rats<sup>7</sup> exhibit elementary forms of empathy. Some researchers hypothesize that empathy evolved as a parental instinct in mammals because



it motivates parents to care for their vulnerable offspring.<sup>8</sup> Scientists have associated it with two different pathways in the brain,<sup>9</sup> and they speculate that some aspects of empathy can be traced to mirror neurons.<sup>10</sup> These neurons fire in our brains when we observe someone else act, much like they would if we performed that action ourselves.

Empathy is fundamental for nurturing social connections. Empathic people make friends more easily.<sup>11</sup> Being able to understand your romantic partner's emotions deepens intimacy and boosts relationship satisfaction, and it's fundamental to resolving interpersonal conflicts.<sup>12</sup> Empathy is thought by many to be the baseline of morality. Empathy doesn't necessarily drive people to want to help someone in need, but possessing it is frequently a vital first step toward compassionate action.<sup>13</sup> Some studies have found that people with higher levels of empathy are more likely to help others, even when doing so goes against their self-interest.<sup>14</sup> While people have an easier time empathizing with people they consider to be more like them,<sup>15</sup> practicing perspective-taking reduces prejudice and racism.<sup>16</sup>



# Empathy in Childhood

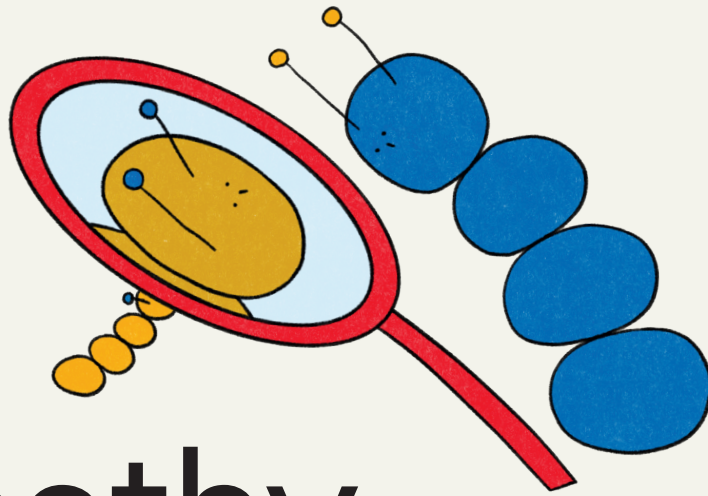
Humans experience affective empathy from infancy. Babies physically sense their caregivers' emotions and often mirror those emotions. Babies can distinguish between happy and fearful faces;<sup>17</sup> their brains respond differently to different vocal emotions;<sup>18</sup> and they will cry when other infants cry.<sup>19</sup>

Cognitive empathy emerges later in development, around three to four years of age,<sup>20</sup> roughly when children develop an elementary "theory of mind"<sup>21</sup>—that is, the understanding that other people experience the world differently than they do. Children continue to develop their empathic abilities throughout childhood and adolescence.<sup>22</sup>

Many elements can impact a child's sense of empathy. Children with autism may have an easier time with affective empathy than cognitive empathy.<sup>23</sup>

Children in lower socioeconomic classes are more accurate in judging the emotions of other people than people with higher socioeconomic status.<sup>24</sup> Children with a parent with an auditory or visual disability have higher levels of empathy and emotional literacy than children of parents who do not have these disabilities.<sup>25</sup> Children from multiethnic and/or multi-faith families may have stronger empathy and conflict-resolution skills.<sup>26</sup>

Evidence suggests that teaching children empathy skills helps them socially and morally. Studies<sup>27</sup> of Mary Gordon's innovative Roots of Empathy program,<sup>28</sup> which brings babies into classrooms to teach empathy and emotional literacy, have found that it decreases bullying and aggression among kids and makes them kinder and more inclusive toward their peers.<sup>29</sup>



# Empathy in Parenthood

“Empathy is vital for being able to respond sensitively to our children’s distress,” write Jessica Borelli and Stacey Doan, researchers and authors of *Nature Meets Nurture: Science-Based Strategies for Raising Resilient Kids*.<sup>29</sup> Empathy helps parents understand their child’s perspective and anticipate their needs, yet it has other benefits. In one study, adolescents with more empathic parents were better able to regulate their emotions, and the more empathic parents themselves had greater self-esteem and life purpose than parents with less empathy.<sup>30</sup>

While parenting changes the brain to help moms<sup>31</sup> and dads<sup>32</sup> become more empathic, that doesn’t mean parenting is always easy. “Parents sometimes struggle to express empathy when they do not like the way the child is expressing their feelings, like when children behave aggressively when they are angry,” write Borelli and Doan. Parents

with depression may especially struggle to empathize with their children.<sup>33</sup> Highly empathic parents may struggle with the “empathy trap”—empathizing so much with their children that they have difficulty separating their child’s feelings from their own.<sup>34</sup> This can lead parents to try to “fix the feeling” rather than teach their children that negative emotions are a tolerable part of life.

Another situation where empathy can be challenging is parenting after a separation or divorce, particularly when parents are struggling with poverty, a lack of affordable housing, and other stressors. Family Paths, a non-profit organization that offers a parenting support program for solo dads, California, found that practicing taking the perspective of their children’s moms by roleplaying helped dads learn to empathize with their co-parent, de-escalated feelings of rage, and helped them communicate more mindfully.<sup>35</sup>

# Nurturing Empathy

Researchers have identified several ways to nurture empathy in both children and adults:

## **Believe that empathy can be learned**

People who think their empathy levels are changeable put more effort into being empathic, listening to others, and helping, even when it's challenging.<sup>36</sup>

## **Be mindful**

Practicing mindfulness<sup>37</sup> (see chapter 4) helps us take the perspectives of other people yet not feel overwhelmed when we encounter their negative emotions.

## **Pursue diverse friendships**

Getting to know people who are different from us makes it easier for us to empathize with them<sup>38</sup> and reduces prejudice towards others of that group,<sup>39</sup> as a study of Catholic and Protestant schoolchildren in Northern Ireland found.<sup>40</sup>



### **Get out of your own head**

Research shows actively imagining what someone else might be experiencing can increase levels of empathy.<sup>41</sup>

### **Don't jump to conclusions about others**

We feel less empathy when we assume that people suffering are somehow getting what they deserve.<sup>42</sup>

### **Meditate**

Meditation—specifically loving-kindness meditation (see chapter 5), which focuses attention on concern for others—might increase the capacity for empathy.<sup>43</sup>

### **Explore imaginary worlds**

People who read fiction are more attuned to others' emotions and intentions.<sup>44</sup>



# Self- reflection

Fostering a sense of empathy is vital for our relationships. Take a moment to reflect on your experience with empathy before you bring the information from this chapter to the parents you work with.

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## **Read the list of statements and ask yourself these questions**

1. How much do you agree or disagree with each of the statements?
2. What do these statements make you aware of about your sense of empathy?
3. Do your responses reveal opportunities for growing your empathy toward others?

# Statements<sup>45</sup>

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- I easily feel sad when the people around me feel sad.
  - Before criticizing somebody, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place.
  - I find that I am “in tune” with other people’s moods.
  - I try to look at everybody’s side of a disagreement before I make a decision.
  - I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective.
- 

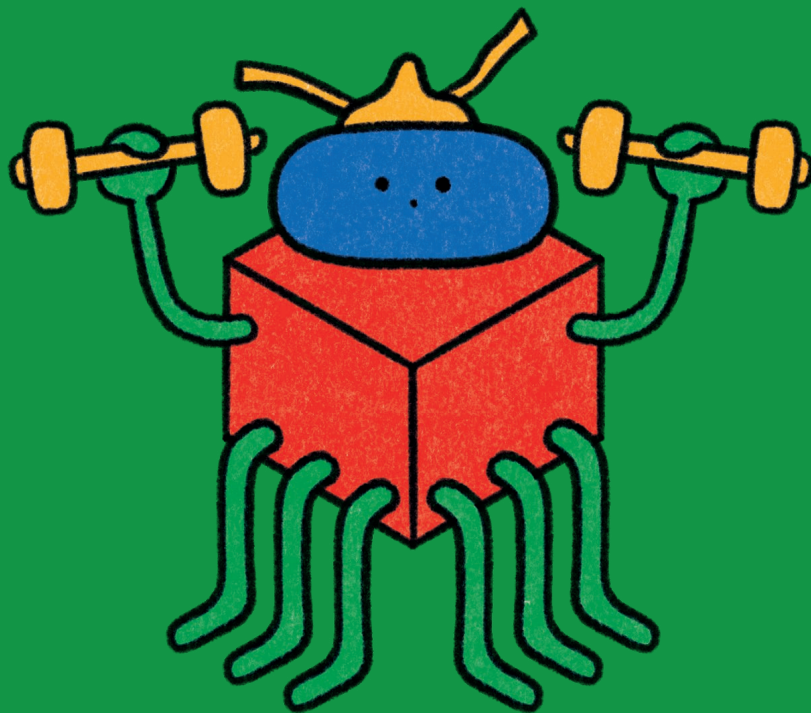


## **Reread the statements as you seek to understand the role of empathy in the lives of the parents you support professionally.**

1. How much do you think the parents you work with agree or disagree with each statement?
2. What strengths are in the community that support empathy towards others?
3. What could the community provide to help parents experience and express more empathy?
4. What experiences or challenges with empathy have parents shared with you that could guide other parents looking for ways to empathize with their children and others?

“Empathy is something that you are working towards more than something that you just sort of teach.”

– Chris O. works with under-resourced families in Tennessee



# Practice

Now that you have been introduced to this topic, you can explore practices to nurture empathy. The first is a “Practitioner and Parent Practice.” Use it to nurture your well-being. Next, share the same practice with parents to guide them in fostering their well-being. The second is “Parent-Child Practices,” which include empathy activities you can share with parents.



practitioner

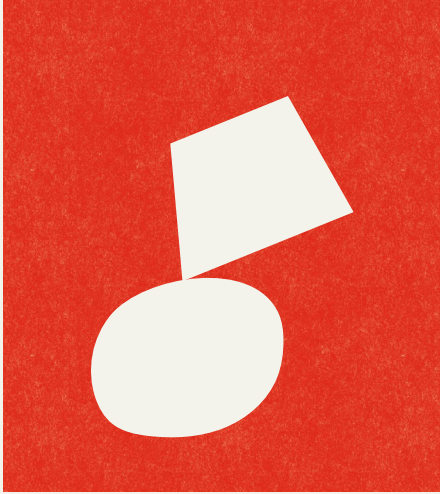


parent



child

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# Practitioner and Parent Practice

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**Active Listening:** Connect with a partner through empathy and understanding.

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**Time Required:** 10 minutes

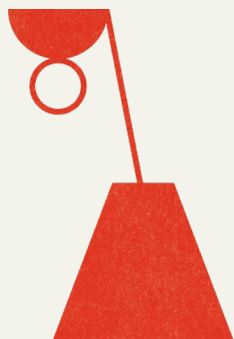
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First, try this step-by-step activity for yourself and then guide the parents you support through the practice. During and after the activity, take a moment to pause and notice your thoughts, sensations, and feelings. Guide the parents you work with in doing the same.

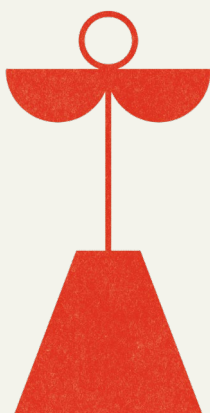
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## Why you should try it



This exercise helps you express active interest in what the other person has to say and make them feel heard—a way to foster empathy and connection. This technique is especially well-suited for facilitating constructive conversations across political, cultural, or other differences. When there’s a power imbalance between people of different groups, it’s more important for the person with less social power to give their perspective while the person with more social power listens and tries to take their perspective.



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## Why it works

Active listening helps listeners better understand others’ perspectives and helps speakers feel more understood and less threatened.<sup>46</sup> This technique can prevent miscommunication and spare hurt feelings on both sides. Active listening can make relationships more enduring and satisfying by improving communication and preventing arguments from escalating.

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## How to do it<sup>47</sup>

Find a quiet place to talk with a conversation partner without interruption or distraction. Invite this person to share what's on their mind. As they do so, try to follow many of the steps below.

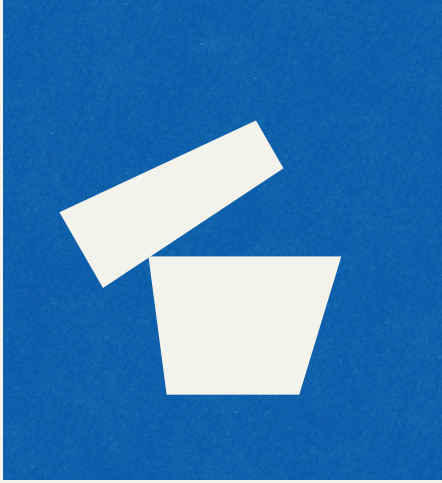
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- 1 Paraphrase.** Helpful ways to restate include “What I hear you saying is...,” “It sounds like...,” and “If I understand you right...”
- 2 Ask questions.** Try to avoid jumping to conclusions about what the other person means. Instead, ask questions to clarify their meaning.
- 3 Express empathy.** For example, if the speaker expresses frustration, try to consider why they might feel that way. Respond with support and understanding, regardless of whether you think that feeling is justified or whether you would feel that way if you were in their position.
- 4 Use engaged body language.** You can show that you are engaged by making eye contact, nodding, facing the other person, and maintaining a relaxed body posture.
- 5 Avoid judgment.** Your goal is to understand the other person's perspective and accept it for what it is, even if you disagree with it.
- 6 Avoid giving advice.** Problem-solving is likely more effective after both partners understand each other's perspective and feel heard.
- 7 Take turns.** After the other person has had a chance to speak and you have engaged in the active listening steps above, ask if it's OK for you to share your thoughts and feelings. When sharing your perspective, express yourself as clearly as possible using “I” statements (e.g., “I feel overwhelmed when you don't help out around the house.”).



“I think the more we can model with empathy it helps our kids then to ‘name it to tame it’ in their own feelings like, ‘Oh, you are feeling really sad. I know that whatever happened is really upsetting you. It must be so frustrating.’ Then they’re hearing those words that they might be able to verbalize themselves.”

– Jennifer S., works with parents and young children in schools in rural Minnesota



# Parent-Child Practices

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## **Talk With Kids About Emotions:**

Labeling feelings can help elicit your child's empathy and generosity.

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**Time Required:** Less than five minutes

**Child Age Range:** All ages

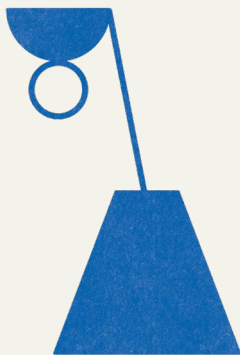
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You can guide parents on these step-by-step activities to support empathy. During and after the parenting activity, encourage the parents to pause to notice their thoughts, sensations, and feelings.

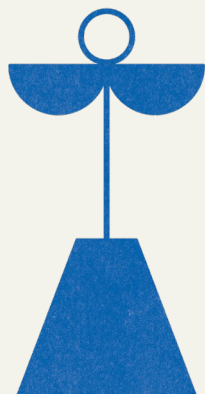
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## Why you should try it

Most parents want their children to develop strengths of the heart, like empathy and generosity. But these strengths can be abstract, and teaching kids about them can leave you wondering whether they are really “getting” it. Empathy—sensing what others might be thinking or feeling—first requires an awareness of other people’s emotions, which is what emotion labeling provides.



Emotion labeling is a simple technique for everyday moments, like grocery shopping or driving. Teaching children to see the world through another person’s perspective helps them to recognize and internalize the emotional states of others and differentiate them from their own. Children’s perspectives widen, and their capacity to respond to other children with empathy grows. With more empathy, kids may be more willing to help and share with others—one type of empathic response—which can foster greater social competence and positive relationships.<sup>48</sup>



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## Why it works

When adults label the emotions of others, children can make sense of internal experiences that people may be having that are not obvious on the surface. This can be a tool to raise children’s social awareness of others and promote social connectedness.

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## How to do it

Emotion labeling is one way to help children understand other people’s feelings. It involves directly pointing out and naming feelings so your child can build their emotion vocabulary and recognize the contexts that give rise to various emotions. In this way, they can begin to understand that emotions are complex and nuanced. The next time you notice a friend or someone nearby experiencing big feelings, help your child gain awareness with the following steps.

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- 1** Describe the possible emotions the person might be feeling. For example, “I heard that Jaime and Omar’s dog was sick and died. They might be feeling so sad and overwhelmed right now.”
  - 2** Invite your child to name other types of related feelings. For example, “What other emotions do you think they might be feeling?”
  - 3** Encourage your child to reflect on and share their experiences with similar emotions. For example, “Have you ever felt that way? What happened?”
- 

### Here’s a list of emotions you can use for quick reference:

Annoyed	Excited	Peaceful
Calm	Frightened	Relaxed
Disappointed	Furious	Restless
Discouraged	Irritated	Satisfied
Disgusted	Joyful	Surprised
Disheartened	Lonely	Thrilled
Embarrassed	Nervous	Worried

---

“Be willing to accept  
what you hear as your  
teen’s truth.”

– Eboni, school administrator  
working with parents in Illinois



## Listening to Teens With Love: Create a warm, non-judgmental space for teens to talk.

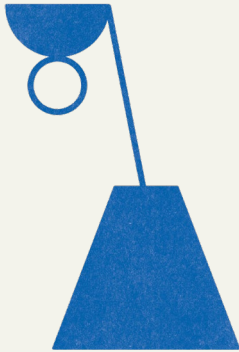
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**Time Required:** As little as 5 minutes

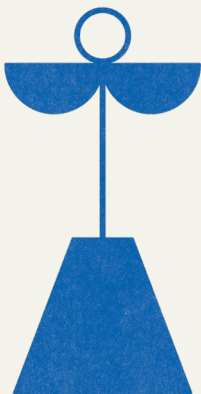
**Child Age Range:** Teens

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### Why you should try it



Communicating with our teens can be challenging. When we express severe disappointment or lecture teens, this can lead them to feel inhibited<sup>49</sup> about disclosing to us in the future because they are worried about a negative reaction. On the other hand, listening to your teen with empathy and non-judgment can help nurture a sense of intimacy between you and a willingness to disclose to you again. When children feel heard, they feel your support and validation, which can foster their well-being and improve your relationship<sup>50</sup>.



### Why it works

When teens can rely on parents to be good listeners, they feel a sense of freedom and confidence in their capacity for self-expression and a greater sense of connection with their parents. This supports your child's basic needs<sup>51</sup> for autonomy (being themselves) and relatedness (feeling closeness).

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## How to do it

As teens move toward becoming more independent from their parents, they tend to be less inclined to share personal hardships. When they share, showing them your love and desire to understand them can be a valuable opportunity.

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### **When teens talk to you about their challenges, respond by letting them know you're available and listening by following these eight tips:**

- 1.** Make eye contact throughout the conversation.
  - 2.** Lean forward and have responsive body language.
  - 3.** Sit straight and remain engaged while your teen talks.
  - 4.** Keep your full attention on your teen.
  - 5.** Nod your head in response to what your teen says.
  - 6.** Speak slowly and softly.
  - 7.** Show empathy through your gestures and body language.
  - 8.** Be as natural as possible with your teen.
- 

When your teen is vulnerable with you, it helps to acknowledge the courage it took to do so by saying things like, "Thank you for being so honest. That must have been hard for you to say. Do you want to tell me more?"

As you're listening attentively, you may hear teens talk about their regrets. You can show them empathy by saying things like, "Ahh. What an intense feeling to have."

With non-judgmental listening, teens can feel open to figuring out their own solutions. You can acknowledge your teen's initiative and reflection by saying things like, "That's a big decision. I'm glad to hear it. Thank you for sharing this with me."

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# Discoveries, Wonderings, and Commit- ments



## Discoveries

What three to five crucial takeaways about empathy are most relevant for you personally and professionally?

How much of a challenge is fostering empathy in your community?

## Wonderings

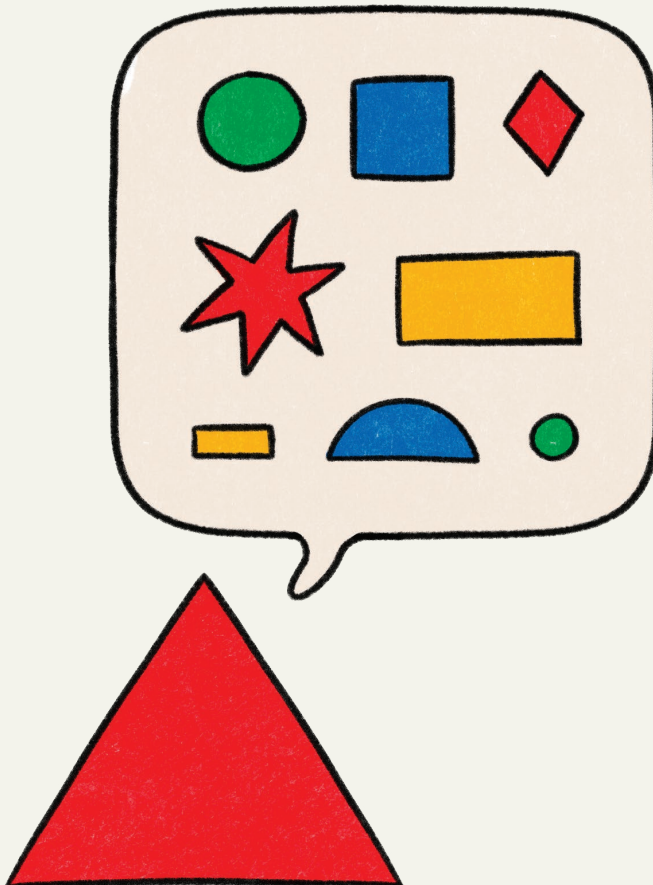
How might parents in your community respond to the empathy practices?

What kinds of modifications to the empathy practices would you consider making to meet the specific needs of the parents in your community?

## Commitments

What actions do you intend to take based on your learning about empathy for yourself?  
For the parents you work with?

Which empathy practice will you share with the parents you work with? What will you say and do to guide them in trying this practice?





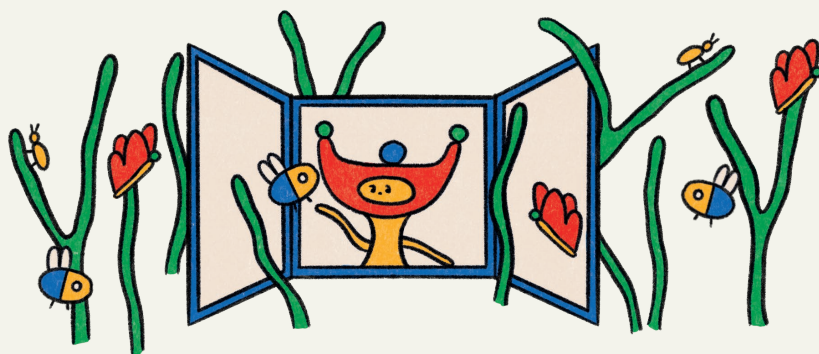




# mind- ful- ness

“The idea of not allowing things of the past nor the anxiety of the future to overtake your mind and heart in the present. That’s the essence of mindfulness, right? That concept seems to resonate a lot, especially with the dads. They understand the anger they’ve held onto for so long. How do you let that go? One key that we try to tell them is that it’s not a light switch that you flip on and off. It’s something that you work on day to day.”

–Chris O., Works with under-resourced families in Tennessee



# Mindfulness in Context

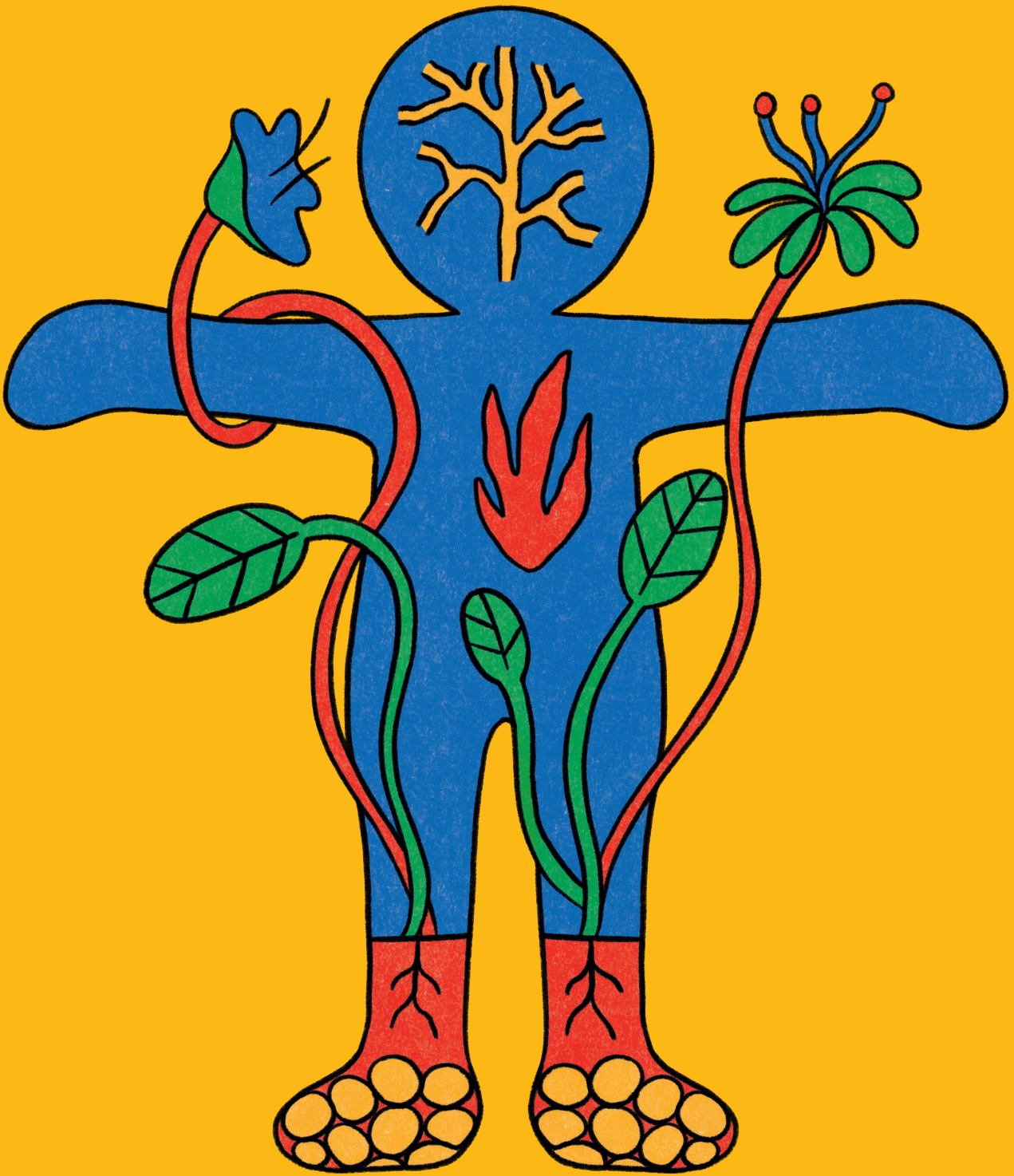
Mindfulness is rooted in Buddhist traditions and incorporates meditation techniques. It has been practiced for millennia and involves maintaining awareness of one's mind's contents in the present moment. Thousands of studies have documented the physical and mental health benefits of mindfulness. It can strengthen the immune system,<sup>1</sup> help with stress,<sup>2</sup> fight off depression,<sup>3</sup> improve memory<sup>4</sup> and decision-making,<sup>5</sup> enhance relationships,<sup>6</sup> increase self-esteem<sup>7</sup> and creativity,<sup>8</sup> and reduce bias<sup>9</sup> and prejudice.<sup>10</sup>

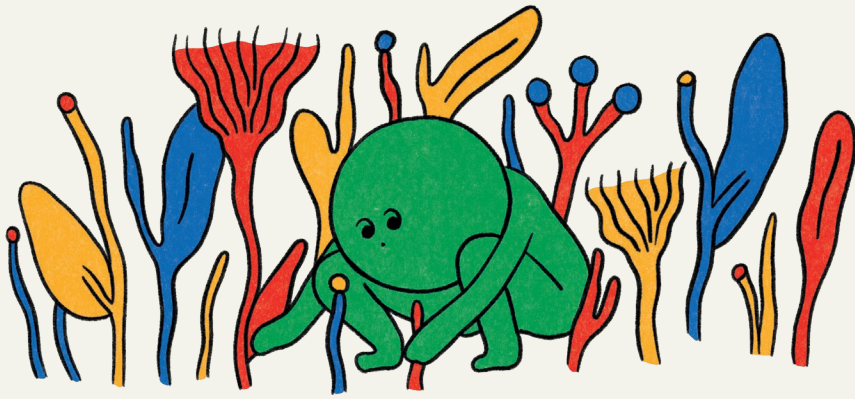
Mindfulness has gained widespread popularity in the United States owing to its effectiveness and the pioneering efforts of Jon Kabat-Zinn<sup>11</sup>. In 1979, Kabat-Zinn introduced the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Since its inception, schools, prisons, hospitals, and veterans centers have regularly integrated MBSR and similar mindfulness activities. Additionally, the popularity of meditation apps and guided relaxation exercises have further contributed to its prevalence.

Researchers and practitioners continue to expand the science and practice of mindfulness to be more diverse and inclusive. For example, recommendations for building inclusiveness within Latinx communities include translating mindfulness practices into Spanish, adapting metaphors to include stories or sayings from Latinx culture, and adapting goals to affirm values, customs, and traditions.<sup>12</sup> These adaptations can support migrant and first-generation Latinx communities with coping with stressors, like navigating cultural values, managing difficult emotions resulting from discriminative experiences, and challenges related to language barriers. Adaptations to mindfulness practices can uplift culturally important strengths within Latinx culture, like community, family, and social relationships.

# What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness invites us to become the observer of moment-to-moment awareness of our thoughts, emotions, physical sensations, and surrounding environment with curiosity and kindness. There are many ways to practice mindfulness, such as meditation, focusing on the breath, and seizing “micro-moments” to notice sensations, like your feet on the ground or the sounds of rustling leaves. Mindfulness involves acceptance, meaning that you pay attention to your thoughts and feelings without judging them—without believing, for instance, that there’s a “right” or “wrong” way to think or feel in a given moment. When you practice mindfulness, your thoughts tune into what you’re sensing in the present moment rather than rehashing the past or imagining the future.





# Mindfulness in Childhood

Young children, who are led by their innate curiosity to explore the world and all the sensations it has to offer, are often naturally mindful. But as they get older, children’s minds can be flooded with fears about the future, regrets about the past, and self-judgment.

Children of all ages can benefit from mindfulness practices. For example, studies have found that more mindful 8-to-10-year-olds were less negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic;<sup>13</sup> more mindful adolescents have a higher pain tolerance<sup>14</sup> and are less likely to struggle with internet “addiction”;<sup>15</sup> and more mindful college students are better able to bounce back from academic challenges.<sup>16</sup> While these studies do not prove that mindfulness is directly or solely responsible for these outcomes, they suggest that more mindful children may be more emotionally resilient.

Fortunately, there are ways to teach children mindfulness. Teaching mindfulness-based yoga to preschoolers<sup>17</sup> can improve their self-regulation skills. Videos<sup>18</sup> can teach children to take deep breaths and reduce stress. School-based mindfulness<sup>19</sup> training can increase resilience, executive function, attention, and kind behavior and decrease behavior problems and anxiety (although this is not universally true).<sup>20</sup>

Given the mental health crisis for teens,<sup>21</sup> mindfulness may be especially beneficial to this age group. When teens participated in a five-day mindfulness retreat<sup>22</sup> involving seated and walking meditations, yoga, and workshops, they felt less stressed and depressed and more happy, self-compassionate, and satisfied with their lives—and they still reported feeling better three months later.





# Mindfulness in Parenthood

Mindfulness can also help support parental well-being, which has downstream benefits for children. More mindful mothers of preschoolers<sup>23</sup> have less parenting stress, depression, and anxiety. Parents who are less self-critical<sup>24</sup> of their parenting have adolescents with fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression. Parents who engage in more mindful parenting also share more positive emotions during difficult conversations with their adolescent<sup>25</sup> children, and their children are less likely to use drugs or have anxiety, depression, or act out.<sup>26</sup>

Mindfulness doesn't come naturally to everyone, and teaching parents to become more mindful and to engage in mindful parenting can pay large dividends for the whole family. Research<sup>27</sup> shows that teaching parents mindfulness techniques reduces

parenting stress and improves child psychological functioning. In one study,<sup>28</sup> parents who attended an eight-week Mindful Families Stress Reduction (MFSR) course with their early-adolescent children reported decreased stress and increased mindfulness, and their children said that their parents paid more attention to them after the course. This study also found changes in areas of the parents' brains involved in self-awareness, emotional awareness, emotional regulation, and empathy. What's more, mindfulness can support the transition to parenthood (see chapter 7). Research suggests that mindfulness-based childbirth education can better prepare mothers for the experience of labor and reduce the likelihood of postpartum depression compared to standard childbirth education that does not include mindfulness.<sup>29</sup>

# Nurturing Mindfulness

Here are some strategies that experts suggest parents can take to become more mindful in their parenting and foster mindfulness in their children:

## Recognize that most parenting issues are temporary

“Some of the best parenting advice ever given to me was to add ‘...for now’ to the end of my observations about my child,” says school psychologist Sarah Wheeler.<sup>30</sup> “He’s not sleeping through the night...for now,’ or, ‘She refuses to wear anything but her Superman costume...for now.’”

## Accept that you (and your parenting) have shortcomings

“If you find yourself constantly striving toward some unrealistic ideal or scrutinizing your every move, it may be time to throw away the parenting books (or unfollow the parenting blog) and focus on listening to your instincts,” says

## Accept that your child has shortcomings

“Most well-adjusted adults had several difficult traits as children (I, for one, was a major tantrum-thrower), and it all turned out fine,” says Wheeler. Children’s development involves figuring out how to respond to new experiences and challenges—it’s a learning process.

### Take a head-to-toe inventory

“A kid can sense any glimmer of doubt you have, and what they’re really seeking is your clarity, your certainty,” says Sheri Glucoft Wong, co-author of *Raising Kids: Your Essential Guide to Everyday Parenting*.<sup>31</sup> Check in with your head, heart, and instincts to get them aligned with your actions to support your child.

### Use your phone intentionally<sup>32</sup>

It’s more difficult to be mindful with your children when technology is vying for your attention. Practice putting your phone away during dinner or for 30-minutes of parent-child connection time.

### Pause to consider what your child needs at the current moment

Take a moment to breathe before getting curious. “Is it space, autonomy, or a boundary?” asks Shauna Shapiro, psychologist and co-author of *Mindful Discipline*.<sup>33</sup> Children may not always be able to put into words that they need time on their own, a sense that they have a say in their lives, or clear expectations from parents.

### Recognize when you need to adjust your schedule

It’s hard to be mindful when you’re hungry, tired, or rushing out the door. When possible, building in some buffer time can give parents the space they need to connect and listen to their children. What’s more, children benefit from some time to make a predictable transition from one activity to another.



# Self-Reflection

Mindfulness helps us stay in the present moment, which can benefit many facets of our lives. Take a moment to reflect on mindfulness's role in your life before you bring the learning in this chapter to the parents you work with.

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**a**

## **Read the list of statements and ask yourself these questions**

1. How much do you agree or disagree with each statement?
2. Do your responses reveal to you that there are opportunities for becoming more mindful?
3. What do these statements reveal about your current relationship with mindfulness?

# Statements<sup>34</sup>

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- I am aware of what thoughts are passing through my mind.
  - I notice changes inside my body, like my heart beating faster or my muscles getting tense.
  - I am aware of thoughts that arise when my mood changes.
  - When I walk outside, I am aware of smells or how the air feels against my face.
  - When someone asks how I am feeling, I can easily pause and check in to identify which emotions are present in me.
- 

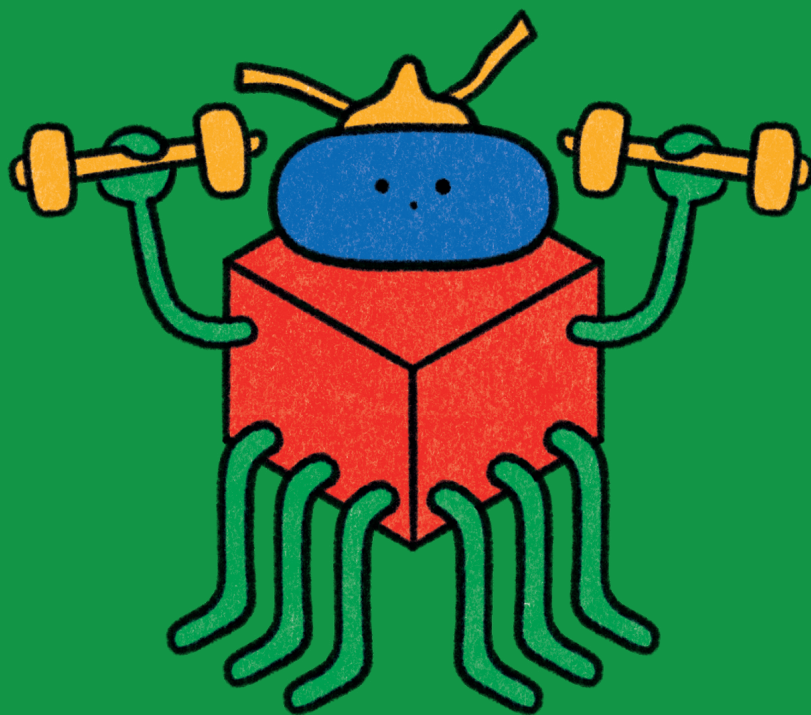


## **Read the statements again as you seek to understand the presence or absence of mindfulness among the parents you support professionally.**

1. How much do you think the parents you work with agree or disagree with each statement?
2. What resources could the community offer to support parents in nurturing mindfulness?
3. What mindfulness experiences have parents shared with you that could guide others in embracing and savoring the present moment savoring the present moment?

“I think breathing practices are something that’s coming up a lot. Parents are definitely practicing breathing before they react and respond to kids and teaching their kids breathing, and I feel like that is a really powerful practice that is connected to all the topics.”

– Sarah H., Works with families with children birth to third grade in rural Minnesota



# Practice

Now that you have been introduced to this topic, you can explore practices to nurture mindfulness. The first is a “Practitioner and Parent Practice.” Use it to nurture your well-being. Next, share the same practice with parents to guide them in fostering their well-being. The second is “Parent-Child Practices,” which you can share with parents. These are mindfulness activities for parents and children.



practitioner

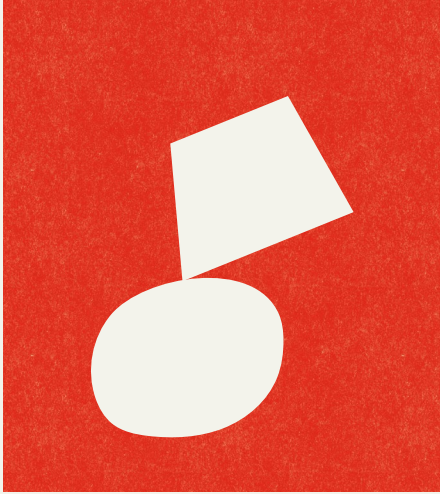


parent



child

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# Practitioner and Parent Practice

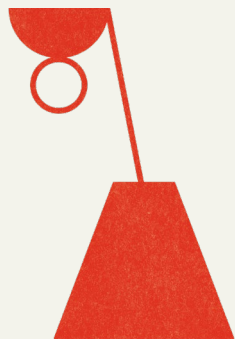


**Mindful Breathing:** A way to build resilience to stress, anxiety, and anger.

**Time Required:** Five minutes

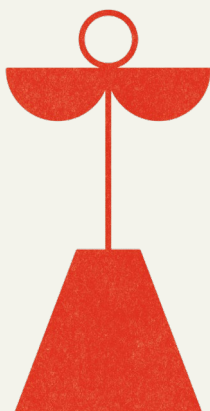
First, try this step-by-step activity for yourself and then guide the parents you support through the practice. During and after the activity, take a moment to pause and notice your thoughts, sensations, and feelings. Guide the parents you work with in doing the same.





## Why you should try it

The impact of stress, anger, and anxiety extends beyond our health, affecting our ability to focus and make sound judgments. Mindfulness offers a solution by fostering attentive awareness of our thoughts, emotions, and sensations in the present moment, free from judgment. Numerous studies highlight the benefits of mindfulness, including improved health, reduced anxiety, and enhanced resilience to stress.<sup>35</sup>



## Why it works

Mindfulness offers a perspective that allows us to step back from our thoughts and emotions, enabling us to manage and navigate challenging feelings without being consumed. Mindful breathing, in particular, serves as a valuable tool by providing us with an anchor—the steady rhythm of our breath—that we can return to when we feel swept away by stressful thoughts.

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## How to do it<sup>36</sup>

A fundamental approach to mindful breathing involves directing your attention to the rhythm of your breath as it goes in and out as you inhale and exhale.

---

**1**

**Time:** Set aside a specific time for this exercise, though practicing it during heightened stress or anxiety can be beneficial. Consistently engaging in mindful breathing fosters the ability to use it readily during challenging situations.

**2**

**Position:** Start by standing, or preferably, sitting or lying down comfortably.

**3**

**Eyes:** Keep your eyes open or closed or maintain a soft gaze, adjusting to your comfort level.

**4**

**Observation:** Observe each breath—inhale and exhalation—without attempting to alter its natural rhythm. Occasionally, particularly when seeking to soothe yourself during a tense moment, you may find it beneficial to begin by taking a deliberate, deep breath:

- a. Deeply inhale through your nostrils (3 seconds),
- b. Hold your breath (2 seconds),
- c. Release with a long exhale through your mouth (4 seconds).

**5**

**Focus:** Focus on the rise and fall of your chest or the sensation of air flowing through your nostrils.

**6**

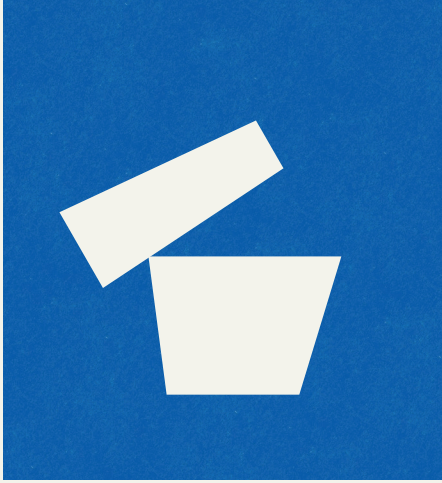
**Distraction:** Expect your mind to wander, distracted by thoughts or bodily sensations. That's OK. When you notice this happening, gently bring your attention to your breath.

**7**

**Closing:** After five minutes, offer yourself gratitude and wishes of well-being for completing this practice.

“Once I’ve pointed out some of those key things to look for, the five senses, the colors, do you notice any critters on the ground if we were doing some kind of mindfulness stuff outside? Do you notice the way the clouds look? I find that folks get excited because now they know what to look for next time, and they’ll come back and report back. ‘I was taking a walk the other day and for the first time in a long time, I just noticed how green the grass was.’”

– Victoria, Works with parents in addiction treatment in Mississippi



# Parent- Child Practices

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**Raisin Mindfulness:** Cultivating mindfulness, easing stress, and savoring simple joys.

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**Time Required:** Five minutes

**Child Age Range:** All ages

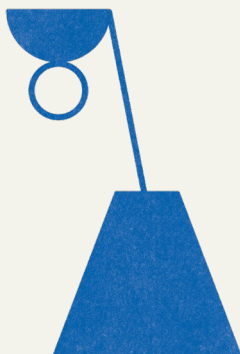
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You can guide parents on these step-by-step activities to support mindfulness. During and after the parenting activity, encourage the parents to pause to notice their thoughts, sensations, and feelings.

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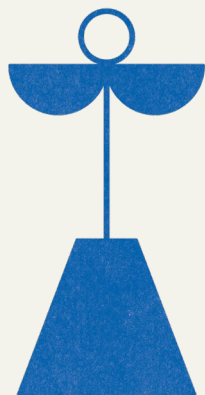
## Why you should try it



Often, we find ourselves dwelling on the past or anticipating the future, neglecting to appreciate the present moment. Lost in distractions, we may overlook simple everyday pleasures like the act of eating. However, mindfulness offers a remedy. By practicing mindfulness, we learn to tune into the present moment, becoming more aware of our thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations without passing judgment. This practice not only diminishes stress but also enhances our capacity to experience positive emotions.<sup>37</sup>

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## Why it works



By enhancing awareness of internal mental and physical states, mindfulness can help children and teens in developing a deeper understanding of their thoughts, emotions, and actions in the present moment. For instance, being more attuned to the sensations of eating can heighten children's enjoyment of their meals and foster more profound gratitude for the chance to satisfy their hunger. Mindfulness activities offer children a means to recognize and relish the simple joys of everyday life.

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## How to do it<sup>38</sup>

Begin by focusing on a raisin, or any fruit of your child's choosing, to initiate one of the most fundamental techniques for fostering mindfulness. This straightforward exercise serves as a common starting point for engaging in mindfulness.

### Guide your child through these steps:

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- 1 Holding:** First, pick up a raisin and hold it in your palm or between your fingers and thumb. Imagine yourself as an alien visitor, freshly arrived from Mars, encountering this object for the first time.
- 2 Seeing:** Focus and allow your gaze to roam all over the raisin, carefully exploring it. Notice the areas where light shines on it and where it has shadows.
- 3 Touching:** Turn the raisin over between your fingers, exploring its texture. If you're comfortable, try doing this with your eyes closed.
- 4 Smelling:** Bring the raisin close to your nose. With each breath in, take in any smell that may arise. While doing so, pay attention to any sensations in your mouth or stomach.
- 5 Placing:** Gradually bring the raisin to your lips. Gently place it in your mouth, allowing it to rest without chewing. Note the sensation as it enters your mouth. Take a few moments to concentrate on the experience of having it in your mouth.
- 6 Tasting:** When you feel ready, get ready to chew the raisin. Then, take just one or two bites into it. Pay close attention to any flavors. Without swallowing, notice the taste and texture in your mouth.
- 7 Swallowing:** When you feel ready to swallow the raisin, see if you can first notice the urge to swallow as it comes up so that you experience this purposefully before actually swallowing it.
- 8 Following:** Finally, see if you feel what is left of the raisin moving down into your stomach, and sense how your body feels after completing this exercise.



## Walking Meditation: Turn an everyday action into a mindfulness and stress reduction tool.

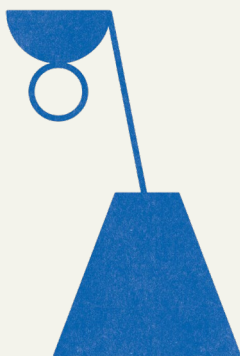
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**Time Required:** 10 minutes

**Child Age Range:** All ages

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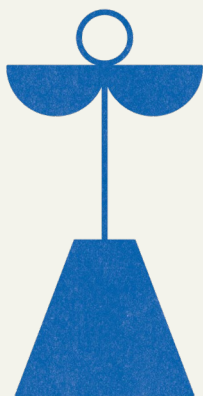
### Why you should try it



In our modern, fast-paced way of life, we often rush from one place to the next. One of the basic methods for cultivating mindfulness is a “walking meditation,” which involves focusing closely on the physical experience of walking. It helps children and teens practice a different pace of being in the world by deeply experiencing an ordinary part of life—walking—as they live it, which can reduce stress and help them tune into positive emotions.<sup>39</sup>

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### Why it works



Focusing more intently on walking can enhance our appreciation and pleasure of the physical self. Through heightened awareness of mental and physical states, walking meditation—similar to mindfulness overall—can empower us with greater control over our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, enabling us to respond more constructively to negative thoughts or feelings.

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## How to do it <sup>40</sup>

Follow these steps with your child. This walking exercise is adaptable for wheelchair users or those with limited mobility.

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- 1** **Find a location.** Locate a serene environment where interruptions are unlikely. You need to be able to pace back and forth for 10–15 steps, or approximately 20–40 feet.
- 2** **Start your pace.** Take 10–15 steps or wheel yourself for 20–40 feet along your chosen path, then pause and breathe at your own pace. When you feel prepared, turn around and retrace your path to the other end, where you can pause once more to breathe. When you're ready, turn again and continue with your journey.
- 3** **Notice the small ways you move.** This meditation involves intentionally noticing and focusing on actions often done automatically. Move and observe as you do these four fundamental actions:
  - a. Lift one foot off the ground.
  - b. Move the foot slightly forward from your starting position.
  - c. Place the foot on the ground, starting with the heel.
  - d. Shift your body weight onto the forward leg as the back heel lifts while keeping the toes of that foot in contact with the ground.
  - e. Observe how the bottoms of your feet connect to the earth and how the earth beneath you supports and sustains your body.



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For wheelchair users, try to notice and focus as you:

- a. Place your hands on the handrims.
- b. Feel the pressure as you push your hands and arms forward and downward.
- c. Release your hands from the handrims.
- d. Notice the way the terrain and ground change and the wheelchair's direction and movement.
- e. Observe how the earth beneath you supports and sustains your wheelchair and body.

**4**

**Go slowly.** You can move at any pace, though this meditation typically unfolds slowly and incorporates small, natural movements.

**5**

**Choose how to use your hands and arms.** If you are walking, clasp your hands behind your back or in front of you, or let them hang at your sides. For wheelchair users, move your hands and arms in your usual manner.

**6**

**Shift attention to new sensations.** As you move, direct your attention towards one or more sensations you typically overlook, such as the rhythm of your breath flowing in and out of your body.

**7**

**Expect your mind to wander.** Anticipate that your thoughts may stray, which is common and completely natural. When you recognize your mind drifting, try to re-focus your attention on one of those sensations.

**8**

**Make this meditation part of your daily life.** For many people, slow, formal meditation is an acquired taste. But the more you practice, even for short periods, the more likely it will grow on you.

# Discoveries, Wonderings, and Commit- ments

## Discoveries

What are three to five key takeaways about mindfulness that are most relevant for you personally and professionally?

How much of a challenge is being mindful in your community?

## Wonderings

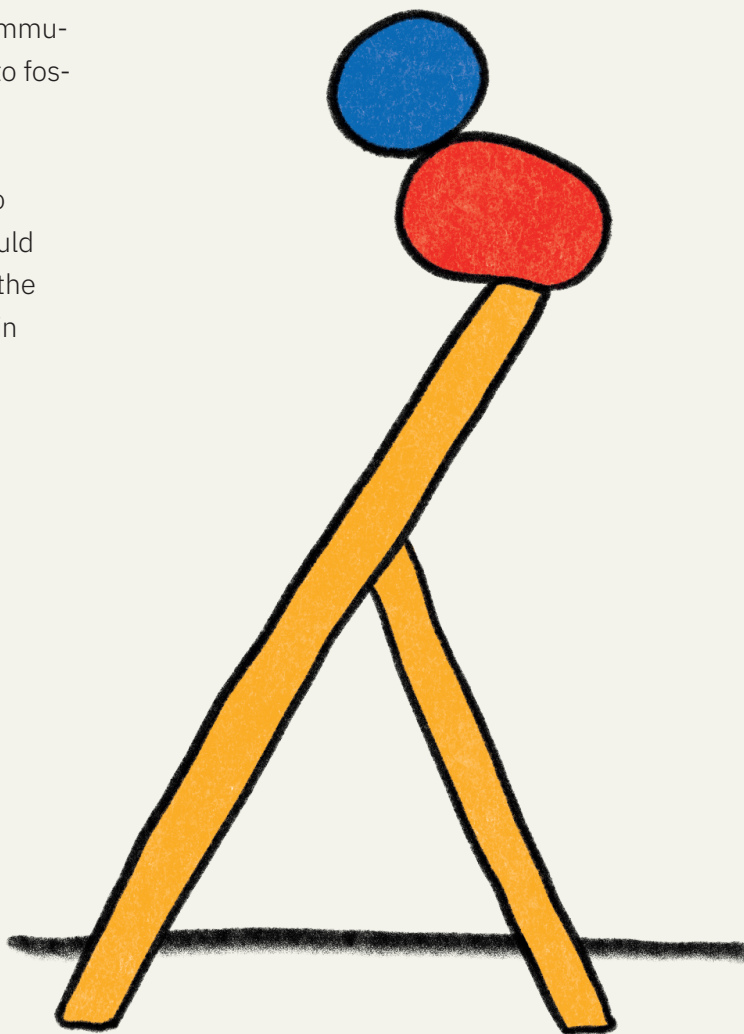
How might parents in your community respond to the practices to foster mindfulness?

What kinds of modifications to the mindfulness practices would you consider making to meet the specific needs of the parents in your community?

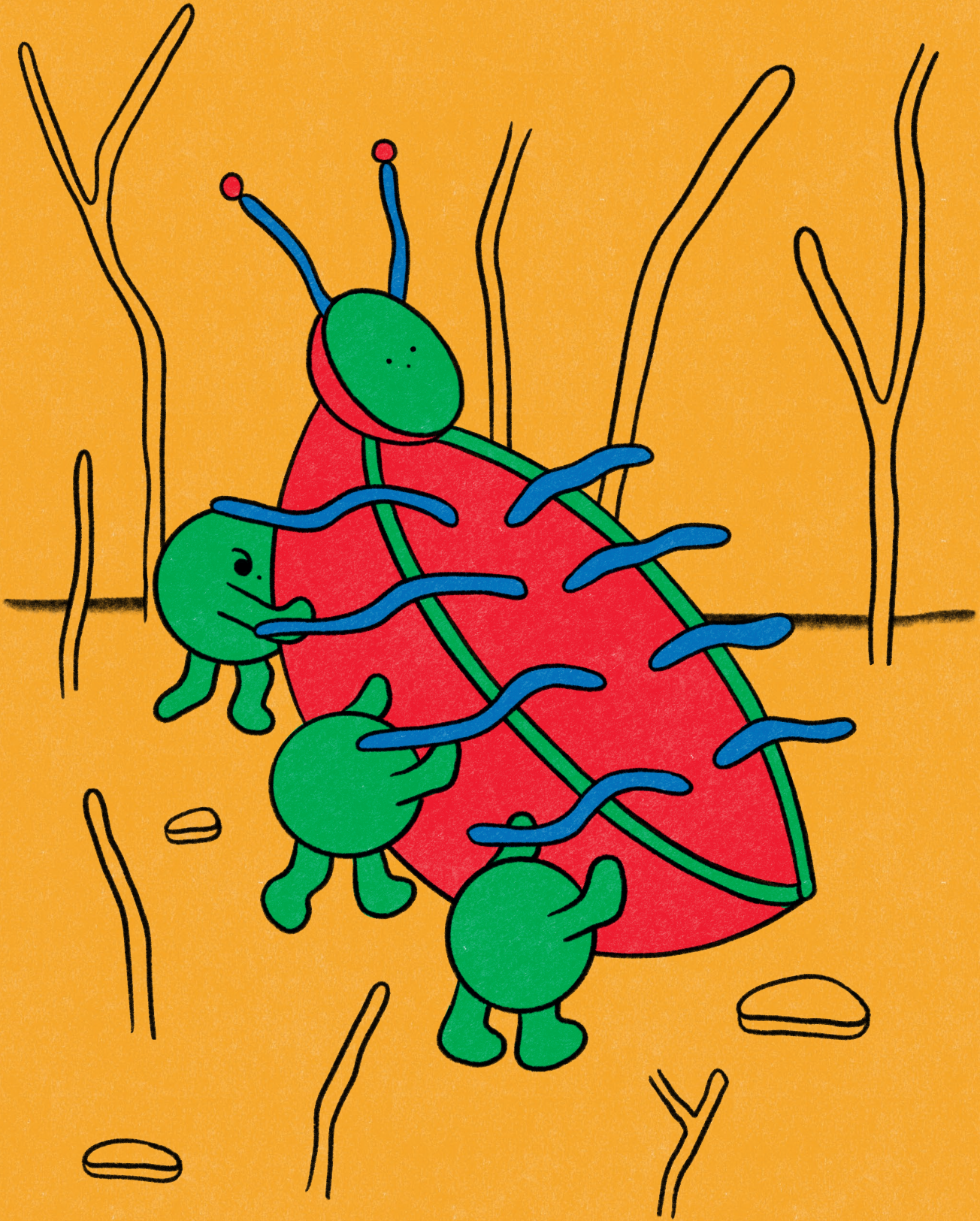
## Commitments

What actions do you intend to take based on your learnings about mindfulness for yourself? For the parents you work with?

Which mindfulness practice will you share with the parents you work with? What will you say and do to guide them to try this practice?





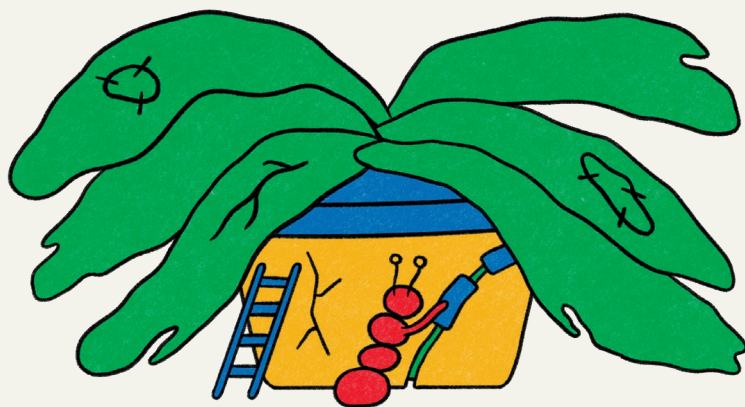




# com- pas- sion

“Compassion is probably one of the largest driving forces for my work in the NICU. My first experience of postpartum was with my child who needed the NICU, and that was a really dark road that I walked, so a lot of the compassion I felt for the younger me is what led me to work with other parents who might not have the exact same situation but similar.”

– Heidi, works with NICU families in Minnesota



# Compassion in Context

Compassion has deep roots in our bodies. Research has shown that when we feel compassion, our heart rate slows down, we secrete the “bonding hormone” oxytocin, and activity in regions of the brain linked to empathy,<sup>1</sup> caregiving,<sup>2</sup> and feelings of pleasure increases,<sup>3</sup> which motivates us to seek closeness and extend care to others.

Many scientists believe we evolved to have compassion so ingrained in our biology because human babies are exceptionally vulnerable and rely on care from adults to survive. “[T]hat simple fact changed everything,” says Dacher Keltner,<sup>4</sup> researcher and co-editor of *The Compassionate Instinct*. “It rearranged our social structures, building cooperative networks of caretaking, and it rearranged our nervous systems. We became the super caregiving species, to the point where acts of care improve our physical health and lengthen our lives. We are born to be good to each other.”

# What is Compassion?

Compassion means “to suffer together.” Among emotion researchers, it is defined as the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another’s suffering and feel motivated to relieve that suffering. Compassion is not the same as empathy or altruism, though the concepts are related. While empathy refers more generally to our ability to take the perspective of and feel the emotions of another person, compassion is when those feelings and thoughts include the desire to help. Altruism, in turn, is the kind, selfless behavior often prompted by feelings of compassion, though one can feel compassion without acting on it, and altruism isn’t always motivated by compassion.

Self-compassion is compassion turned inward: Treating yourself with kindness and understanding, acknowledging your feelings, and recognizing that everyone struggles sometimes. According to self-compassion researcher Kristin Neff,<sup>5</sup> “self-compassion provides an island of calm, a refuge from the stormy seas of endless positive and negative self-judgment.”

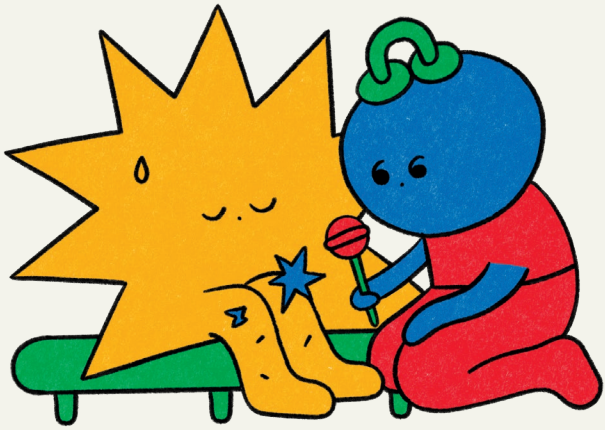


According to Neff, self-compassion entails three components:

- **“ First, it requires self-kindness**, that we be gentle and understanding with ourselves rather than harshly critical and judgmental.”
- **“ Second, it requires recognition of our common humanity**, feeling connected with others in the experience of life rather than feeling isolated and alienated by our suffering.”
- **“ Third, it requires mindfulness**—that we hold our experience in balanced awareness, rather than ignoring our pain or exaggerating it.”

## Working Together: Compassion, Self-Compassion, and Mindfulness<sup>6</sup>





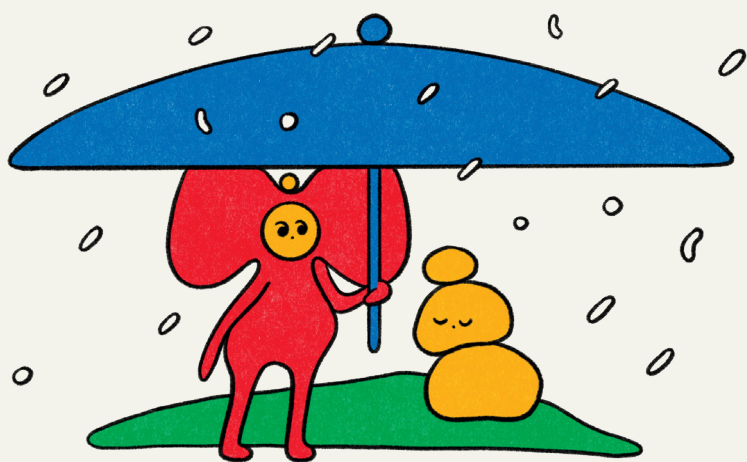
# Compassion in Childhood

Children, including very young ones, show compassion towards others. Toddlers<sup>7</sup> as young as 14 months old will hand objects to someone trying unsuccessfully to reach for them. Older toddlers will proactively help by picking up an object<sup>8</sup> that someone dropped and giving a cold person a blanket or a sad person a toy.<sup>9</sup>

Parental love and warmth can further support children's innate sense of compassion. Emotional warmth<sup>10</sup> is "the quality of loving relationships between parents and their children and physical and verbal behaviors parents use to express those feelings." The Young Finns Study,<sup>11</sup> which followed 2,700 Finnish children and their parents for decades, found that the children of emotionally warm parents grew into more compassionate adults. Another study found that showing teens<sup>12</sup> love and af-

fection when they do something good for others is more effective at instilling compassion as a value than material methods like a points system or allowance for helping around the house. These findings align with previous research linking greater parental warmth to greater empathy,<sup>13</sup> sympathy, and caring<sup>14</sup> in children and reinforce attachment theory research that suggests sensitive and responsive parenting may underpin<sup>15</sup> kindness in our children.

Self-compassion is particularly important for teens and can help protect them against trauma,<sup>16</sup> peer victimization,<sup>17</sup> depression and self-harm,<sup>18</sup> perfectionism,<sup>19</sup> low self-esteem,<sup>20</sup> and climate anxiety.<sup>21</sup> Teens who completed an eight-week self-compassion course<sup>22</sup> showed improved mental health,<sup>23</sup> and the program lowered risk factors<sup>24</sup> for suicidal ideation among transgender teens.



# Compassion in Parenthood

Parenting is biologically linked to compassion. When people experience compassion, their brains activate in neural systems known to support parental nurturance<sup>25</sup> and other caregiving behaviors, and parents' compassionate love<sup>26</sup> for their children can act as a buffer that decreases fight-or-flight stress responses during challenging parenting moments. Compassionate parenting also has psychological benefits for parents, including higher levels of parenting satisfaction and meaning in life.<sup>27</sup>

Fostering self-compassion helps parents build their emotional reserves. In studies, mothers of infants<sup>28</sup> who used self-compassion resources were less stressed and more satisfied with breastfeeding than those who did not. Parents who listened to a loving-kindness<sup>29</sup> meditation were calmer, more sympathetic, and less angry and frustrated when

asked about their emotional responses to common parenting scenarios than parents who listened to a guided imagery exercise. In another study, self-compassion acted as a shield<sup>30</sup> for parents of children with autism, preventing parents from internalizing negative stigma from others. Together, these studies suggest self-compassion may be a resource for resiliency and a protective buffer against stress for parents.

When parents model self-compassion, it also benefits their children. "Since children imitate our example, treating ourselves with compassion and without judgment can help them do the same," says Susan Pollak,<sup>31</sup> author of *Self-Compassion for Parents*. Pollack says this can be as simple as a parent acknowledging when they are having a hard day and saying that everyone struggles sometimes.

# Nurturing Compassion

Compassion training programs<sup>32</sup> reveal how we can boost feelings of compassion<sup>33</sup> in ourselves and others. Here are some of the best tips to emerge out of those programs, as well as other research:

## Respect your inner changemaker

When we think we're capable of making a difference,<sup>34</sup> we're less likely to curb our compassion.

## Don't play the blame game

When we blame others for their misfortune, we feel less tenderness and concern<sup>35</sup> toward them.

## Look for commonalities

Seeing yourself as similar to others increases feelings of compassion. One study<sup>36</sup> shows that something as simple as tapping your fingers to the same rhythm as a stranger increases compassionate behavior.

### Don't be a sponge<sup>37</sup>

When we completely take on other people's suffering as our own, we risk feeling personally distressed, threatened, and overwhelmed; in some cases, this can even lead to burnout.<sup>38</sup> Instead, try to be receptive to other people's feelings<sup>39</sup> without adopting those feelings as your own.

### See people as individuals (not abstractions)<sup>40</sup>

When presented with an appeal from an anti-hunger charity, people were more likely to give money after reading about a starving girl than after reading statistics on starvation—even when those statistics were combined with the girl's story.

### Notice and savor how good it feels to be compassionate

Studies have shown that practicing compassion and engaging in compassionate action bolsters brain activity in areas that signal reward.<sup>41</sup>

### Encourage cooperation, not competition

A seminal study<sup>42</sup> showed that describing a game as a "Community Game" led players to cooperate and share a reward evenly; describing the same game as a "Wall Street Game" made the players more cutthroat and less honest.

### Take routine self-compassion breaks

First, accept the moment of suffering. Next, acknowledge that other parents have felt this way. Last, offer yourself kindness and compassion.



# Self-Reflection

Take a moment to reflect on self-compassion's role in your life before you bring the learning in this chapter to the parents you work with.

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**a**

## **Read the list of statements and ask yourself these questions**

1. How much do you agree or disagree with each of the statements?
2. Do your responses reveal to you that there are opportunities for becoming more compassionate towards yourself?
3. What do these statements reveal about your current relationship with self-compassion?

# Statements

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- When I'm feeling down, I try to approach my feelings with curiosity and openness.
  - When I'm down and out, I remind myself that many other people in the world feel like I am.
  - I'm kind to myself when I'm experiencing suffering.
  - I try to be patient and understanding toward the aspects of my personality that I don't like.
  - I try to see my failings as part of the human condition.
- 



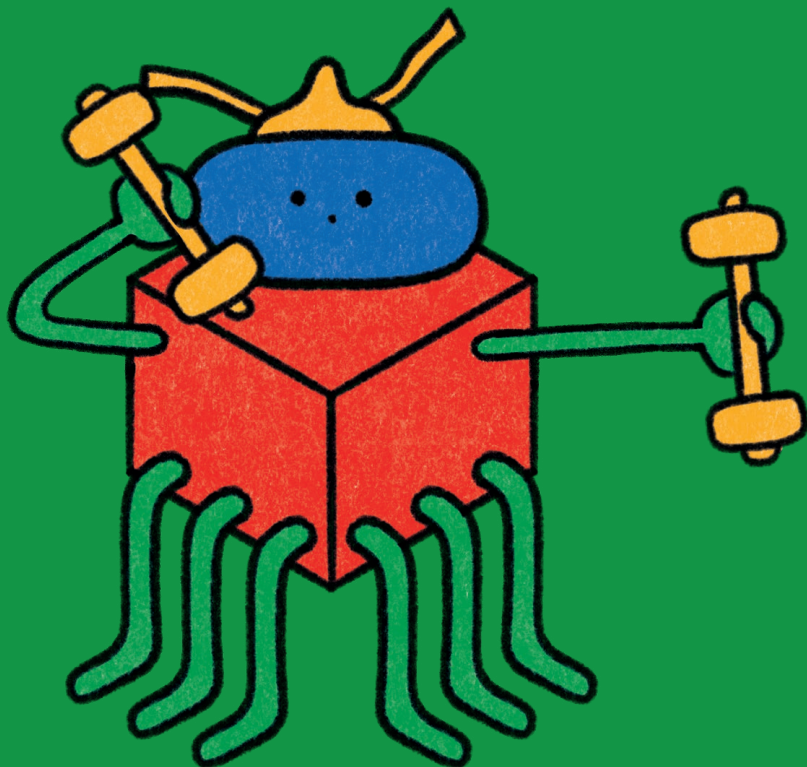
## **Reread the statements as you seek to understand the presence or absence of self-compassion among the parents you support professionally.**

- 1.** How much do you think the parents you work with agree or disagree with each statement?
- 2.** What resources could the community offer to assist parents in cultivating self-compassion?
- 3.** What experiences of self-compassion have parents shared with you that could guide other parents looking to foster more self-compassion in themselves and their children?

“We need to let parents know of the power of their modeling... We can show our kids real compassion by being good to our neighbors, neighbors being anyone we meet, and by offering to help as needed. Even small acts of kindness towards a stranger can teach our children what compassion looks like in action.”

– Jennifer S., works with parents and children from birth through sixth grade in a school-based setting in rural Minnesota





# Practice

Now that you have been introduced to this topic, you can explore practices to nurture compassion and self-compassion. The first set is a “Practitioner and Parent Practice.” Use it to nurture your well-being. Next, share the same practices with parents to guide them in fostering their well-being. The second set is “Parent-Child Practices,” which you can share with parents. They are compassion and self-compassion activities for parents and children.



practitioner

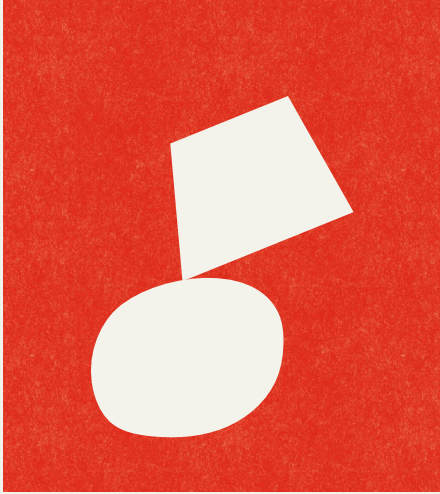


parent



child

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# Practitioner and Parent Practice

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Compassion



**Feeling Supported:** Recalling how others have comforted us can make us more compassionate.

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**Time Required:** 15 minutes

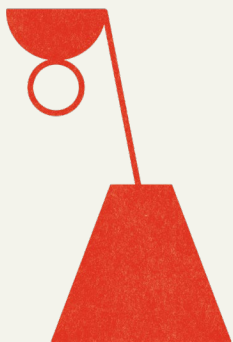
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First, try this step-by-step activity for yourself and then guide the parents you support through the practice. During and after the activity, take a moment to pause and notice your thoughts, sensations, and feelings. Guide the parents you work with in doing the same.

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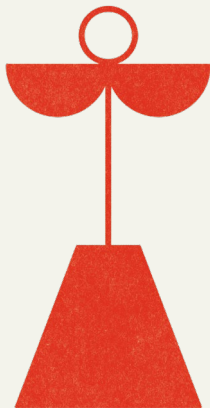
## Why you should try it



Most of us want to be kind and caring, but that can be easier said than done, especially when we feel stressed, threatened, or insecure. This exercise asks you to think about the people you turn to when you're distressed and recall times when you've felt comforted by them. Research suggests that increasing momentary feelings of comfort by thinking about supportive relationships can make us more trusting, compassionate, and helpful toward others in general.

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## Why it works



A great deal of research points to the importance of “attachment security,” a state that involves feelings of trust and comfort. When we feel secure, our energy can be more easily directed toward caring for others. Reflecting on the people in our life who love and support us can increase our feelings of security and also remind us of the qualities we want to embody when supporting others—thereby making us more likely to respond compassionately when we encounter someone in need.

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## How to do it<sup>44</sup>

**1**

Make a list of the people who offer you comfort or security and consider:

- a. Who do you most like to spend time with?
- b. Who do you find it most challenging to be away from?
- c. Who do you want to talk to when you are worried about something?
- d. Who do you turn to when you are feeling down?
- e. Who will always be there for you?
- f. Who do you want to share your successes with?

It is ok if the same person keeps coming to mind some or all of the time.

**2**

Write down six positive qualities that these people strongly demonstrate.

**3**

Next, visualize a specific situation when you felt distressed or worried, and one of these people comforted and helped you.

**4**

Write a brief description of the situation and how you felt.



Self-Compassion

## **Fierce Self-Compassion Break:** Cultivate the clarity and courage to protect yourself from harm.

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**Time Required:** 5 minutes

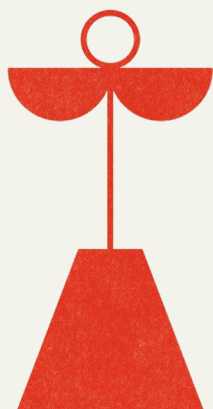
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### **Why you should try it**

When we are hurt or suffering, it can help to soothe ourselves with warmth and acceptance. But in many situations, we also need to protect ourselves: to speak up, say no, draw boundaries, or fight injustice. Research suggests that more self-compassionate people are more empowered and resilient. They tend to take more action<sup>45</sup> to solve their problems, and cope better with stigma,<sup>46</sup> microaggressions,<sup>47</sup> and bullying.<sup>48</sup>

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### **Why it works**

The three parts of fierce self-compassion each serve a purpose. Mindfulness counteracts discomfort and allows us to acknowledge what's going on. Recognizing our common humanity creates a sense of empowerment. Self-kindness gives us the determination and energy to protect ourselves and others. Together, this fosters brave, empowered clarity about our situation and response.

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## How to do it <sup>49</sup>

**1**

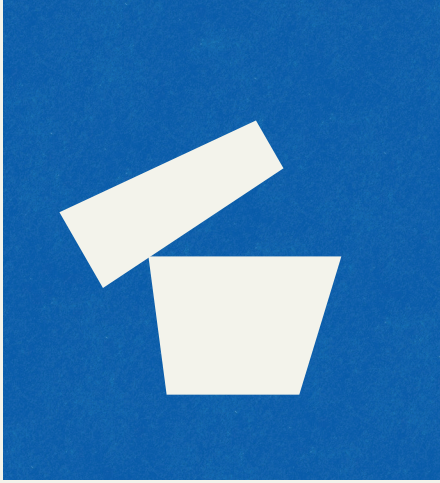
Think of a situation in your life in which you feel the need to establish boundaries, safeguard yourself, or assert yourself against someone. Opt for a situation where you feel mildly to moderately threatened, ensuring you're not in real danger, allowing yourself to learn the new skill without feeling overwhelmed. When you're ready, call up the situation in your mind's eye. Try not to focus too much on any particular person or group of people causing the situation. Rather focus on the harm itself. What's happening? What is the boundary violation or injustice? Try to allow yourself to feel whatever emotions come up: fear, anger, frustration? See if you can tune in to the physical discomfort this situation gives you. Now sit or stand up tall and roll your shoulders back, so that your posture embodies strength and determination. Then say a series of phrases (aloud or silently to yourself) designed to invoke the three components of self-compassion—mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness—in terms that feel active and protective. Below are some suggestions, but the goal is to find language that works for you personally.

- a. The first phrase is meant to help you be mindful of what is happening. Say to yourself slowly and with conviction, "I clearly see the truth of what's happening." That's mindfulness; we see things as they are. Find the words that seem right for you.
- b. The second phrase helps you remember your common humanity with others so you can draw strength from your connections while protecting yourself. Try saying, "I am not alone; other people have experienced this, as well," or "By standing up for myself, I stand up for everyone."

- 
- c.** Now, put a fist over your heart as a gesture of strength and bravery. Commit to being kind to yourself by keeping yourself safe. For the third phrase, assert confidently, “I will protect myself.”
  - d.** Finally, put your other hand over your fist and hold it tenderly. The invitation is to combine the fierce energy of brave, empowered clarity with the tender energy of a loving, connected presence. Give yourself full permission to feel the force of your anger and resolve, but also let this force be caring.

**2**

After this practice, you may be experiencing a lot of emotions. If calling on fierce self-compassion feels awkward or scary, allow yourself to go as slowly as you need to. The important thing is to set your intention to care for yourself as best you can.



# Parent-Child Practices

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Compassion



**Loving-Kindness Meditation:**  
Strengthen feelings of kindness  
and connection toward others.

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**Time Required:** Seven minutes

**Child Age Range:** Middle childhood and teens

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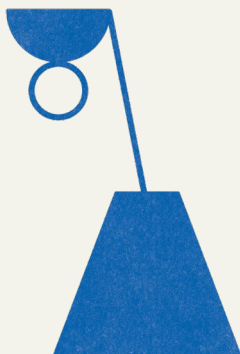
You can guide parents on these step-by-step activities to support compassion and self-compassion. During and after the parenting activity, encourage the parents to pause to notice their thoughts, sensations, and feelings.

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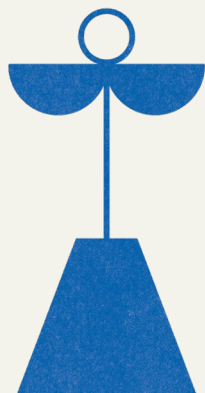
## Why you should try it



Practicing kindness is one of the most direct routes to happiness: Research suggests that kind people tend to be more satisfied with their relationships and with their lives in general. We all have a natural capacity for kindness, but sometimes we don't take steps to nurture and express this capacity as much as we could. Loving-kindness meditation (sometimes called "metta" meditation) is a great way to cultivate our propensity for kindness.

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## Why it works



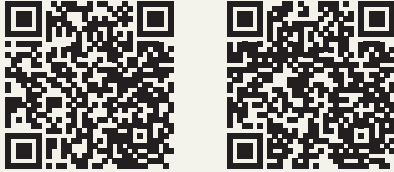
Loving-kindness meditation increases happiness in part by making people feel more connected to others—to loved ones, acquaintances, and even strangers. Research suggests that when people practice loving-kindness meditation regularly, they start automatically reacting more positively to others—and their social interactions and close relationships become more satisfying.<sup>50</sup> Loving-kindness meditation can also reduce people's focus on themselves—which can, in turn, lower symptoms of anxiety and depression.

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## How to do it <sup>51</sup>

**1**

Here is a script of the practice you can use with your child.<sup>52</sup> You can also watch a video<sup>53</sup> of children trying a loving-kindness meditation.



- a. **Positioning Your Body:** Find a comfortable reclining or seated position.
- b. **Noticing Your Breath:** To help us focus, let's bring our attention to our breath at the belly. Inhale, noticing sensations of breath as the belly rises. Exhale, noticing sensations of breath, as the belly falls.
- c. **Breathing:** 30 seconds of silent breathing
- d. **Receiving Loving-Kindness:** Transition into the practice of joy by focusing on someone you genuinely believe cares deeply for you—someone who has shown you kindness. Envision them smiling warmly before you, genuinely desiring your happiness and fulfillment, radiating this intention through their smile and eyes. As you breathe in, inhale this positive energy, allowing it to fill you with feelings of goodness. Please take a few more breaths to fully absorb their wishes of wellness, happiness, and joy, knowing they cherish you deeply.

- 
- e. **Appreciating in Silence:** 15 seconds of silence.
  - f. **Noticing Lingering Positive Emotions:** When gently letting go of the image of this person, notice if your body holds any positive emotional remnants—feelings of warmth or goodness. Then, relax into these sensations and feelings for a couple of breaths.
  - g. **Appreciating in Silence:** 15 seconds of silence.
  - h. **Sending Loving-Kindness:** With the warmth of support and happiness within us, let's extend this boost of joy. Visualize someone who could benefit from extra encouragement—perhaps a friend or family member. Imagine them vividly as if they were physically present before you. Tap into the genuine desire for their happiness, fulfillment, and joy. Inhale, drawing in this intention deeply. Then, exhale, sending them wishes of happiness, fulfillment, and flourishing. Repeat this process twice: inhale, draw in the intention, exhale, and send it outwards.
  - i. **Wishing in Silence:** 15 seconds of silence.
  - j. **Noticing Lingering Positive Emotions:** Release the image of this person. Once again, just notice the sensations in your body associated with wishing someone else well, generating and extending joy.
  - k. **Closing:** Bring this practice to a close with three long inhales and three long exhales.



Self-Compassion

## Pleasant Events Calendar for Kids:

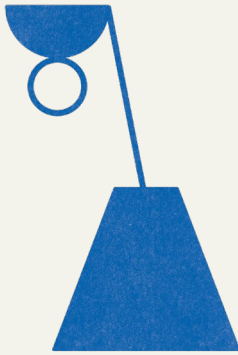
Help children cultivate self-compassion by planning enjoyable activities.

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**Time Required:** 10 minutes

**Child Age Range:** Middle childhood and teens

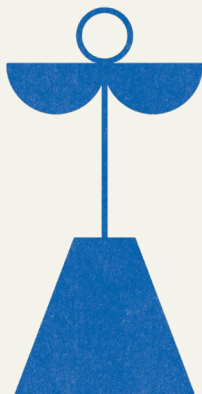
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### Why you should try it

Like adults, children experience stress that feels overwhelming at times. With so many responsibilities on their plates, children sometimes have difficulty being intentional about taking care of themselves. Self-compassion provides an avenue to intervene. Research suggests that taking care of and being kind to themselves can help adolescents reduce stress and increase feelings of curiosity and gratitude.

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### Why it works

The Pleasant Events Calendar is one of many ways to encourage your children to be proactive about carving out space for themselves, so they can look forward to positive experiences and do things that make them feel happy. In turn, being self-compassionate may allow children to be more open to both receiving and offering care—which some researchers consider to be the three parts of the full human experience of compassion.<sup>54</sup>

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## How to do it<sup>55</sup>

Compassion involves noticing suffering, whether it's our own or others, and feeling compelled to relieve it. During hectic routines, children might overlook their distress—be it stress, overwhelm, or sadness—or push it aside as they strive to keep up with the demands of daily life. To foster self-compassion in children, prompt them to carve out time to explore their passions and engage in activities that bring them joy, such as using a Pleasant Events Calendar.

### Here's how to do it:

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- 1** **Reflect:** Encourage your kids to write down a list of activities they enjoy.
- 2** **Schedule:** Help your children identify time slots on the calendar when they can do one or two activities.
- 3** **Track:** Place the calendar in a visible location and help your children track the activities by adding a sticker or checkmark when they are completed.

# Discoveries, Wonderings, and Commit- ments

## Discoveries

What are three to five key takeaways about compassion that are most relevant for you personally and professionally?

How much of a challenge is a lack of compassion or self-compassion in your community?

## Wonderings

How might parents in your community respond to the practices to foster compassion?

What kinds of modifications to the compassion practices would you consider making to meet the specific needs of the parents in your community?

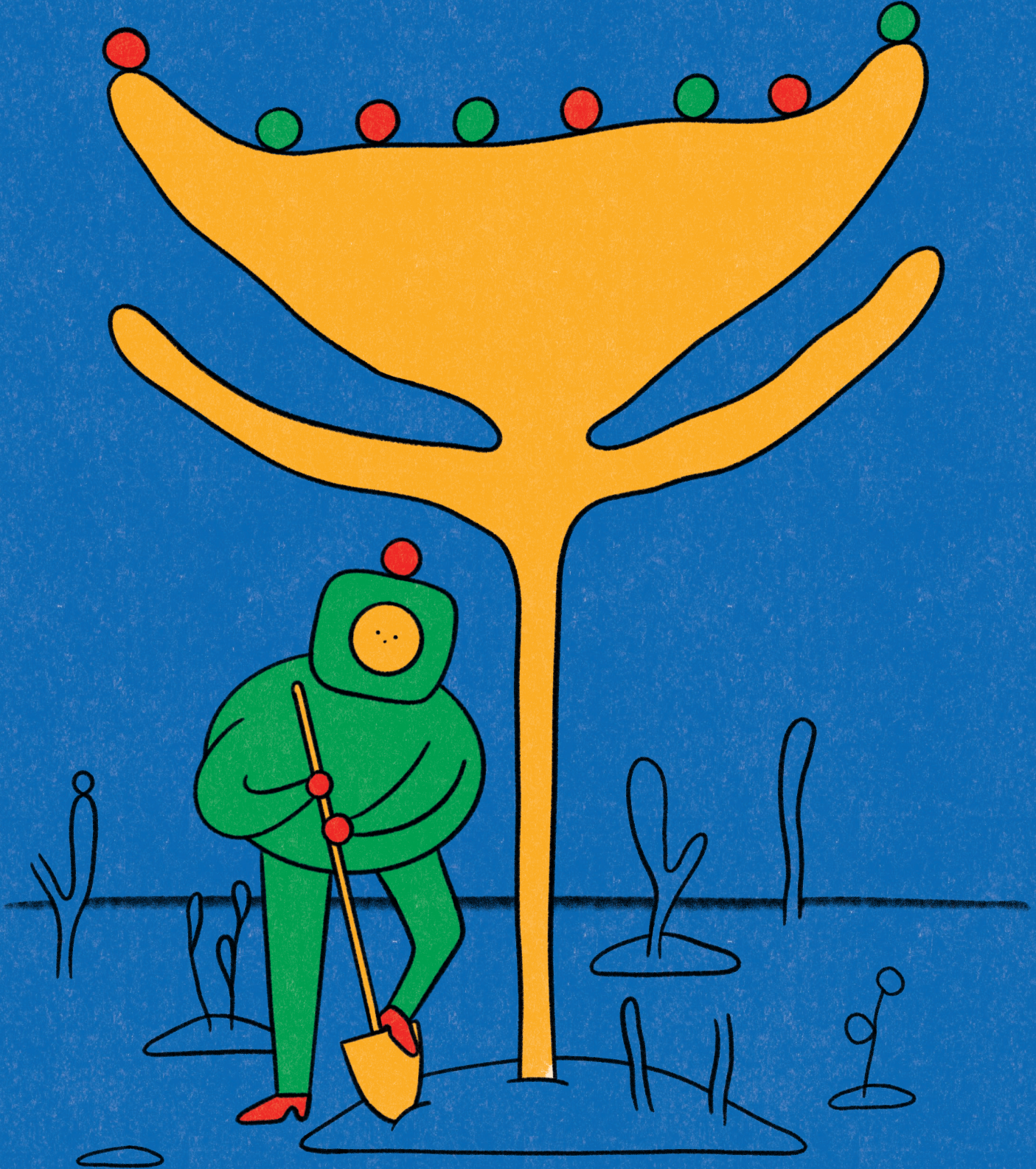
## Commitments

What actions do you intend to take based on your learnings about compassion for yourself? For the parents you work with?

Which compassion practice will you share with the parents you work with? What will you say and do to guide them to try this practice?





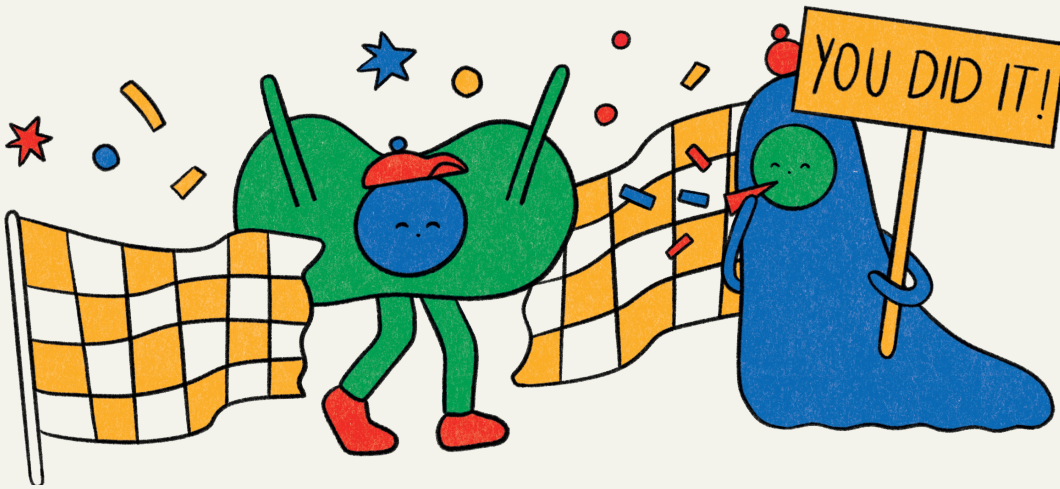




# pur- pose

“Most parents have an enormous sense of purpose about raising their kids. The more we can support each other, the better off we are. We don’t have to think about things the same way to be respectful and continue learning.”

– Mary Kaye, Early Childhood Family Educator and Pastor in Minnesota



# Purpose in Context

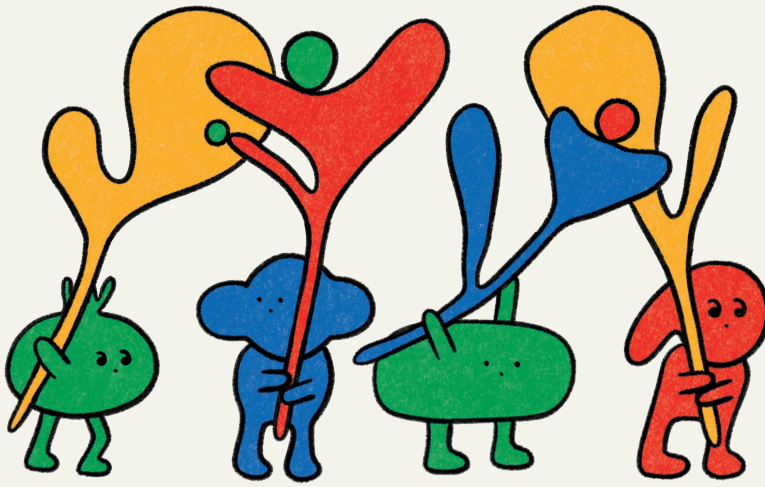
Parenthood can be full of joyful and peaceful moments as well as challenging ones. Research suggests that having a greater sense of purpose is an important ingredient for resiliency—purposeful people are happier,<sup>1</sup> have better health<sup>2</sup> and cognitive functioning,<sup>3</sup> and live longer.<sup>4</sup> As parenting practitioners, we have the unique opportunity to help parents reflect on the aspects of parenting that provide them with a sense of purpose and support them in guiding their older children explore interests and aspects of their identity that could fuel their own sense of purpose. This work may, in turn, help practitioners foster their own sense of purpose.

# What is Purpose?

To psychologists, purpose is an abiding intention to achieve a long-term goal that is both personally meaningful and makes a positive mark on the world, potentially changing the lives of others. Examples include launching an organization, researching a disease, or raising children. Many parenting practitioners feel a deep sense of purpose from their work with parents and children.

It's important for practitioners and parents to know that purpose is not a destination, but a journey and a practice.<sup>5</sup> That means it's accessible at any age if we're willing to explore what matters to us and what kind of person we want to be—and act to become that person. It also means that our sense of purpose changes over the course of our lifetime; research finds that it will naturally wax and wane. This research suggests that if we're able to revisit and renew our sense of purpose as we navigate milestones and transitions, then we can look forward to more satisfying, meaningful lives.





# Purpose in Childhood

Research suggests that our paths to finding purpose can be shaped by early childhood experiences. Studies have found that people who experienced greater adversity<sup>6</sup> and conflict<sup>7</sup> with their mothers as children tend to have less of a sense of purpose as adults, whereas those who had stronger memories of the beauty of nature<sup>8</sup> from early childhood and more secure attachments<sup>9</sup> to their parents tend to have a higher sense of purpose as adults.

While early life may set the stage for finding a purpose, the process really begins when we're teens, as we explore who we are, what we value, and what we want out of life, says purpose expert Kendall Cotton Bronk,<sup>10</sup> professor at Claremont Graduate University. Some teens start to discover the paths they want to pursue by trying different interests and activities,<sup>11</sup> like music or volunteering. Other teens have

challenging life experiences, like a parent being diagnosed with cancer or a shooting in their hometown, that spur them to work on particular causes. Others are inspired by parent and coach role models leading purposeful lives.

In *The Path to Purpose*,<sup>12</sup> researcher William Damon shares insights from decades of studying how individuals cultivate purpose in their professional endeavors, family relationships, and civic engagements. As he describes it, purpose is like a chemical reaction that takes place when our skills meet the needs of the world. Parents can guide young people to identify something in their environment that could be improved, whether it's politics or modern jazz music, and recognize something in themselves that they can bring to bear on that problem—leadership skills or creativity, for example.

According to Damon's research, only about one in five teens has a strong sense of purpose. Others have pie-in-the-sky dreams or fun hobbies, or they're just trying to get through high school. More often, childhood and adolescence seem to be when the building blocks of purpose are established, but we're still exploring what we want out of life.

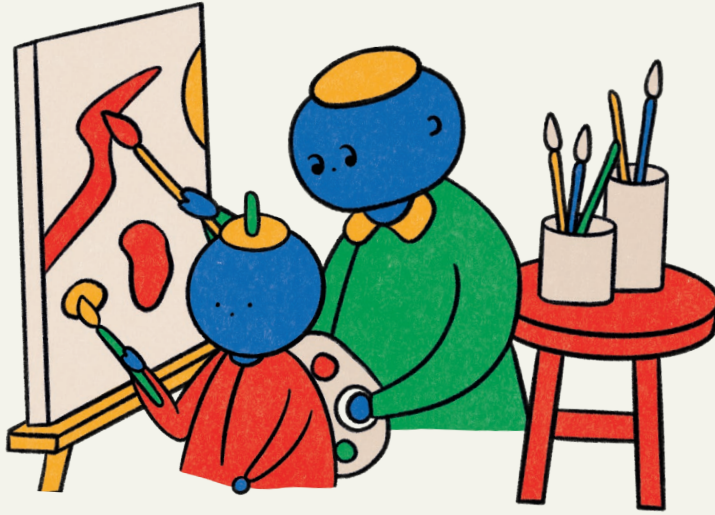
The teen years are also important for identity development (see chapter 7), and research shows that developing purpose and identity are intertwined processes. A study<sup>13</sup> of high school and college students found that those who had a more solid sense of identity—clear ideas about the jobs, values, friendships, politics, religion, and gender roles they would have in life—also had a greater sense of purpose. A later study<sup>14</sup> by the same researchers had a similar finding, but in the opposite direction: young people who felt more purposeful built a more solid sense of identity over time.

Discovering a sense of purpose may help teens overcome difficult situations. A study<sup>15</sup> by Bronk and her colleagues found that Greek adolescents with

greater purpose were both more resilient and optimistic during the Great Recession. They could better adapt when they faced setbacks and believed things would improve. In turn, particularly thanks to their resilience, they were also more likely to have brighter expectations. These purposeful youth didn't ignore or downplay the economic challenges—their beliefs and knowledge about the state of the economy weren't any different—but they did see hope and opportunities for themselves. “[Helping youth find a purpose] is likely to benefit not only the young people, but also the families, communities, and even countries to which these young people may choose to contribute,” explains Bronk<sup>16</sup> and her colleagues.

Research<sup>17</sup> shows that mentorship is an important part of the process of discovering a sense of purpose, as children often need inspiration. Adults can support children in identifying how to best use their talents and provide encouragement to motivate them to move forward with their commitments. As children make greater commitments and identify how to use their talents to have a positive impact on others, they will begin to develop a sense of purpose.





# Purpose in Parenthood

Many parents feel a deep sense of purpose from becoming parents and raising their children. The transition to parenthood can become a time when parents explore a new aspect of their identity, which can spur new meaning to their lives (see chapter 7). What's more, raising children<sup>18</sup> can change a parent's perspective and promote new long-term goals for themselves, their children, and the world they want to create for their children in the future.

Parents may also find a sense of purpose at work, where they feel fulfilled in supporting their coworkers, making a difference in the organization, or contributing to society, writes Damon.<sup>19</sup> Volunteering and engaging in civic life can be sources of purpose for parents, and can be especially meaningful and fulfilling when they do so with their children.

Having a sense of purpose can help parents sustain their energy and be persistent when times are tough. A study<sup>20</sup> of mothers with opioid use disorder found that their infants provided them with a sense of purpose and resilience during their road to recovery. In another study,<sup>21</sup> low-income mothers with a stronger sense of purpose experienced more positive psychological growth following Hurricane Katrina.

Fostering a sense of purpose may also make parents healthier. According to one study, mothers who have a stronger sense of purpose are less likely to smoke.<sup>22</sup> Another study<sup>23</sup> found that fathers had a greater sense of purpose than non-fathers and that men with a greater sense of purpose engaged in healthier behaviors such as eating well and exercis-

ing. These findings suggest that parenthood provides some parents with a sense of purpose that can motivate them to take better care of themselves.

There are ways that parents can develop a greater sense of purpose. In a recent study,<sup>24</sup> fathers learned about research<sup>25</sup> on how children benefit when dads are involved and then were asked to reflect on and write about their sense of purpose as fathers. For example, these reflections could involve prompts like the ones below, which were adapted from the study:

1. Think about the type of life you want your child to have. What long-term goals and aspirations do you have for them? For example, do well in school, and be healthy.
2. Think about a recent positive experience you had as a parent with your child. Briefly describe it then identify two or three of your core values it reflects. For example, going to the playground represents my value of fun, connection, and growth.
3. What are two or three specific character strengths you bring to being a parent? For example, hard work, compassion, or loyalty.
4. What are two or three specific skills you are motivated to develop

as a parent? For example, better communication, empathy and listening, and organizational skills.

5. Now, take a moment to reflect on your unique combination of core values, character strengths, and skills you are motivated to develop and the long-term goals and aspirations you have for your child. Finish your reflection by writing about the impact you want to make on your child's life or in the world through your role as a parent.

Compared to fathers who didn't engage in learning and reflection, fathers who participated in the writing program grew in their sense of purpose. The findings suggest that taking time to think about fatherhood helped to nurture a sense that their lives had meaning and an impact beyond themselves. This research highlights how parents can benefit from having time and space to reflect on what it means to be a parent.

"Whether it be brief online reflection exercises or conversations with a trusted health care practitioner, helping new fathers to recognize what they find meaningful about fatherhood, their hopes and goals for their children, and how they as fathers hope to impact them—such interventions represent a promising way to support fathers and their children's healthy development," explain the study's authors.

# Nurturing Purpose

According to research by Kendall Cotton Bronk, finding one's purpose requires four key components: dedicated commitment, personal meaningfulness, goal-directedness, and a vision larger than oneself.

Finding our purpose often involves combining meaning-making in past experiences with assessing our values, skills, and hopes for a better world. It means taking time for personal reflection while imagining our ideal future. Remember, you can nurture a sense of purpose in small steps.

Here are some activities purpose researchers recommend for finding a sense of purpose in life:

## Best Possible Self

Imagine yourself at some future age<sup>26</sup> — like 10 or 20 years down the road—and think about your life if everything went as well as possible. Then ask yourself these questions: What are you doing? What is important to you? What do you care about, and why? Focusing on an ideal self can increase optimism<sup>27</sup> for the future, which researchers believe is tied to purpose.

## Tell your story

Those who see meaning and purpose in their lives can tell a story<sup>28</sup> of change and growth, where they overcame obstacles. Creating a narrative can help us see our strengths and how applying those strengths can make a difference in the world.

### Read

Reading may be particularly useful for young people looking for purpose. For some teens, reading religious texts<sup>29</sup> or poetry and fiction<sup>30</sup> can help nurture a sense of purpose. By seeing purpose in the lives of other people, teens are more likely to see it in their own lives.

### The Magic Wand<sup>31</sup>

Think about the world around you — your home, community, the world at large—and visualize what you would change if you had a magic wand and could change anything. Ask yourself why you chose what you did and consider concrete steps you might take to move the world a little closer to that ideal. This exercise has been used to foster purpose in youth and young adults.<sup>32</sup>

### Recognize your strengths

Contact people who know you—teachers, friends, family, colleagues, and mentors—and ask them what you're good at, what you seem to like to do, and how you might make your mark on the world. Sometimes an outsider's opinion can help clarify your personal strengths and help you figure out how best to apply them.

### Clarify your values

If it's hard to figure out what matters most to you, affirming your values<sup>33</sup> can help.<sup>34</sup> Make a list of around ten values, characteristics, and qualities, some of which may be important to you and some of which may not, like sense of humor, friendships, spontaneity, or athletics. Next, rank them in order of their importance to you. Then, write about why your #1 value or quality is important.



# Self-Reflection

Take a moment to reflect on the role that purpose plays in your life before you bring the learning in this chapter to the parents you work with.

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## **Read the list of statements and ask yourself these questions**

- 1.** How much do you agree or disagree with each of the statements?
- 2.** Do your responses reveal opportunities for developing a greater sense of purpose?
- 3.** What insights do these statements offer about your current understanding of your life's purpose?

# Statements<sup>35</sup>

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- I know how to use my talents to contribute meaningfully to the larger world.
  - I understand what it is that makes my life feel worthwhile.
  - I can describe my purpose well.
  - I often hope to leave the world better than I found it.
  - I put effort into making my goals a reality.
- 

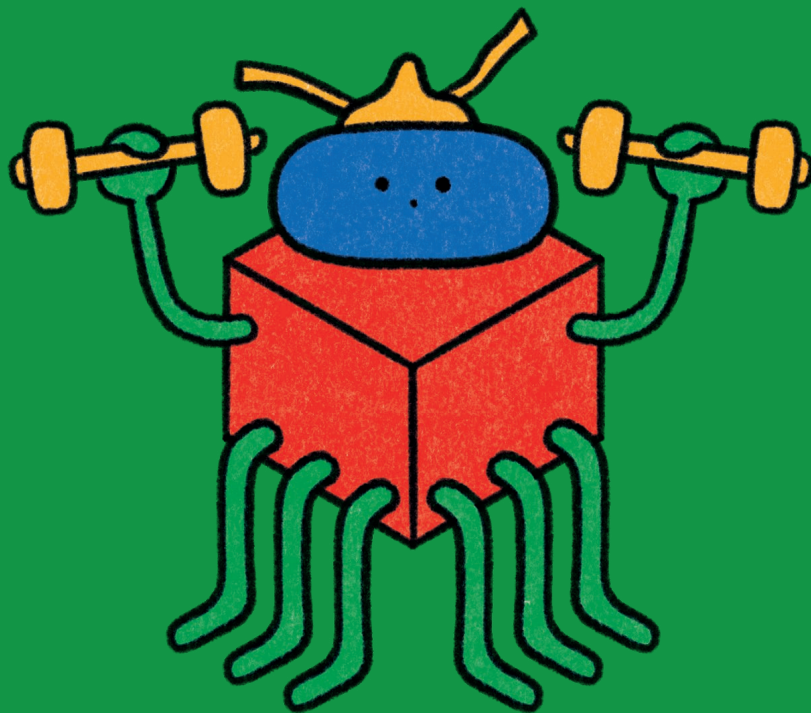
**b** **Reread the statements as you seek to understand the presence or absence of purpose among the parents you support professionally.**

1. How much do you think the parents you work with agree or disagree with each statement?
2. What could the community provide to help parents foster a sense of purpose?
3. What experiences of purpose have parents shared with you that could guide other parents looking to foster a greater sense of purpose in themselves or their children?

“These programs are based on the belief that our purpose as individuals is to contribute to the betterment of society. To achieve this, we must possess compassion and a concern for the well-being of others. These spiritual qualities, among others, are essential for making contributions that transform both society and the individual.”

—Nadia, Community Organizer supporting families in Minnesota





# Practice

Now that you have been introduced to this topic, you can explore practices to foster a sense of purpose. The first is a “Practitioner and Parent Practice.” Use it to nurture your well-being. Next, share the same practice with parents to guide them in fostering their well-being. The second is “Parent-Child Practices,” which you can share with parents. They are activities for parents and children to explore their sense of purpose.



practitioner

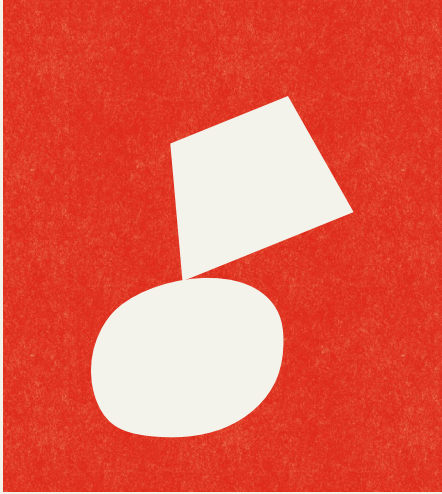


parent



child

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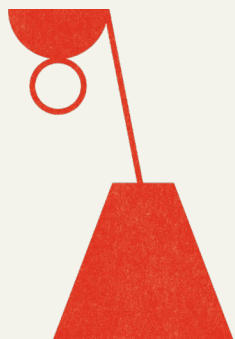
# Practitioner and Parent Practice



**Life Crafting:** Sharpen your sense of purpose by defining and committing to your goals.

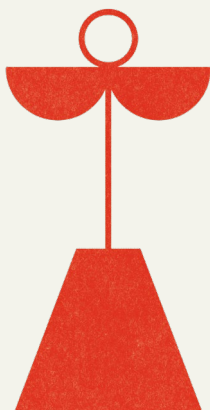
**Time Required:** 20 minutes

First, try this step-by-step activity for yourself and then guide the parents you support through the practice. During and after the activity, take a moment to pause and notice your thoughts, sensations, and feelings. Guide the parents you work with in doing the same.



## Why you should try it

Defining your sense of purpose in life can feel daunting or even overwhelming. This practice can help us break the process down into a series of more manageable steps. Encouraging us to reflect specifically on the values and activities that provide us with meaning and motivation can help us renew certain passions or see new possibilities that were previously invisible.



## Why it works

Researchers define purpose as something that is both personally meaningful and socially valuable. By reflecting on your present and future life, this practice can help you make sense of your priorities in life, better articulate the values and passions that are important to you personally, and also possibly contribute to the wider world. Moreover, a substantial body of research suggests that writing about thoughts, feelings, and goals can help support mental health and goal attainment.<sup>36</sup>

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## How to do it

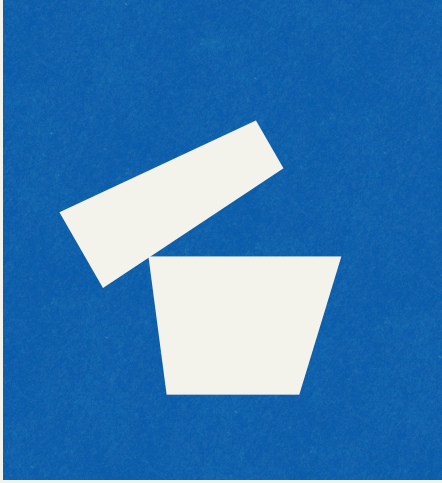
Life crafting is a way to better define your goals and chart a path to achieving them. Reflect on and write about them in either a single session or break up the activity into multiple sessions.

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- 1 Identify your deepest values and passions—what’s most important to you.** Write a list of your greatest values and a separate list of what you most like to do in life. If you need help, write about the qualities you admire in others, skills you would like to build, or personal habits you both like and dislike.
- 2 Reflect on your ideal future.** Write a paragraph envisioning how you’d like your social life, family life, or career path to turn out if you had no constraints. What does your ideal life look like? What kinds of personal and professional relationships do you want? What do you want in an ideal job or volunteer experience?
- 3 Write down how you’ll attain those goals.** Prioritize your goals and, in another paragraph, identify obstacles, and your strategy for overcoming those obstacles. Detail how you will track your progress toward those goals.
- 4 Make a public commitment to your goals.** Communicate these goals to others in your community, including friends, family, and coworkers.

“Thinking about the changing political climate after the pandemic, a lot of educators struggle with their sense of purpose. We were heroes for a minute and a lot of people have a hard time pushing through the negativity and noise that happens in the outside world and rediscovering the why of why we are here.”

—Anonymous, Parent Engagement Specialist in California



# Parent-Child Practices

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## **Talk with Teens about Purpose:**

Help adolescents start exploring and reflecting on meaningful life goals.

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**Time Required:** Between five and 45 minutes

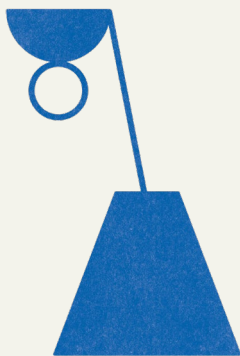
**Child Age Range:** Teens

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You can guide parents on these step-by-step activities to support purpose. During and after the parenting activity, encourage the parents to pause to notice their thoughts, sensations, and feelings.

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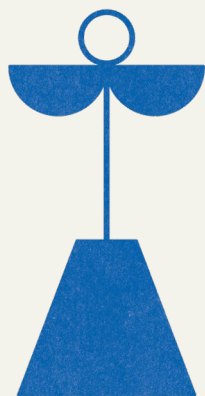
## Why you should try it



Youth who have a sense of purpose<sup>37</sup> tend to have greater coping skills, resilience, and well-being. As they get older,<sup>38</sup> more purposeful adults have better physical and psychological health, including better sleep, less chronic pain, less depression and anxiety, greater life satisfaction, and even a longer life. Despite these benefits, only a minority of young people report leading a life of purpose. Parents are in a unique position to help their children cultivate a sense of purpose so that they may reap its benefits.

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## Why it works



Research shows that a sense of purpose can develop from early experiences that trigger ever-growing commitments in life<sup>39</sup>. For example, a teen in one study, whose purpose became supporting cancer research, was inspired by her childhood experience of volunteering at an American Cancer Society fundraiser. These initial commitments do not have to be particularly noteworthy; what's important is that children identify a cause they are interested in or ways their talents can be used for the greater good.



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## How to do it

Researchers describe purpose as an abiding intention to achieve a long-term goal that is personally meaningful and makes a positive mark on the world. Parents can use the three research-based strategies below to talk regularly with their teen about purpose.

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**1**

**Discuss:** Talk to your teens about your experiences finding your own path to purpose. Show and tell them what you're doing right now toward that end. Ask questions that will help them start thinking about purpose:

- What's most important to you in your life?
- Why do you care about those things?
- Do you have any long-term goals?
- Why are these goals important to you?
- What does it mean to have a good life and be a good person?
- If you were looking back on your life, how would you want to be remembered?

2

**Seek input:** Making a positive contribution to the world starts with knowing your strengths. One way that teens can affirm or discover their strengths is to solicit feedback from adults they are close to. Encourage your children to talk about their life purpose with at least five adults who know them well. These questions help them start thinking about how they can touch others' lives:

- What do you think I'm particularly good at?
- What are my greatest strengths?
- What do you think I really enjoy doing?
- When do you think I'm most engaged?
- How do you think I'll leave my mark on the world?

3

**Think far out:** Help your children move from thinking about today to thinking about the future. For example, if they mention they don't like something about the world, ask them how they would change it. Or if they enjoy an activity like hiking, ask them if there are ways they can help preserve the national parks. Encourage your children to envision their lives two, five, ten, or twenty-five years later.

# Discoveries, Wonderings, and Commit- ments

## Discoveries

What three to five crucial takeaways about purpose are most relevant for you personally and professionally?

How much of a challenge is a lack of purpose in your community?

## Wonderings

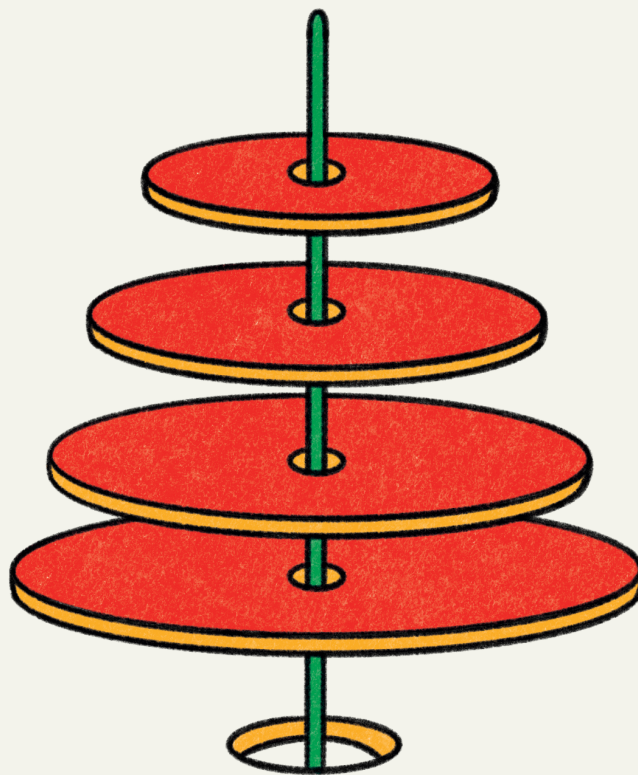
How might parents in your community respond to the practices to foster a sense of purpose?

What kinds of modifications to the purpose practices would you consider making to meet the specific needs of the parents in your community?

## Commitments

What actions do you intend to take based on your learnings about purpose for yourself? For the parents you work with?

Which purpose practice will you share with the parents you work with? What will you say and do to guide them to try this practice?





# Part two



## Laying the Groundwork

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Chapter 7.

### **Social and Emotional Development**

Growing Across the Lifespan

Chapter 8.

### **Coparenting**

Being on the Same Team

Chapter 9.

### **Cultural Humility**

A Journey, Not a Destination

Chapter 10.

### **Healing and Resilience**

Navigating Adversity Together

Chapter 11.

### **Program Evaluation**

Listening and Learning

Chapter 12.

### **Engaging Parents**

Facilitating Gatherings

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# 7 Social and Emotional Development: Growing Across the Lifespan

When we think of development, we might reflexively imagine the amazing and rapid succession of milestones within a baby's first year, like cooing to first words or sitting up to first steps. But it's not just kids who are growing up—we, as adults, continue to develop, too. The process of growth and change is lifelong and extends from birth to the final moments of life. Development occurs in multiple ways—biologically, cognitively, emotionally, and socially.

Our relationships with people and our surroundings guide our development. According to the ecological model,<sup>1</sup> development across the lifespan is influenced by the back-and-forth interactions between a person, the dynamics of their immediate and more distant settings, and the interconnectedness of these influences across settings and time. Immediate settings include interactions with parents, family, teachers, peer groups, neighborhoods, and schools. More distant settings where a person is not directly embedded include interactions with family members' workplaces, siblings' network of friends, mass media, social policies, and culture.

Let's examine parent-child relationships more closely, which are crucial for a child's growth and development. Primary caregivers and babies develop an emotional bond from repeated back-and-forth interactions. According to attachment theory,<sup>2</sup> these interaction patterns become "internal working models"—how children begin to understand how they relate to others and the world around them. When parents are tuned into the needs of their baby and their interactions are synchronized so that their needs are responded to and fulfilled, a secure attachment forms. Secure attachments help children develop an internal working model that

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**“The way that we interact with our kids is different if they’re a toddler or an eight-year-old or a teenager or an adult. As kids get older, we spend more time asking questions to build wisdom, mentoring, coming alongside, and encouraging them.”**

- Pam, Parent Coach and Family Educator in Minnesota

helps them know they are worthy of sensitivity and warmth. In turn, children become confident that this pattern of relating to others and the world is possible and expected. For example, a child can expect positive relationships in settings beyond the home later in childhood with a teacher at school. Plus, when children grow up feeling secure in their relationships with their parents, they’re more likely to develop a healthy attachment style in their adult romantic relationships and feel a strong sense of being worthy of love.

Because development happens across the lifespan, attachment style is also malleable into adulthood. For example, a secure attachment style can develop despite earlier experiences that lacked responsiveness if we can go on to have warm, loving, and respectful relationships. Development is an ongoing process, and back-and-forth interactions between people and their settings can lead to new trajectories in the future because early experiences do not necessarily lead to predetermined outcomes. Practitioners can help guide parents towards positive relationships with their children and other adults to support their social and emotional well-being and that of their children.

Lifespan development is vast and could fill volumes to cover its entirety. This chapter focuses on just a few key social and emotional development areas across three life stages to help practitioners working with parents and families. These topics are central to family well-being: temperament in childhood, identity in adolescence, and the transition to parenthood in adulthood.



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# Temperament is important because its various dimensions are related to both children's own well-being as well as parents' well-being

## Childhood: Temperament

Temperament<sup>3</sup> is the way children tend to respond and regulate their emotions, activity level, and what they pay attention to. While temperament develops over time, it can be measured as early as in the first few months of life. Parent questionnaires about temperament ask about a range of behaviors, like a babies' cuddliness and soothability. They also explore how often babies smile and laugh, and their fear and sadness. What's more, they assess babies' energy levels and vocalizations. Temperament is important because its various dimensions are related to both children's own well-being<sup>4</sup> as well as parents' well-being.<sup>5</sup>

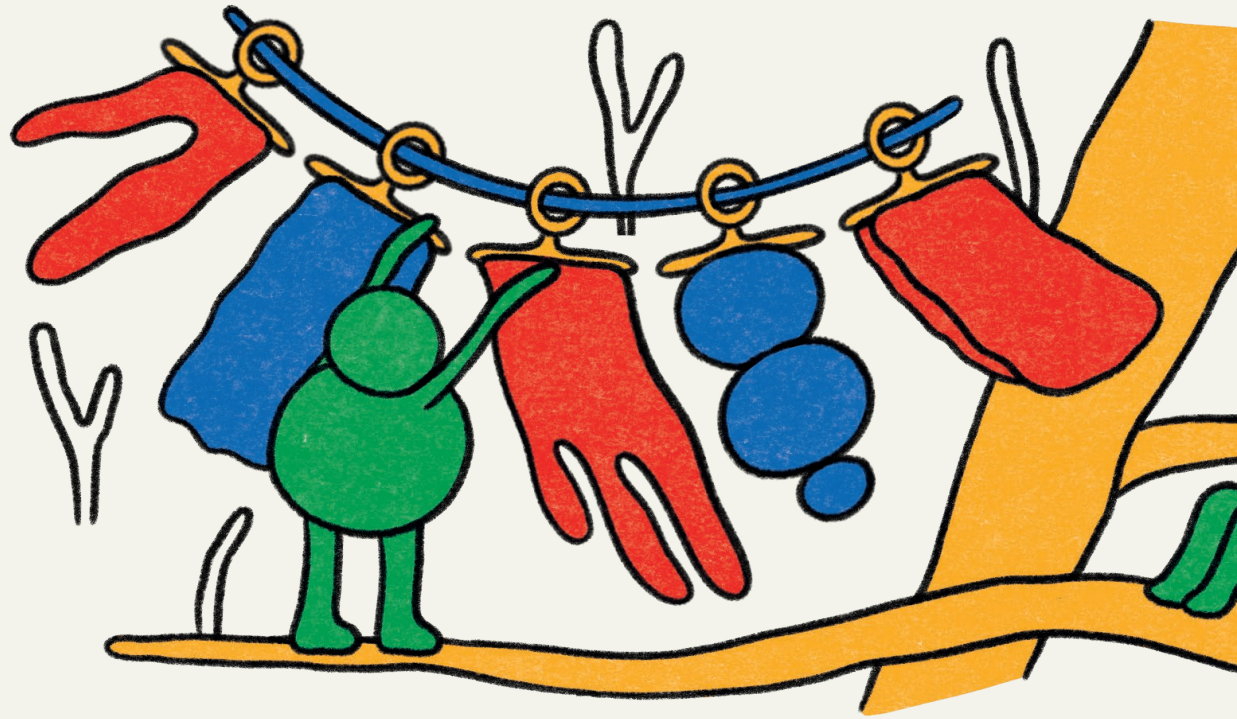
Just like many other aspects of development, temperament is influenced by biology, genetics, maturity, and experiences. Parents<sup>6</sup> can play a role in developing their child's temperament,<sup>7</sup> and a child's temperament can play a role in how they parent. In other words, temperament and parenting are a two-way street. Culture can influence temperament as well. Depending on cultural values,<sup>8</sup> parents, other adults, and peers can respond to the same expressions of temperament with either encouragement or discouragement, which, in turn, can either increase or decrease them.

While temperament develops in childhood, it has a far reach throughout the lifespan.<sup>9</sup> Temperament can shape how children go on to interact in the world. For example, temperament in early childhood can also shape later prosocial development—tendencies to act in ways in-

tended to benefit others,<sup>10</sup> like helping, concern, and kindness. According to temperament researcher Mary Rothbart,<sup>11</sup> “Temperament and experience together ‘grow’ a personality, which will include the child’s developing [thoughts] about self, others, and the physical and social world, as well as his or her values, attitudes, and coping strategies.” While temperament is important, it’s only one factor in children’s development.

Sometimes, parents don’t realize the role temperament plays until they have a second child because it becomes clear just how different children are and how, although one parenting strategy might work with one child, it might not be effective for another child. Practitioners serving parents can offer these tips<sup>12</sup> to support children and their distinctive temperaments:

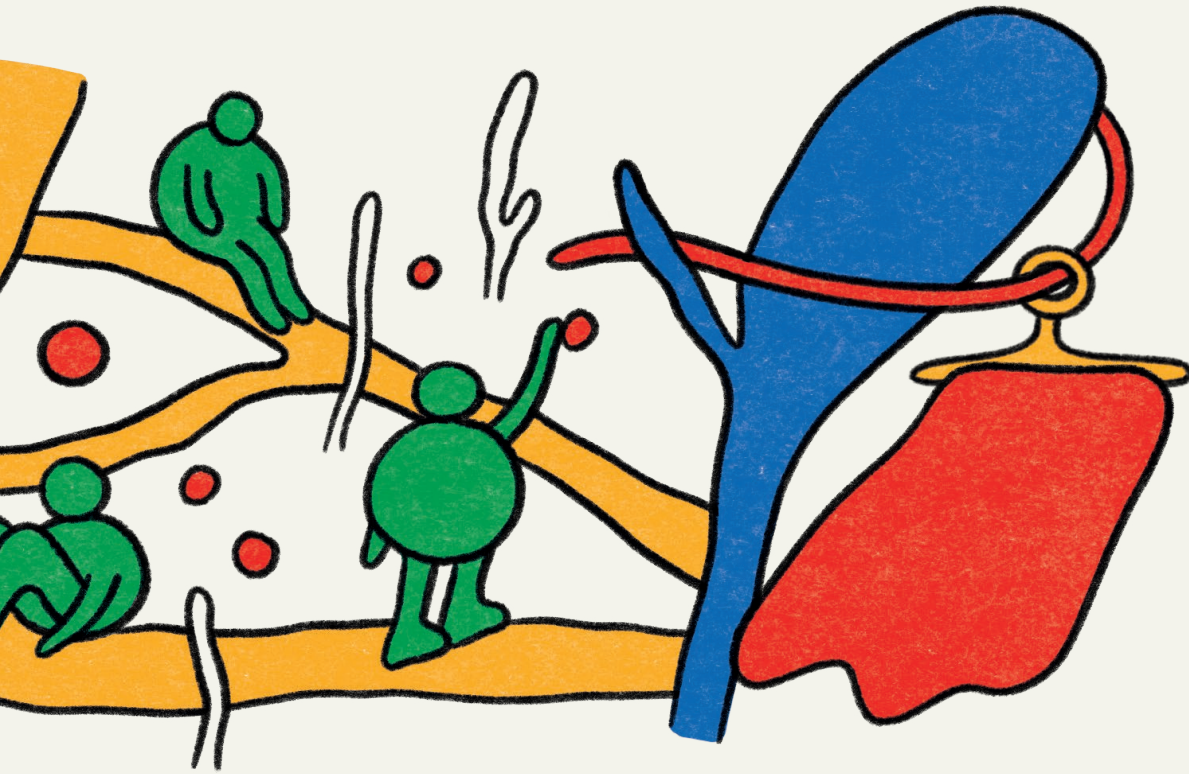
- 1. Notice and Affirm Children’s Individuality:** There’s no “one-size-fits-all” parenting. Remember children’s temperament varies. Parents who tune into their children’s unique ways of expressing their needs can be clued into how to respond in a sensitive way that their children prefer and can help them learn skills to function in the world. For example, some children prefer to be cuddled, but others prefer different ways to be soothed, like playing.
- 2. Provide Good-Fit Structure to Children’s Environments:** Temperament involves how children respond to their surroundings. Beyond the home setting, parents can notice how children respond to differences in sights, sounds, smells, and textures in outside settings like children’s child care centers or enrichment activities, like early childhood music or art programs. Some children are highly reactive, fearful, or reserved in crowded or noisy spaces and unfamiliar environments. Parents can provide additional support to ease children slowly, if needed, or find alternative environments that are better matched to their children’s temperament.
- 3. Leave Off Negative Labels about Temperament:** Notions of a “difficult” temperament can be unhelpful. They can pose a risk for a self-fulfilling prophecy when children identify with imposed roles within the family. Parents who believe that their child’s behaviors communicate messages about their needs for a particular situation rather than a reflection of their character can spark empathy and a solutions-oriented mindset.



## Adolescence: Exploring Identity<sup>13</sup>

One of the most important tasks<sup>14</sup> during adolescence is to engage in personal exploration to develop a clear sense of identity—a sense of consistency<sup>15</sup> across time and circumstances in the ways they relate to others and their commitments to roles, values, and beliefs. When teens can gain a deep understanding of who they are, they are better able to chart a course for their lives with a sense of meaning and purpose.<sup>16</sup> Achieving clarity on their identity can help teens have a sense of “inner unity,” become more self-aware, recognize their assets and efficacy, and have greater self-direction interpersonally and within a broader society.

A sense of identity helps contribute to teens’ well-being beyond adolescence because it sets the stage for nurturing close relationships into adulthood. Learning about and developing positive feelings about the social groups they belong to<sup>17</sup> is another way your teen develops a positive self-concept. What’s more, teens who have a good understanding of their identity can better bridge differences and pursue justice. “The more comfortable individuals are in their own skin, the more capacity they will have to engage in a productive manner with others,” explain<sup>18</sup> psychologists Deborah Rivas-Drake and Adriana Umaña-Taylor in their book *Below the Surface: Talking with Teens about Race, Ethnicity, and Identity*. Teens who have a greater understanding and positive feelings about their cultural identity<sup>19</sup> are better able to recognize injustices related to their own identity and their connection to the struggles of other marginalized identities and, in turn, are more caring and helpful to others as they act against injustice.

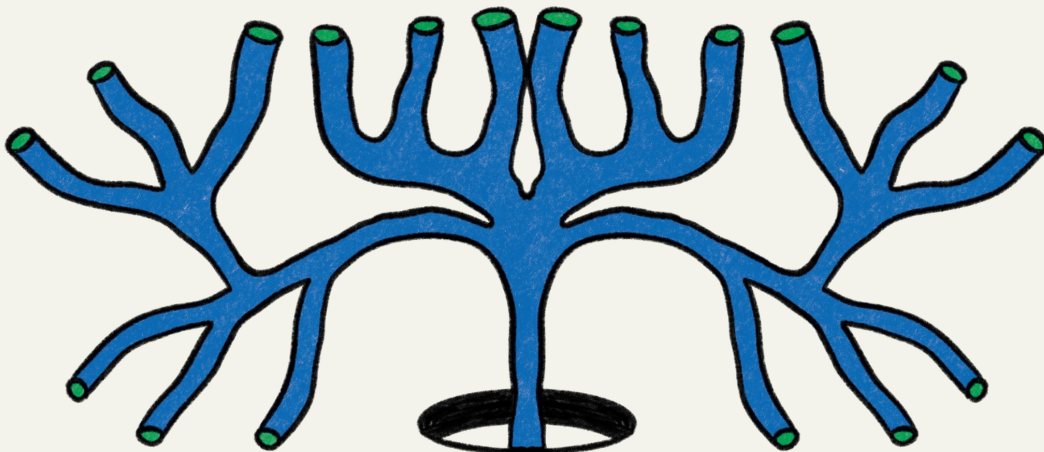


Having a better sense of your identity helps teens feel more sure of themselves and fosters a greater sense of competence to navigate being with people of identities that seem or are different from their own. Identity can involve multiple aspects, such as race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, religion, age, national origin, ability, or political orientation.

When parents carve out time and create a safe space<sup>20</sup> for teens to explore their identities, teens are more likely to have the opportunity to reflect on these complex questions about who they are. These exploration opportunities reassure teens that they have a source of support to learn about the different dimensions of their identities. Having honest conversations about identities also acknowledges their existence instead of denying their intersecting identities and how they might affect their interactions with people in the world. When parents talk with their kids about how they reflect on their identities, they help teens learn to be brave and comfortable in their own skin.

Practitioners can encourage parents to begin a conversation about identity with their teen by naming some of their identities and asking a few questions to encourage their teen to share. Here are some potential questions practitioners can share with parents who, in turn, can bring into their conversations with their teens:

- What does identity mean to you?
- Which identities do you feel are most important to how you see yourself? Tell me a story about how you became aware of these identities. Which identities do you feel the most positive about? The most unsure about? Why?
- What have you learned about your identities within your family? Have any traditions or values related to your identities been passed down from your family? What are they, and how are they expressed in your daily life?
- How do your identities shape your daily experiences in your community? What spaces do you feel most and least at ease with your identities? Why?
- Which of your identities are dominant or marginalized in our society? How are your identities represented in popular culture, such as movies or other media? How authentic does this representation seem to you?
- What do you wish you understood better about your identities? How could you learn more about these parts of your identity?



“We talk with parents about family bonds, and that you are bonded to your children, and your children are bonded to you from day one to eternity.”

– Benita, Program Director and Parenting Facilitator in California





## Adulthood: Transitioning to Parenthood

Becoming a new parent can be filled with a mix of emotions—excitement about meeting your child and worry about whether you’ll know how to take care of another person and yourself. For parents who have partners to share this experience with, there can also be relationship challenges, like how to restructure your patterns as partners and coparents as a new baby becomes a family member (see chapter 8). The relationship between partners during this major life transition is important. “Typically, we know that the couple relationship declines in quality during this period, with consequences for their relationship, for responsive parenting, and for the children,” explain researchers and authors of *When Partners Become Parents: The Big Life Change for Couples* Philip Cowan and Carolyn Cowan.<sup>21</sup> For single parents, there can be challenges and opportunities navigating coparenting (see chapter 8) with the team of adults supporting your caregiving. The transition involves adapting to many changes, which can be stressful because of the uncertainty of how to meet your baby’s needs.

The transition to parenthood has been described<sup>22</sup> as “a critical window for determining both mental and physical health in midlife and beyond.” Parenthood<sup>23</sup> can be a source of well-being in many ways. Becoming a parent can fulfill a meaningful life goal<sup>24</sup> and contribute to a sense of purpose. Parents can also experience a range of positive emotions, like pride from watching their children grow, joy from seeing their children play, and surprise by

the novelty they bring. A partners' positive emotions<sup>25</sup> can boost how much partners feel satisfied about their relationship and the social support they provide to each other. In other words, a parent's personal experiences of positive emotions not only enhance their transition to parenthood, they can also promote their partner's well-being. Becoming a parent can also satisfy important psychological needs like connection with your baby and a community of people<sup>26</sup> that you meet related to being a parent. The transition to parenthood can also broaden your identity<sup>27</sup> as you take on a new role of being a parent, which can foster a sense of greater autonomy and offset disappointment or stress<sup>28</sup> from other social roles, like being a worker.

While support for the transition to motherhood might be more widely known, parenting practitioners can also highlight the importance of the transition to fatherhood. Fathers' direct interactions with babies are important in their earliest weeks and months. The quality of time between fathers and babies is important, but the quantity of time<sup>29</sup> matters, too. It takes time for fathers to get to know their babies. The more time they spend together, the more fathers become aware of their baby's preferences, and the better they can read and become attuned to their body language and signals. Fathers who spend more time providing care for their children tend to show<sup>30</sup> greater brain activity patterns in the connection between the amygdala and the superior temporal sulcus—two brain areas considered part of a global parental caregiving network. What's more, physical contact<sup>31</sup> between newborns and fathers nurtures bonding and healthy development. Preterm babies<sup>32</sup> who have “kangaroo care” (skin-to-skin contact) with their fathers experience the same physiological benefits as they do after contact with their mothers. Fathers who often playfully touch<sup>33</sup> their babies tend to have more oxytocin—a hormone known to support social connection and bonding—circulating in their bloodstream.

Here are some ways parenting practitioners can support mothers, fathers, and other caregivers during the transition to parenthood:

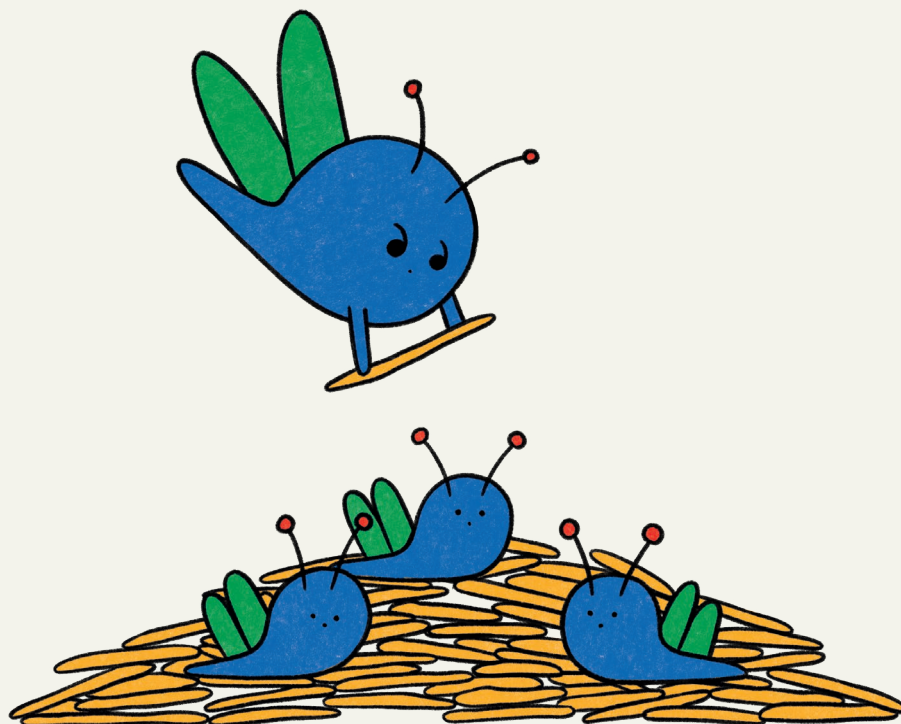
- 1. Care for the parent-child pair.** During infancy and early childhood, parents and their children develop together as dyads, not only as individuals. Later on in childhood and adolescence, children individuate, and the parent-child relationship changes. As a parent practitioner, it's important to consider in these early months and years how the parent-child dyad needs to be cared for, not only the child's development.



- 2. Make asking for and receiving help ordinary.** New parents often benefit from reaching out for help from their social support network. At the same time, it can be difficult to seek out help because of societal pressure to go at it alone. But parenting is not a solo effort—it never has been. We tend to underestimate the chance that people will respond positively to our direct requests<sup>34</sup> for help by up to 50 percent. Here’s a friendly tip to share with new parents: most people are happy to lend a hand when asked directly, and they feel great knowing they’ve been helpful. Try reaching out when you need a hand. It gets easier the more you do it, and it is fulfilling for everyone involved.
- 3. Support restful sleep habits.** Sleep is essential for child and parent well-being.<sup>35</sup> Babies often take time to develop their sleep patterns. What’s more, taking care of a baby often interrupts parents’ sleep patterns. As practitioners, helping parents with their baby’s sleep (and their own) is a great way to nurture positive parent-child relationships. While controversial,<sup>36</sup> some parents may explore cosleeping as an option depending on their values and culture. In his book, *Safe Infant Sleep: Expert Answers to Your Cosleeping Questions*,<sup>37</sup> researcher James McKenna offers guidance on sleeping “together, safely.”
- 4. Encourage daily movement.** Exercise can offer protection from anxiety and depression, which can be important during the transition to parenthood because it involves risk for greater mental health challenges.<sup>38</sup> Postpartum depression occurs in roughly 10 to 20%<sup>39</sup> of mothers and new fathers<sup>40</sup> experience depression at almost double the rate of men in general. Researcher Ben Singh<sup>41</sup> has five tips that parenting practitioners can share with parents. First, start small by walking for even just ten minutes per day. Find an activity you enjoy, like dancing or hiking with a friend. Make exercise a habit, like working out first thing in the morning. Set realistic goals, and don’t try to do too much too soon. Reward yourself for exercising with something healthy that you enjoy. Finally, don’t give up even when you don’t feel like exercising.
- 5. Advocate for fathers, not just mothers, to take parental leave.** Promoting better parental leave policies across the globe—and encouraging fathers to take advantage of them—are crucial for family well-being. After having a baby, fathers in Norway are entitled to up to 15 weeks of fully paid leave and another 16 weeks of parental

leave shared between fathers and mothers (in addition to the 18 weeks of paid leave that mothers already get). By keeping new fathers at work, less generous social policies in the United States make parenting much more difficult for all parents. They may also disrupt the relationship between fathers and children and even children's development.

As practitioners, it's important to guide ourselves and parents to see the big picture of development because sometimes, it can feel like the current moment is forever. For parents, it's helpful to know that there's a long arc and that their role in their child's life will remain important even though it changes over time. Parents provide a tremendous amount of scaffolding between the early years and adolescence and adjust their support level as their children learn new skills or gain greater responsibility and independence. For parents, this transition can be like holding tightly to a car's steering wheel early on and gradually loosening the grip. But development doesn't happen linearly, so we might sometimes hold onto the steering wheel tighter because we're learning new skills as parents, too. Parenting requires different skills throughout the lifespan. Each part of the journey has novel questions and expectations, like how to balance encouraging exploration with boundary-setting. Parents need to engage differently—not less—when their child is in the preschool through teen years.



# Coparenting: Being on the Same Team

“It takes a village” is a well-known saying in parenting practitioner circles because it affirms our experience that parenting is not something anyone can do all by themselves all the time—it takes a community to help children and families be well. Researchers, practitioners, and policymakers recently expanded<sup>1</sup> this effort to “How to raise the village to raise the child.” This point of view aligns with the “ecological model” researchers use to understand the settings and factors that contribute to human development (see chapter 7).

As practitioners, we support families with different compositions at home—multi-generational families, foster families, adoptive families, stepfamilies, single-parent families with one parent living with a child, and families with caregivers or kin living with a child. We have an important role in “raising the village” to uplift and support cooperation among caregivers to help nurture children’s development within households and beyond into their communities. At the heart of coparenting is a spirit of collaboration within the “village” of caregivers.

## What is Coparenting?

Coparenting<sup>2</sup> is the supportive alliance between two or more caregivers in their effort to raise a child who they are responsible for and how they interact together with the child. Coparenting<sup>3</sup> is not just about dividing general caregiving responsibilities, like who drives a child to school or makes them dinner. Coparenting involves being teammates working together in solidarity

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**“At the end of the day, even if you disagree on things, you are both there because you want the best for your kid.”**

- Juan, Facilitates Spanish language fatherhood and coparenting groups in California

rather than in opposition to nurture a child’s development and well-being. Coparenting can happen between different caregivers—including grandparents, uncles, and aunts. While the term “co-parent” has sometimes been used in the past as only referring to divorced parents, our view of coparents is more expansive because coparenting happens in all types of parenting circumstances within families living in the same or different households.

Coparenting matters for both children and parents. Children reap multiple benefits<sup>4</sup> when coparents work well with one another. For example, strong coparenting helps caregivers nurture children by being attuned to their needs and communicating effectively with each other about how to fulfill those needs. Strong coparenting also helps children feel supported and have strong connections with each coparent on their own and together. Even when coparents disagree, children benefit from seeing coparents model respectful communication and repairing ruptures between them. But intense breakdowns in coparenting can have detrimental consequences for the whole family. “When parents are at war or in a deep freeze, they suffer as individuals, they are less able to be positive parents, and their children, from infants to adults, are much more likely to have problem levels of aggressiveness, depression, or problems in learning,” explain researchers Philip Cowan and Carolyn Cowan.<sup>5</sup> Children often notice when coparents have conflict. What’s more, these negative feelings can spill over to them, which can foster fear, worry, and insecurity, which can impact their day-to-day functioning: Some may have trouble staying focused on schoolwork or getting along with siblings or classmates.



## Who Are a Child's Coparents?

As a practitioner, you might wonder how you can determine who are a child's coparents. One way is with an "ecomap,"<sup>6</sup> a simple drawing representing all the caregiving adults connected to a child. Ask the parent or caregiver to write the child's name in a circle in the center of a piece of paper. Then write the names of each adult the child has a bond or "heart connection" within different circles around the child and connect them with lines to the child's circle. Remind the caregiver to ensure that all important adults are included whether or not they live with or visit the child. Once you can see the complete network of adults on the ecomap, you can work with the parent to determine the primary caregivers who work together as coparents. An ecomap can help you understand whether coparents have similar or different views about who is in the network of adults that are important to the child. The distance between the child's circle and the adults can also tell how important the person is from the coparent's perspective. Adults drawn close to the child's circle indicate relatively greater importance than those drawn farther away from the child's circle.

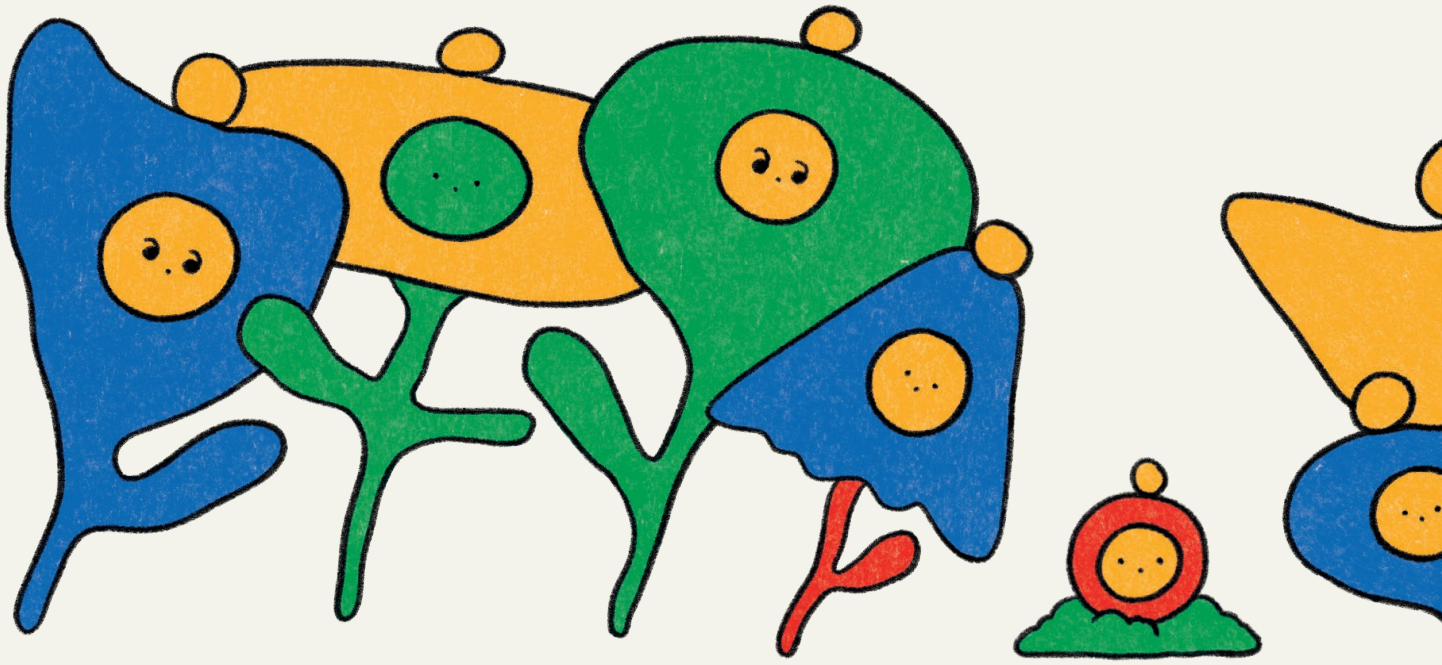
## How to Better Understand Coparenting Partnerships

Using the ecomap, you can talk with the primary caregivers to understand their perspectives on their coparenting. For example, determine how long they have been coparenting, the challenges they have navigated together, and how much their coparenting meets their child's needs. You can also get a sense of how much the coparents feel like they are on the same team or going at it alone—a sense of “we-ness” compared to a sense of “I-ness.” You can try to better understand how much caregivers share an understanding of their roles as coparents and how much they share an understanding of their child's needs and development. When you do not have access to all coparents, using the ecomap with at least one primary caregiver is still beneficial.

According to researchers James McHale and Susan Dickstein,<sup>7</sup> it is helpful to imagine a child's point of view of three coparenting qualities to better understand how effective primary caregivers are in their coparenting. While older children can better understand their coparents' cooperation, even younger children can have some general sense of the degree to which their coparents work together.

- **Mutual Involvement and Engagement.** How much are coparents on the same page, actively involved in making essential parenting decisions, and increasing their level of engagement when their child needs support? Is there a lot of exclusion of a coparent? Is one or more coparent absent a lot of the time? What strengths might you uplift to encourage coparents to support one another's involvement with their child?
- **Active Solidarity and Collaboration.** How much do coparents trust, affirm, and cooperate with each other? In other words, how much do coparents feel they have each other's backs when it comes to supporting their child? Is there ongoing or intense distrust between any of the coparents? How can you support coparents to foster a sense of unity and partnership about common parenting goals? What hopes do they share for their child that can be a source of alliance?
- **Presence of Dissonance.** How much do coparents share perspectives about their child's strengths and challenges? Do they agree on how to navigate and fulfill their child's needs? In what ways can you support empathy, active listening, and collaborative problem-solving between coparents who are not seeing eye-to-eye on their child's development?



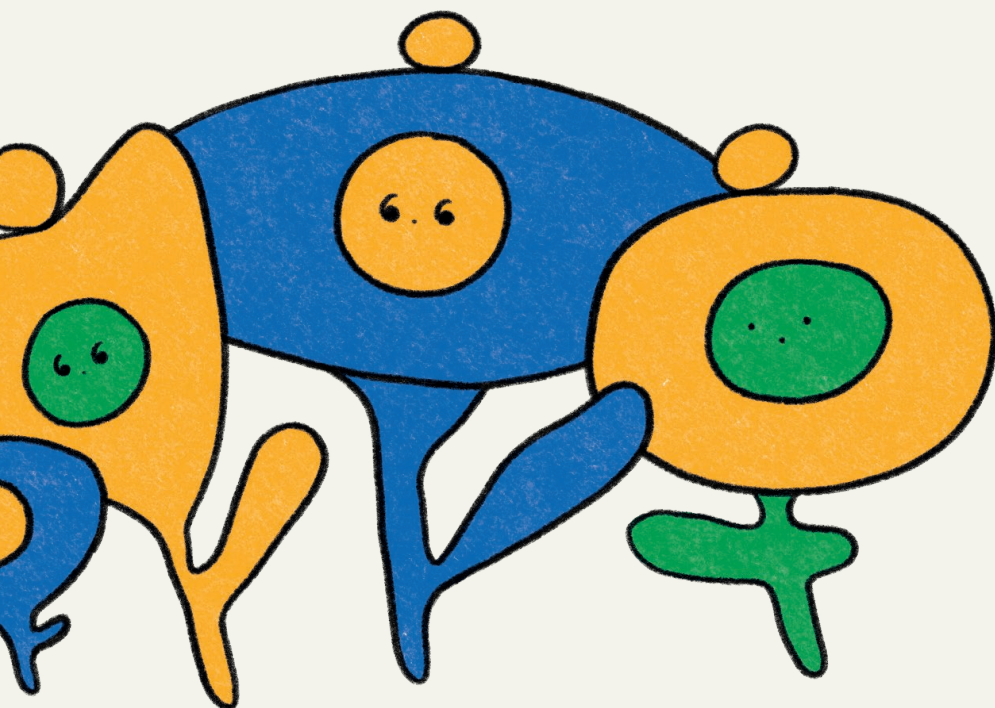


## How to Cultivate Strong Coparenting Partnerships

Coparents often don't perfectly agree on every issue—disagreements are expected in interpersonal interactions, and trying to avoid them entirely is not helpful for coparents. But unresolvable conflict can be stressful for coparents and children. It can interfere with how they move about their daily lives and engage with others. Researchers Carolyn Cowan and Phil Cowan<sup>8</sup> offer five tips to foster collaboration and overcome conflict between coparents.

### 1. List and discuss what's important to you

Before talking with their coparent about a disagreement, encourage each parent to take five minutes on their own to consider their current priorities. What family issues or concerns have been on their mind and heart? For example, have they been thinking a lot about their family's health, their child's progress, or their connection with their coparent or child? Ask the parent to list these priorities and then rank them in importance. Then, encourage the parent to find a time to meet with their coparent to share their lists with one another with a sense of curiosity and openness. Ask them to reflect on what they notice. How much are they on the same



page? What can they learn about themselves and their coparent when discussing their lists? Ask them to pick one important issue or concern to discuss. For example, they can discuss ways to work together to support a helpful sleep routine for their child who has been having trouble waking up on time for school in the morning.

## **2. Reflect on the goodness in each other**

During a conflict, we tend to see everything that's wrong with someone, including our coparents. When stressed, parents might not see each other in the best light. Remind them that sometimes you can alleviate conflict by noticing good things about each other. For example, you can encourage coparents to reflect on a time when they appreciated or supported each other.

## **3. Have a collaborative conversation**

As a parenting practitioner, you can access resources about having hard conversations, like gaining perspective on an argument,<sup>9</sup> and ways to overcome difficult relationship patterns, like avoiding the four horsemen in relationships.<sup>10</sup> Make sure you take a breath as you enter into these spaces with coparents. Hold empathy for each coparent as they talk about their



children. You can incorporate the work of Dan Wile, who recommended that a parent start a conversation with their coparent about a concern with emotional vulnerability. For example, guide parents to consider saying, “I’m feeling vulnerable about my job because I’ve been starting work later. The kids have a hard time waking up on time in the morning, and I haven’t been able to finish an important project that my coworkers are counting on me to complete. Can we talk about this?”

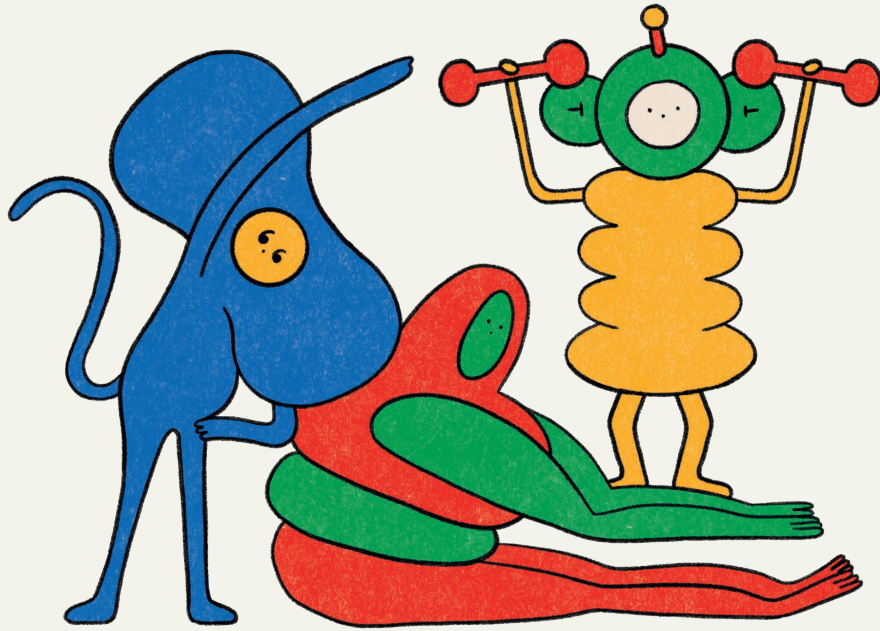
Listen for and speak to the vulnerability underneath communication. Encourage parents to keep their statements short during their discussions so they can both take turns listening to one another. Tell parents to give each other feedback to ensure they understand what their coparent is saying. For example, they can say, “I hear you saying that you’re overwhelmed because there’s not enough time in the morning to help the kids get to school and to get to your work.” Remind parents to show their coparent that they are curious about their experiences. They can say, “Tell me more,” to ensure they have the information they both need to problem-solve collaboratively.

#### **4. Tell your kids about the resolution**

Talk to parents about how children can gain a lot from seeing coparents communicate assertively and problem-solve together. This role modeling helps nurture their well-being and relationship skills. Remind parents to acknowledge to their children that they were upset with one another and explain how they worked it out to help them feel reassured. For example, you can tell parents to explain how they took the time to think about the problem and how they named their feelings about it. Have parents explain to their child why this is an important step in helping someone else know your perspective before you hear from them and how you can later think together about possible solutions. Children can gain a lot from learning about alternatives their parents brainstormed and how they persisted in arriving at a solution or agreement.

#### **5. Nurture yourself and others**

Continuous stress can be draining, so finding simple ways to replenish ourselves occasionally is crucial. Doing so helps us resolve conflicts more effectively and enables us to sidestep them altogether. Parents are constantly trying to make sure their children get enough healthy food, sleep, and exercise, and you can encourage them that they need to do the same for themselves. Remind parents that small acts of kindness toward others can also restore us, such



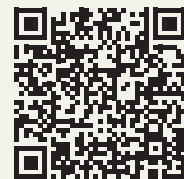
as helping neighbors move, taking out their garbage cans, or donating canned goods to food banks. For coparents who are currently partners, you can suggest that they can nurture their relationships by simply remembering to play together—dance in the living room, for example. For coparents who are not currently partners, you can invite them to share a funny video or story with their child and other coparents. Some families like to keep a traveling journal that goes back and forth between households with information, like schedules and appointments. You can suggest to parents to add a section in their journal for fun facts and silly stories to be shared across households. These light moments are like deposits in our positivity reservoir to draw on when the going gets tough again.

Children benefit from multiple loving adults and are positively impacted when coparents work well together. Practitioners can do many things to support stronger coparenting relationships, which, in turn, support healthy family systems and healthy child development.

## Resources for Digging Deeper:

Greater Good in Action practices:

- Gaining perspective on an argument.<sup>11</sup>
- Avoiding the four horsemen in relationships.<sup>12</sup>



# Cultural Humility: A Journey, not a Destination

What comes to mind when you think of culture? You might think of diverse identities, like ethnicity or religion, or ways of making things, such as food or music. Culture has been viewed<sup>1</sup> as “the values, beliefs, language, rituals, traditions, and other behaviors that are passed from one generation to another within any social group.” Social groups can be based on a wide range of identities, like age group, gender, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic class, to name a few. Of course, people can be a part of multiple social groups, and these intersections can give rise to new and overlapping cultural patterns and experiences.

Because nearly all families across the world approach parenting to ensure their children’s well-being, there are many similarities in parenting across cultures.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, each culture has distinct values and beliefs that shape parenting and exert unique influences on caregiving, parent-child interactions, and child development. For example, while a parent’s warmth and acceptance of their child is important across cultures, families can show love in many ways. Parents can show care by cooking their children’s favorite meals in some cultures, whereas parents can hug their children regularly in others. Parenting differences within the same culture are often bigger than parenting differences between cultures.<sup>3</sup>

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“I think having the humility to broaden a perspective or consider different ways of thinking about solving problems is so helpful and softening. It gets us away from the rigidity of ‘there’s only one correct way or one linear path for getting from here to there.’”

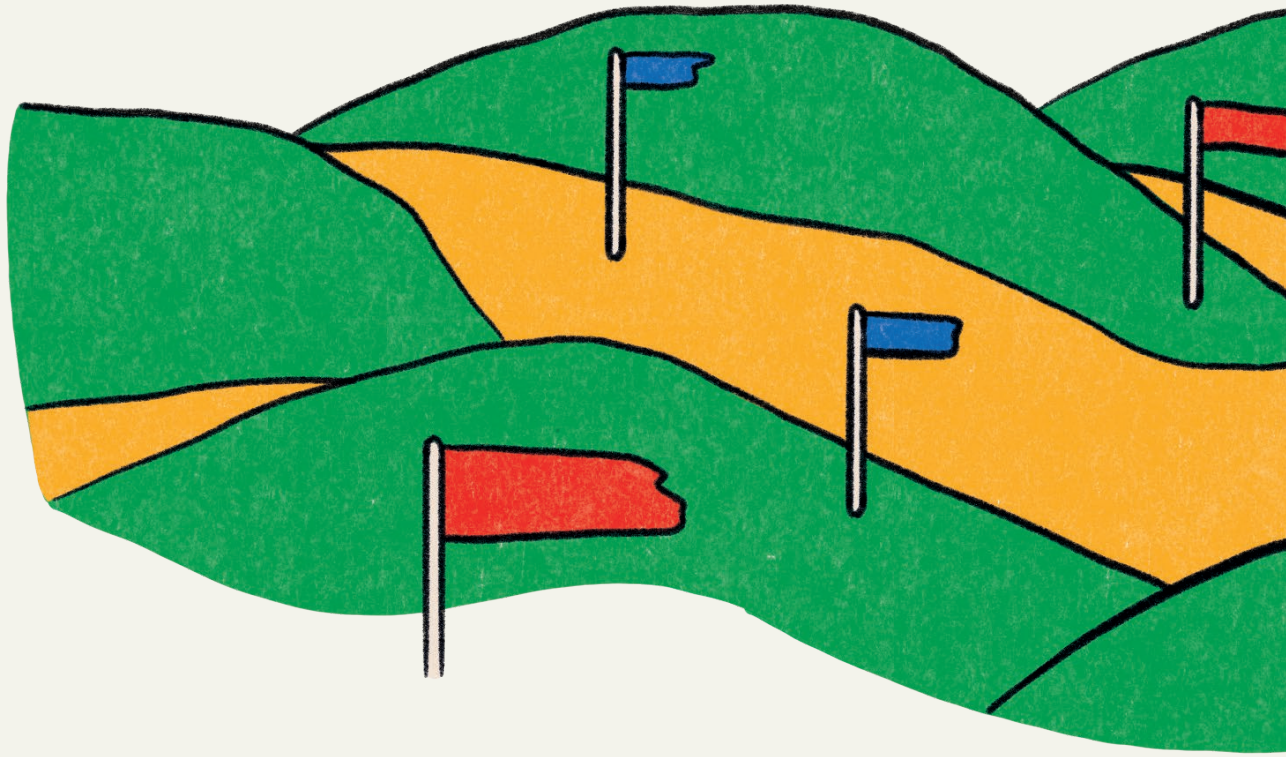
- Sarah H., Works with families in rural Minnesota

## What is Cultural Humility?

As a parenting practitioner, you may work with parents from many different cultures. There is no way to know everything about every culture, and it is critical to recognize that there is always room to grow in our understanding of cultures. Beginning in the 1990s, practitioners began to question the usefulness of the term cultural competence<sup>4</sup>—the traditional idea that someone could have mastery of a finite knowledge about culture. There are countless cultures and culture changes over time. Rather than cultural competence, which denotes that there is an endpoint to learning, cultural humility involves constant learning about cultures.

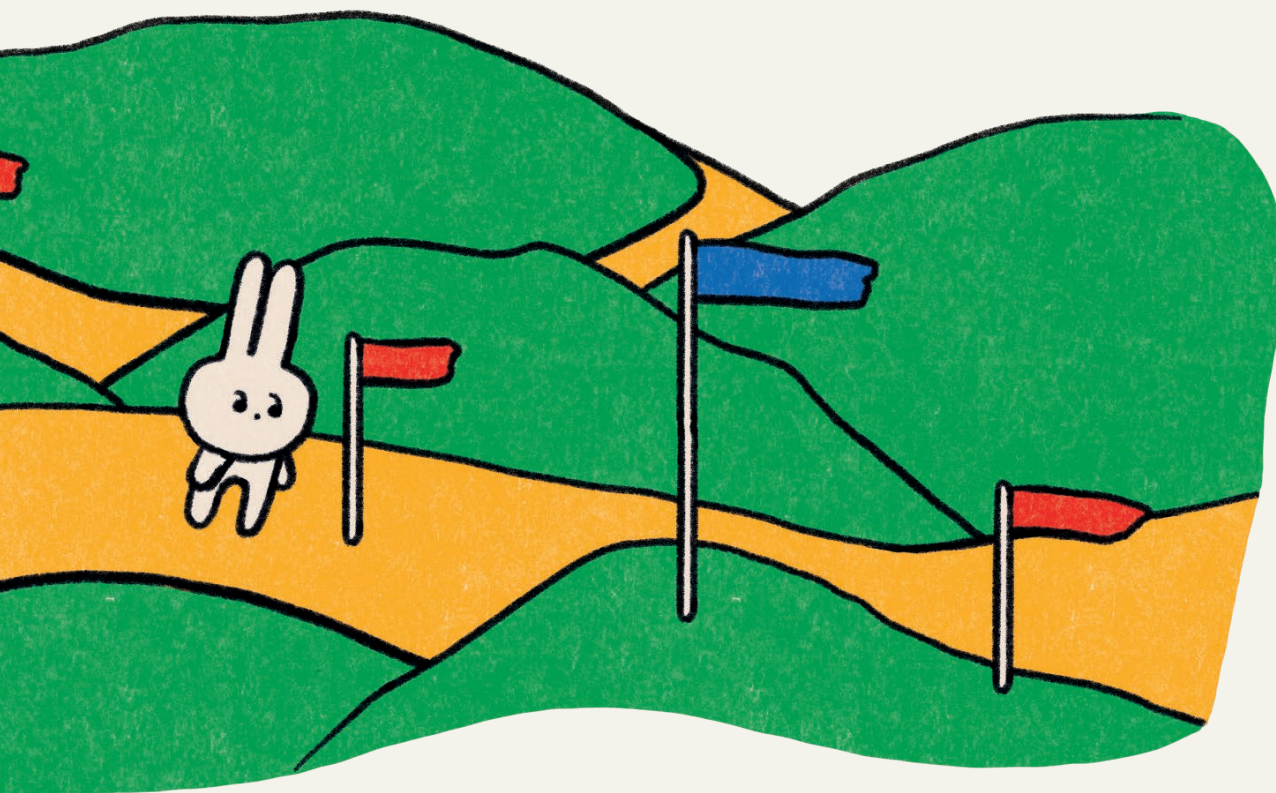
### Cultural humility requires four commitments:

1. **Lifelong learning and critical self-reflection:** Completing a training session about culture does not make someone a cultural expert. We must be flexible and willing to admit when unfamiliar with a parent’s culture. More importantly, we have to change our attitudes and behaviors in response to having greater insight into parents’ cultures.



- 2. Recognizing and changing power imbalances:** We can monitor whether we are perpetuating a dynamic that disempowers the parents we are supposed to support. We can nurture a co-learning partnership with parents communicating in a non-controlling way, and expressing our interest in understanding their perspectives. In this way, we can learn together and from one another so that we elevate rather than minimize parents' wisdom and strengths.
- 3. Caring for and advocating for the community:** We need to show care and love for the community, listen and advocate as invited to, and amplify the voices of those in the community and most proximate to the need. Being a part of the community helps us to "identify, believe in, and build on the assets and adaptive strengths" of parents, particularly those who are disenfranchised. This first-hand experience within the community prepares us to advocate more effectively for parents.





- 4. Developing institutional accountability:** We have to constantly examine how the organizations we work for are committed to cultural humility. For example, do our organizations include practitioners who are representative of the parents' own cultural groups? Do our organizations uphold guiding principles of inclusion and belonging across cultures in our daily practice? Do our organizations support authentic discussions about culture?

Cultural humility is one of the foundational principles of trauma-informed care and practice, which we will explore in the next chapter (see chapter 10). It involves a process of communal reflection to analyze the root causes of suffering and create a broader, more inclusive view of the world. As practitioners, we cannot address trauma without cultural humility—without understanding what culture is and how it lives in our bodies, brains, and relationships—because we come from diverse cultural groups that may experience and react to the world around us differently. When we're open to understanding and responding to these differences, we can help each other feel understood.

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**Cultural humility is this invitation for us to think about who we are as people, practitioners, caregivers, and instruments of change.**

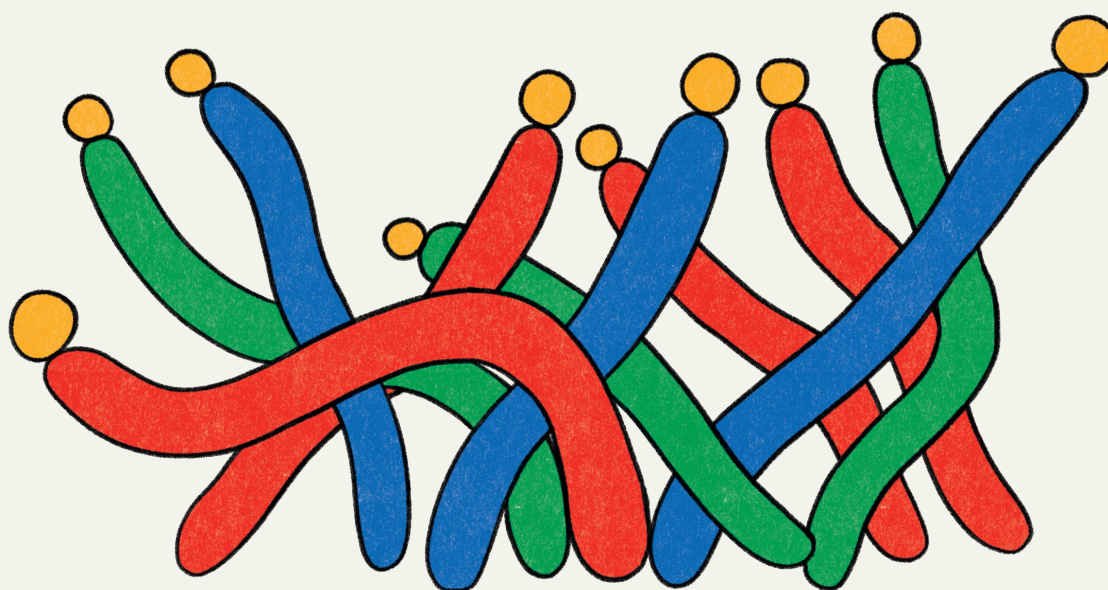
## **Exploring Our Own Culture**

As practitioners, cultural humility calls upon us to reflect on our culture. What does it mean to me? How do I carry it? How and when do I share it with parents? How can I assist parents in exploring their own culture? How can I help parents educate their children about their culture?

Cultural humility is this invitation for us to think about who we are as people, practitioners, caregivers, and instruments of change. As leaders training other professionals in running parenting groups or programs, you can emphasize how cultural humility helps us become more aware of our cultural identities and how these intersect with power, privilege, and oppression.

It's important for us to think about where we have power. For example, as a practitioner who facilitates parenting groups, we can recognize that parents in the group do not have our role or responsibility to guide discussions or manage the group. The role and responsibility we have as practitioners are a type of power. With this role comes the power to switch topics or call on participants to share their thoughts with a group, for example. This is an example of a power analysis.

As leaders training other parenting practitioners, we can also discuss being aware that our actions might differ from those of a parent. We should ask ourselves questions like, "Do I value and appreciate how this parent raises their child? Why? Where is culture involved?"



## Affirming Strengths in Parents' Cultural Identities

Sometimes, practitioners have deficit-based approaches to parenting practices in different cultures. Acknowledging that “good parenting” can vary across cultures can be transformative for a parent. We can validate the wisdom and strengths that parents’ cultural identities contribute to their parenting by actively listening to them discuss what is working well and also hearing their concerns or challenges. We can acknowledge that “good parenting” is what is working for them and their children and encourage them to share how they are experiencing a sense of competence in specific parenting practices and interactions with their children. For example, parents might share that they know how to show love to their child and communicate that love to their child, not necessarily by saying it, but in other ways. As practitioners, we often find that parents worry that they are failing. For example, parents may say, “I think I’m messing up my kids.” If we listen to and lift up, “You’re here, and you’re trying,” or “You got mandated, and you’re showing up and trying,” or “There was that one time when you listened in this kind of way.” We must try as much as possible to find and reflect back to them the wisdom and strengths that they are offering.

Culture can be an important asset for parents to draw from as they try to cope with stress or challenges. Parenting practitioners can help parents identify and uplift cultural assets to support families. For example, researchers<sup>5</sup> have identified many protective capacities of Black American families. These include cultural legacies, family values, family cohesion, and ra-



cial socialization to promote pride and preparation for discrimination. Religion and spirituality can promote happiness, hope, faith, optimism, strength, confidence, forgiveness, trust, and meaning. The Black church is a significant institutional source of social, emotional, and practical support for many, but not all. Collective socialization involves having access to other adults in the community who come together to support parents and watch over neighborhood children.

Similarly, strengths-based research exploring Latine<sup>6</sup> culture identifies ethnic socialization practices related to the important cultural values of familismo, respeto, and bien educado, for example. Familismo is an orientation toward, affinity for, and commitment to family. This can be expressed in intergenerational relationships where older children care for grandparents or younger siblings. Familismo helps family members understand reciprocity—the giving and taking involved in relationships—and to consider the needs and perspectives of others in the family. Respeto nurtures an acknowledgment of hierarchy within family relationships and encourages deference to the wisdom of older family members who have greater life experience. Bien educado is the belief that being well-educated involves upstanding qualities beyond academics, like being warm, honest, polite, respectful, and responsible. These cultural values and beliefs help promote well-being within children, parents, and families, and harmony within the community.

“What I tell the home visitors is that when people know that we seek to respect and we want to understand, we appreciate learning about their values and how they come to these practices. It just opens up the dialogue and contributes to a significance and belonging all around.”

– Nicki, School-based parent and family educator in Minnesota

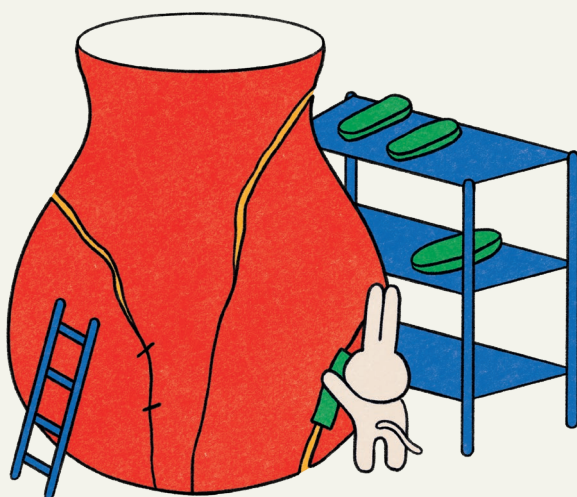
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# Practitioners are afraid of doing or saying something wrong if they bring up culture with parents.

## Navigating Our Cultural Missteps

As practitioners training other practitioners who are facilitating parenting groups or programs, we may find that practitioners are afraid of doing or saying something wrong if they bring up culture with parents. We can support practitioners in adopting a growth mindset—the idea that we can learn and gain more skills with more practice—to nurture their cultural humility. Setting expectations that no matter what we do in supporting parents, we are going to say something wrong and we are going to make a mistake can be helpful. We can encourage practitioners to think of other spaces or topics that they now feel comfortable with but started by making mistakes. As practitioners, surely we have messed up about something related to parenting. For example, maybe they are comfortable talking with parents about how they can swaddle their babies. But have they ever made a mistake with that in the past? How did they manage that mistake?

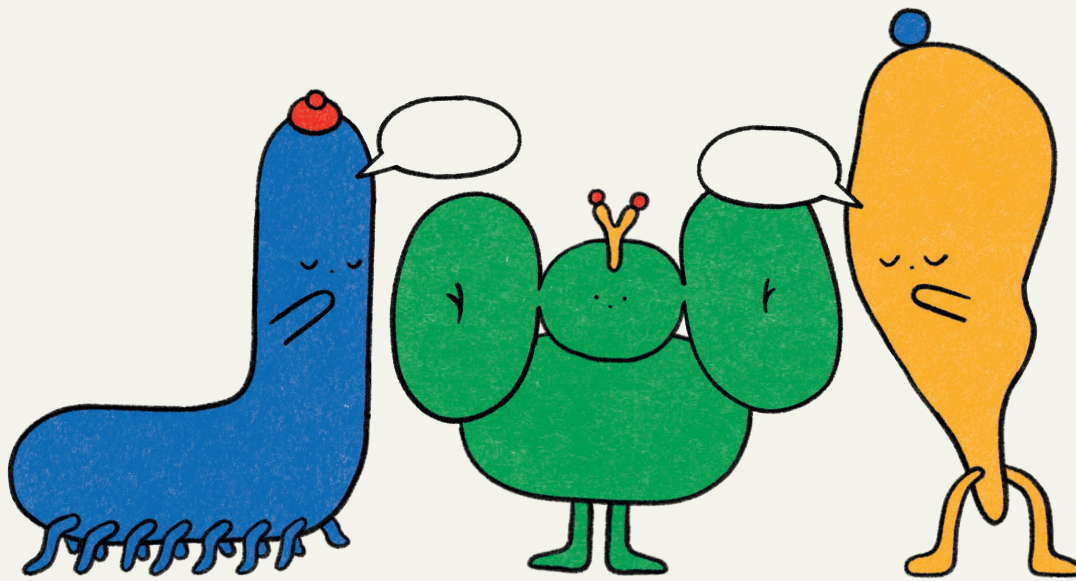
Talking with parents about culture is yet another opportunity to practice. We don't get to practice talking about culture if we never say anything. What's more, our silence about culture can be a mistake, and it doesn't mean that we aren't communicating about culture; it just means that we aren't comfortable talking about it. We can provide practitioners with opportunities to practice, learn, role play, try on, bring their wisdom, and learn how to be accountable when the inevitable misstep occurs. Mindfulness, which we explore in Chapter 4, is also part of this learning process. We can support practitioners with breathing and getting grounded to do as much as possible to weather the inevitable storms of making mistakes. Part of cultural humility is accepting that parent educators are not “all-knowing.” Practitioners can and should learn from participants and the community to help lessen the power differentials.



## Repairing Ruptures Related to Culture

Because mistakes are not only possible but also expected, sometimes we unintentionally say or do something that alienates or offends the culture of a parent we work with without realizing it. There are ways to repair a rupture while navigating challenging feelings like confusion, defensiveness, shame, and guilt. Self-compassion<sup>7</sup> (see chapter 5) can be an important tool and technique to be agile with our emotions during these instances. First, lean into mindfulness—breathe and be present in the moment to understand what has happened. Second, common humanity helps us appreciate that other people have and will make these kinds of mistakes, too. Finally, offering ourselves kindness and tenderness for our missteps can also help us to give spaciousness for compassion to both ourselves and the person whom we may have harmed. This last part can be tricky, but we have to leave enough space to hear how we hurt others, so we have to ask, listen, and take it in. Let's also remember that intention and impact are different things. We often are not “trying” to harm, but the impact of what we say might be heavy. Rather than moving to defense or “I didn't mean to,” we can acknowledge by saying, “Wow, it was not my intent to offend. I hear that I did. I am sorry and will work not to do that again.”

Repair also involves making an effective apology.<sup>8</sup> The first step is to acknowledge you are taking responsibility for the offense, like, “I made a mistake,” rather than something vague like, “I'm sorry you feel hurt,” which skirts responsibility for causing the hurt. In some cases, explaining without making excuses or blaming the other person can be helpful. Next, express remorse by acknowledging your disappointment in yourself and your commitment to improve. Finally, make amends by taking steps to improve your behavior, including asking the person who was harmed what would mean the most to them.



## Navigating Parents' Cultural Missteps

As practitioners, we can also experience times when one of the parents in our parenting group is unaware that they have made a cultural misstep that offended another parent during a group discussion that we are facilitating. For example, a parent can make culturally inappropriate or harmful statements, like, “When I look at you, I don’t see color,” or “Where were you born? You speak English so well.” In instances like this, step one is to reflect upon how we manage challenging moments within facilitation in general. Notice how parents deal with cultural missteps or offenses in the group. Are they angry? Is there a rupture?

You can gauge how the statement appears to be landing by reading the room. If parents appear to be dysregulated or having difficulty, you don’t need to speak for them. Pause and say, “Hey, I just want to pause and check in how folks feel about the conversation.” This kind of pause allows parents to share their perspectives. You also have the opportunity to follow up with parents after by saying, “Hey, I wanted to check in and see how this was.” Another option is to just talk about how it feels for you. For example, you can say, “Hey, I just want to pause. As we’re talking about so many different things, I am going to assume that what you’re trying to do is to offer a compliment. I just want to let you know that sometimes that lands hard and, despite your intention, made me a little bit uncomfortable, so maybe we can just talk about that.” You can do that in the group, or pull someone aside. Importantly, be aware of your cultural assumptions because you might think you know what will land with difficulty, but your assumption might be mistaken. Sometimes, practitioners can believe that they know what is happening for somebody else, but we don’t.

## Navigating Differences in Cultural Values

There may be interactions where you are having difficulty understanding the cultural values of a parent. For example, you may have a collectivist cultural orientation and are working with a parent with an individualist cultural orientation. You realize the mismatch in cultural values is causing friction between you and the parent. Noticing and recognizing any discordance is an important first step. As practitioners, we must be reflective to notice why we struggle with a parent. Ask yourself, “What am I bumping on? Is this because I don’t like what they’re doing?” These self-reflections can help you identify your biases and be attuned to how your cultural identities have shaped your values.

Anytime we begin to notice that we are starting to assume that we would be able to parent someone’s child better, then that is a good moment to pause and to ask ourselves, “What’s going on? What reframing do I need to do to return to my job, which is to figure out how to support this parent and community of people parenting this child?” An important guiding principle for practitioners is that we, as practitioners, can offer so much help and support to parents and make big differences in the trajectory of children’s lives. Still, we must always pay attention to the reality that we can never be the child’s parent--we can’t outperform that parent.

## Nurturing Cultural Humility for the Long Term

As a community of practitioners working with parents, we must embrace continuing to grow in our cultural understanding and guard against being culturally arrogant, when we assume that our way is the best and only way. We should never feel like we’ve always got this during our work with parents. If we do, we should question how we can nurture our cultural humility. Therefore, it’s about finding the right balance—not overestimating our cultural knowledge, but also not underestimating it. We should become more comfortable with the tools we have to build our cultural knowledge with more time and practice. Furthermore, we can demonstrate cultural humility to the parents we work with, encouraging them to foster this lifelong commitment to learning about culture in their children.

# Healing and Resilience: Navigating Adversity Together

## What Are Trauma and ACEs?

Traumatic events<sup>1</sup> are when something frightening, dangerous, or violent happens that threatens your life or body. Witnessing an event that threatens a loved one's life or body can also be traumatic. A traumatic event can be a singular experience or multiple experiences. Approximately 70% of adults<sup>2</sup> across the world have experienced a traumatic event, and nearly a third have experienced four or more traumatic events. More than two-thirds of children<sup>3</sup> have experienced at least one traumatic event. These adverse events can have long-term negative consequences for individual, family, and generational social and emotional well-being. Importantly, it is possible to foster healing and resilience with well-timed social support following adversity and trauma by drawing upon community strength.

In their book, *Raising a Resilient Child in a World of Adversity: Effective Parenting for Every Family*,<sup>4</sup> researchers Amanda Sheffield Morris and Jennifer Hays-Grudo explain<sup>5</sup> that over half of parents have experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) like abuse, neglect, divorce, violence in the home, and mental illness. These experiences can also include major separations from parents. Children who have experienced ACEs, especially four or more, tend to face greater challenges in adulthood, like cancer and heart disease and problems with managing stress and regulating emotions, which can contribute to difficulties with nurturing



relationships and parenting. A community of supportive caregivers is critical to helping these children and parents heal and cultivate resilience.

Morris and Hays-Grudo offer ten antidotes to ACEs, called protective and compensatory experiences (PACEs): love, guidance, friendship, affiliation, benevolence, stability, comfort, knowledge, movement, and recreation. The following tips help parents break the cycle of intergenerational adversity.

- Acknowledge the good and hard parts of your past, but don't feel the need to relive these experiences, especially without professional support.
- Notice and learn to navigate your emotions with mindfulness practices (see chapter 4).
- Identify ways you've coped in the past that no longer serve you well.
- Find new, healthy ways of coping, like holding family meetings to discuss challenges before they become overwhelming.
- Appreciate that while there may be similarities, your children are different from you and have their own life journeys.

## Trauma in Context

Trauma is a term sometimes casually used during everyday conversation to describe daily stressors like a writing project or waiting in a long DMV line as “traumatic.” Today, trauma has become “the word of the decade.”<sup>6</sup> Google Trends<sup>7</sup> shows the interest in the term over the last two decades. Heightened awareness and open discussion about trauma have destigmatized the term.

Common use of the word trauma nowadays is in stark contrast to previous generations where people, like World War I and World War II soldiers, for example, would come home and never

speak about their traumatic combat experiences. Practitioners and researchers worked for decades to help the public understand, recognize, and respond to trauma. However, mental health professionals worry that this formal clinical term is now so broadly used in pop culture that it is losing its original meaning.<sup>8</sup> This ubiquitous use raises concerns that every discomfort or challenge is misidentified as a trauma. It is important to discern between everyday challenges and significant adversities that can lead to trauma.

## Responding to Adversity and Trauma

While traumatic events and ACEs are relatively common and widespread, their impact on people varies. What's more, many people have experienced and overcome them. As a practitioner, it's helpful to understand why people respond so differently. Of course, no single reason drives how people respond to adversity—differences in genetics, physiology, experiences, circumstances, and the environment are some factors that play a role. It's important to recognize that when a community supports people, they can tap into strengths to help them overcome tremendous hardship, grief, and loss. Not all traumas impact people similarly. People may be surprised, but the invitation is to listen to the impact and not make assumptions.

Looking for and finding the helpers—and even more so—having the helpers look for and find you when you are suffering—is a tremendous resource in the face of adversity and trauma, which can lead to healing and resilience. For children, the number one protective factor of navigating adversity and trauma is having one caring, competent, and consistent caregiver. Parents and caregivers who express empathy and warmth, have good caregiving skills, and reliably show up when they say they will so that children can access them are essential ingredients for children's healing and resilience. These caregiver strengths are important across the constellation of caregiving adults in a child's life—not just primary caregivers, but also if you're the bus driver, child care provider, teacher, or coach. You show up when you say you will, treat children respectfully, and keep them safe. It highlights the importance of the virtuous cycle of caregiver well-being. That is, caregivers with high levels of well-being are more prepared to foster the well-being of those in their care. What gets altered when we experience trauma are all the critical elements children need when they experience adversity: our capacity for care, competence, and consistency become diminished.

In her book *Homecoming: Overcome Fear and Trauma to Reclaim Your Whole, Authentic Self*,<sup>9</sup> researcher Thema Bryant explains, “Stressful and traumatic experiences may have created within you a core belief about yourself that is untrue; this keeps you disconnected from yourself. Some of these core beliefs may be:

- I am not good enough.
- I am not worthy.
- I am not lovable.
- I am not meant to have a good life.”

When an adult or child has what may appear to be an oversized reaction to something, it can be a sign of dysregulation or disconnection from self. It can be helpful to ask, “What happened to you?”, rather than the more typically asked, “What is wrong with you?” This empathic shift and curious perspective can help you consider how they got to this particular need or behavior.



## Hurt People Hurt People

As practitioners, we sometimes serve parents who are the source of distress or harm to their children. In addition to all of our regulatory and legal mandates around getting help and notifying authorities, we also have to strengthen our capacity to work with parents who hurt their children because the majority of trauma that happens to children happens at the hands of parents who love or want to love them. For example, we will sometimes find that parents are compromised in their caregiving due to their own history of trauma and not being supported in parenting by a community. Sometimes, parents have their own experiences of being excluded from the family due to their overwhelming mental health needs or substance dependence. Practitioners may work with parents who have gotten so frustrated and overwhelmed that they didn't know what else to do except to use excessive force or who weren't supported with boundaries and had histories of sexual trauma and perpetuated that trauma on their children. There are some instances where we find that parents make harmful choices or mistakes or, for various reasons, don't have the capacity to provide care for their children. Sometimes, parents can be reticent to talk about the trauma that they've experienced.

These professional experiences require incredible empathy (see chapter 3). As practitioners, we also need support from colleagues and the community because we exist within systems that don't have the capacity to care. As a parenting professional, you can provide guidance to help practitioners be aware of trauma in their everyday work with parents and families and how to discuss it with them.

Voice, choice, and clarity are important considerations when supporting parents because the fundamental experience of trauma is about not having your voice heard, the ability to make a choice, and clarity about what will happen to you. Provide parents the opportunity to express themselves, options for participating in meetings with you and other parents, and clear expectations to help them feel transparency and certainty.

## The Ripple of Adversity and Trauma to Practitioners

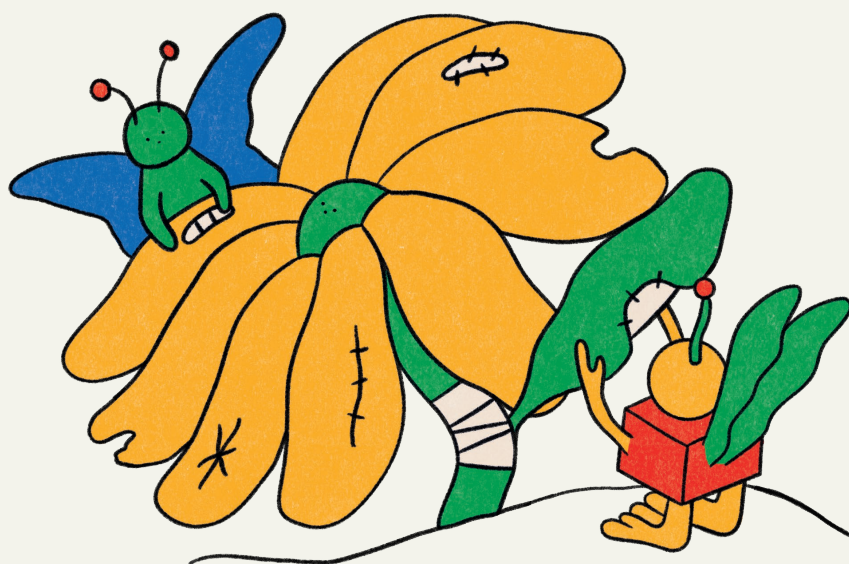
Adversity and trauma can ripple out to and from families, groups, communities, and society, including you as a practitioner. These ripples might be having a direct experience with adversity or an indirect experience of hearing about or imagining a traumatic event. Our humanity has shaped us to have empathy and compassion. As practitioners, we are often in places of bearing witness and accompanying children and families who have experienced trauma. “Vicarious trauma is the process of change that happens because you care about the people you serve. Over time, this can lead to changes in your psychological, physical, and spiritual life that also affect your family, your organization, and your patients/clients,” explain Laurie Anne Pearlman and Lisa McKay of the Headington Institute.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, our experiences will change us. Why wouldn't you be changed through your connection and service? Conversely, one practitioner noted, “You know, all you really have to do is take out vicarious trauma and put in joy, and say, ‘Joy is an inevitable process of change to your psychology, your wellness, your senses, because you love the people you serve.’” In other words, you will be changed in good ways and hard ways because you are helping parents. You see them experience hard things, and might be in the same community where this adversity and trauma happen.

As a parenting practitioner, it is important to recognize your own experiences with adversity and trauma and any potential triggering cues in your work with parents. Identifying how we have navigated adversity can help uplift a strengths-based mindset we can use in our work with parents. Noticing where pain points remain from our past adverse experiences can help us self-direct resources. Before you step into work related to adversity and trauma, take a moment to reflect on how you might be reminded of your own experiences. Sometimes, practitioners can feel a “backdraft” where we experience intense emotions within ourselves when we open the door to help other parents through adversity and trauma. Imagine how you might navigate your own emotional “backdraft” on a scale of one to ten, with ten being an overwhelming intensity of emotions. If you begin to notice you'll exceed your threshold for emotional agility at a level of five to eight, then pause to practice mindfulness (see chapter 4) with a body scan meditation,<sup>11</sup> mindful breathing,<sup>12</sup> or walking meditation,<sup>13</sup> for example, or step away entirely.

“We demonstrate compassion and grace for our own threshold by asking for help. Tap in, tap out, tap in again. It is problematic to think a child with big needs might only be soothed and directed by one person. To bring someone in after you with a renewed threshold, means the child isn’t dropped and the adult is also supported.”

– Heather, Social Worker in Minnesota<sup>14</sup>



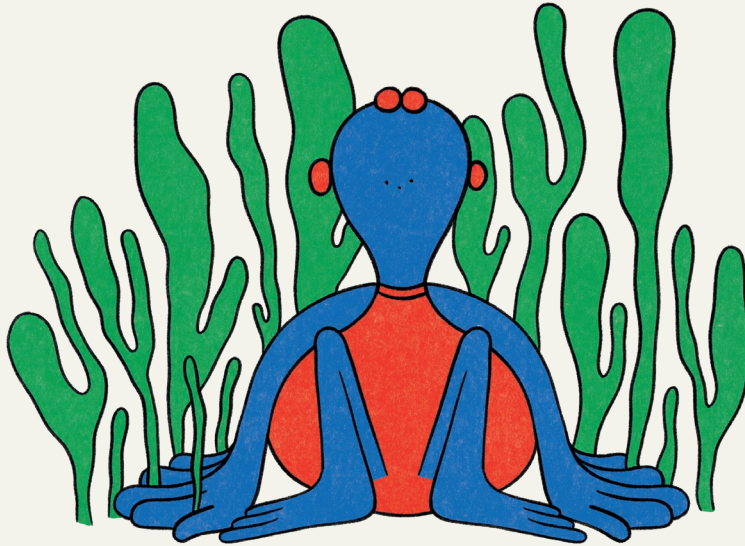
## Collective Responsibility

As practitioners, we also can recognize adversity and trauma, which means that we inherently have to pay attention to the resources and capacities inherent in children, parents, and their communities. This chapter has primarily focused on providing you, as a parenting practitioner, with strategies and insights to work with families in your community. At the same time, it is critical to keep in mind that we must zoom out to understand that adversity and trauma are common and widespread, with underlying roots in systemic issues that can be addressed with collective action. Healing and resilience are our collective responsibility as a society to support—not the individual responsibility<sup>15</sup> of a person who has experienced adversity and trauma. In other words, our “big picture” goal as practitioners supporting families is to be part of solutions that “fix conditions” that can alleviate adversity and trauma for everyone, like large-scale government and societal efforts.

When asked what the solutions are for us as a society, pioneering pediatrician and author of *The Deepest Well: Healing the Long-Term Effects of Childhood Adversity*,<sup>16</sup> Nadine Burke Harris, explains,<sup>17</sup> “There’s an incredible amount that we can do. There are multiple levels where we can address the impacts of childhood trauma.” Her suggestions include:

“There are many schools across the country that are trying to be trauma-sensitive, understanding how to recognize the symptoms of toxic stress...There are a lot of kids right now who are being told that they are bad, who are being suspended or expelled, when really the underlying problem is a biological one, with the over-reactivity of their stress response.





If you're an employer, you can explore workplace policies that support parents' ability to support their kids, like predictable work hours...Or employers can create a space for workers...to manage their own stress response...Many folks may have access to health care through their employer, but many, many people still do not have access to mental health care.

Finally, we need to invest in this work...We had to invest public funds in addressing public health threats like HIV/AIDS, lead poisoning, or tobacco. With HIV, it was the Ryan White Act that required political will. We need folks to come together to demand greater investment in solutions for this public health problem."

Communities are full of strengths that can help nurture healing and resilience in the face of adversity and trauma. Moreover, practitioners can serve as leaders within their communities to uplift and build resources to minimize adversity so that all families, parents, and children can thrive.

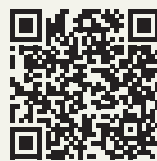
**Resources for Digging Deeper:** Greater Good in Action practices:



Body Scan  
Meditation



Mindful  
Breathing



Walking  
Meditation

Sheffield Morris, A. & Hays-Grudo, J. (2023). *Raising a resilient child in a world of adversity: Effective parenting for every family.* American Psychological Association.

“As a first-generation college student and son of immigrant parents, I understand firsthand the taboo surrounding discussions of trauma and mental health within families. That’s why I’m committed to breaking these barriers and providing the support and resources necessary for parents to address generational trauma and foster healthier family dynamics.”

– Jonathan, Parent Engagement Specialist  
in California Schools

# Program Evaluation: Listening and Learning

As a parenting practitioner, you might ask yourself, “Is what I’m doing in this parenting program helpful for parents?”, or, “Is there something else I can do in this parenting program to help parents?” Fortunately, there’s an entire field dedicated to helping you explore these questions no matter what stage you are in developing or running your parenting program.

Program evaluation is a systematic process for planning, documenting, and assessing a program’s implementation and outcomes. Simply put, program evaluation helps you answer two important questions: Is this program working and can it be improved?<sup>1</sup> This chapter offers simple listening and learning tools and strategies to understand the parents’ needs and find effective ways to support them.

Parenting practitioners work in organizations and settings with different levels of experience with evaluation. Some practitioners reading this workbook may work in larger organizations that have a professional evaluator on staff. If this is the case at your organization, you might already have a clear evaluation approach in place and this chapter might offer you ideas to collaborate with evaluation staff members. If you’re starting in evaluation or running programs on your own or in smaller organizations, this chapter is here to help. We have some easy-to-follow tips on asking the right questions and gathering data to see how well your program is doing.

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“The issue with evaluation is that if it is done as an afterthought, without clarity and time, it can harm. But it can be powerful if it is framed as: ‘We really want to understand how this works for you. We take your voice seriously. We heard you and here’s your feedback.’ ... It can be super powerful and foster strong connections, especially for communities that are often devalued, ignored, and on whom research is not centered.”

- Allison, Child Clinical Psychologist working with families in Washington

## **Mapping Out How You Expect Your Program To Work**

You probably have some ideas connecting the dots between what you’re doing in your program and how you think it makes a difference for parents, your community, and the world. You might even share these ideas with parents when you’re working with them or with the community members who support your program. Explaining how and why you expect a program to produce a desired outcome—a program theory—is important for how you develop an evaluation. Many tools can help you refine and communicate your program theory to parents, community stakeholders, and funders, including logic models and the theory of change. The value of these tools is that they help you identify causal pathways—how and why one activity leads to a desired outcome within the context of your program. For example, you can start with your goal or what you would like participants to take away with them after the program and then think about what would need to happen to achieve this goal.<sup>2</sup> It is important to have a clear program theory before you design your evaluation to identify which questions will help you test if your theory is true and what information you will collect to answer these questions.

This process may involve a lot of new terminology. We've provided a few definitions of common program theory terms.<sup>3</sup>

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## Activities

The actions you take in your program, such as hosting a parent session, to achieve desired outcomes.

## Outputs

Evidence of your program's implementation. For example, the number of parent sessions facilitated or curriculum produced.

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## Outcomes

The anticipated results of your program. There are different levels of outcomes:

**Short-term outcomes:** The most immediate results of a program, which often focus on knowledge or skills gained and may be easier to measure. For example, parents have an increased understanding of a concept covered in the parent session's curriculum, such as compassion.

**Medium-term outcomes:** The anticipated program results, such as changes in behaviors, attitudes, or practices, that might take time to become evident because these changes require participants to apply new knowledge and skills. For example, parents implementing a compassion practice at home with their children.

**Long-term outcomes:** The ultimate desired outcome for your program, which are often systemic changes that you hope to see after many people have experienced changes in their attitudes and behaviors as a result of the program. Long-term outcomes may take a long time to achieve and often one program won't achieve them alone, but will contribute to this larger goal. Because of this, long-term outcomes are often the most difficult to measure. For example, children in the community are more compassionate.

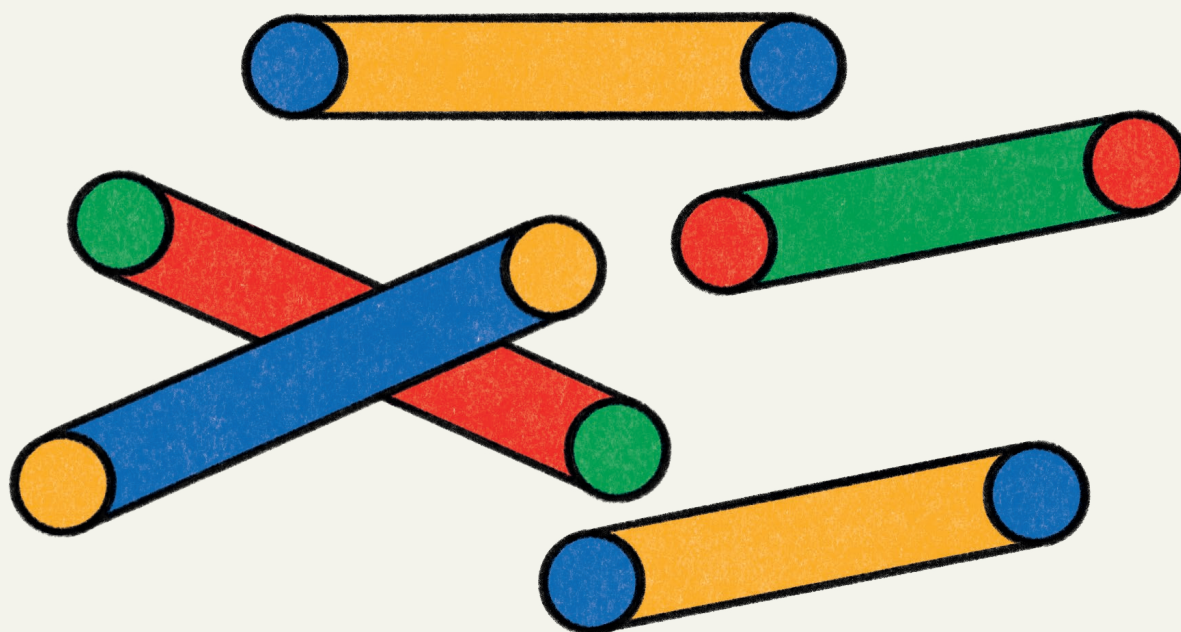
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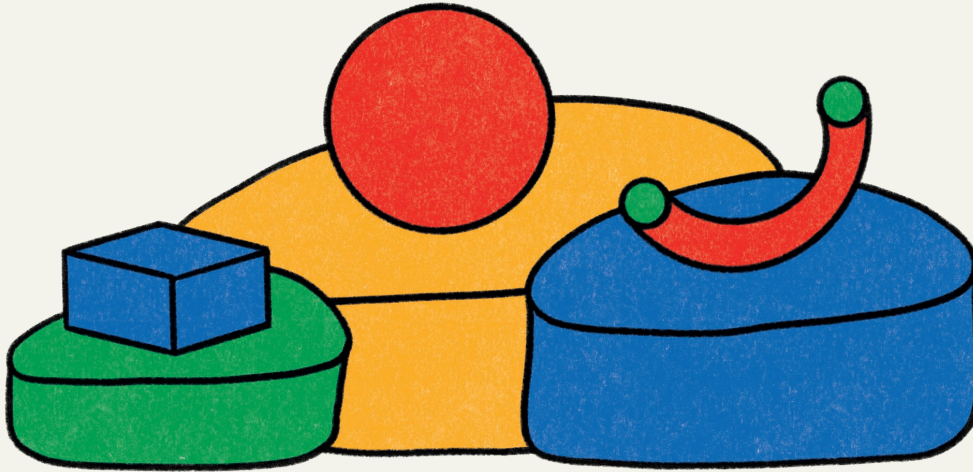
When you design or implement a new program, make sure it is in response to parent needs and co-created with parents as much as possible. Program theories that take this approach tend to lead to more successful programs because they take into account the specific values and priorities of families in your community (see chapter 12).<sup>4</sup>



“Evaluation is not something that’s tacked on at the end of a program. You have to have an evaluative mindset throughout the entire process of program planning and implementation. It’s everything from what specific outcomes you really want to see happen before you even begin a particular program to how you are going to know that those outcomes have happened.”

– Chris O., Works with under-resourced families in Tennessee





## Figuring Out Where To Start

As you begin to create an evaluation plan it is important to consider where your program is in its development. Doing so will help you narrow down which kinds of evaluation questions to focus on. While you might be eager to answer a variety of questions about your program, keep in mind that not all programs are ready for an evaluation that measures program impact.<sup>5</sup> Evaluations of new and early-stage programs often focus on how well the program is being implemented and how participants are responding to the program, which is called process evaluation or formative evaluation. You may include questions about outcomes at this early stage, focusing on short-term outcomes, or the first signs that a program is working as intended, like knowledge outcomes. This kind of evaluation focuses on providing quick feedback to refine a program theory and identify issues in the program.

## Asking Evaluation Questions

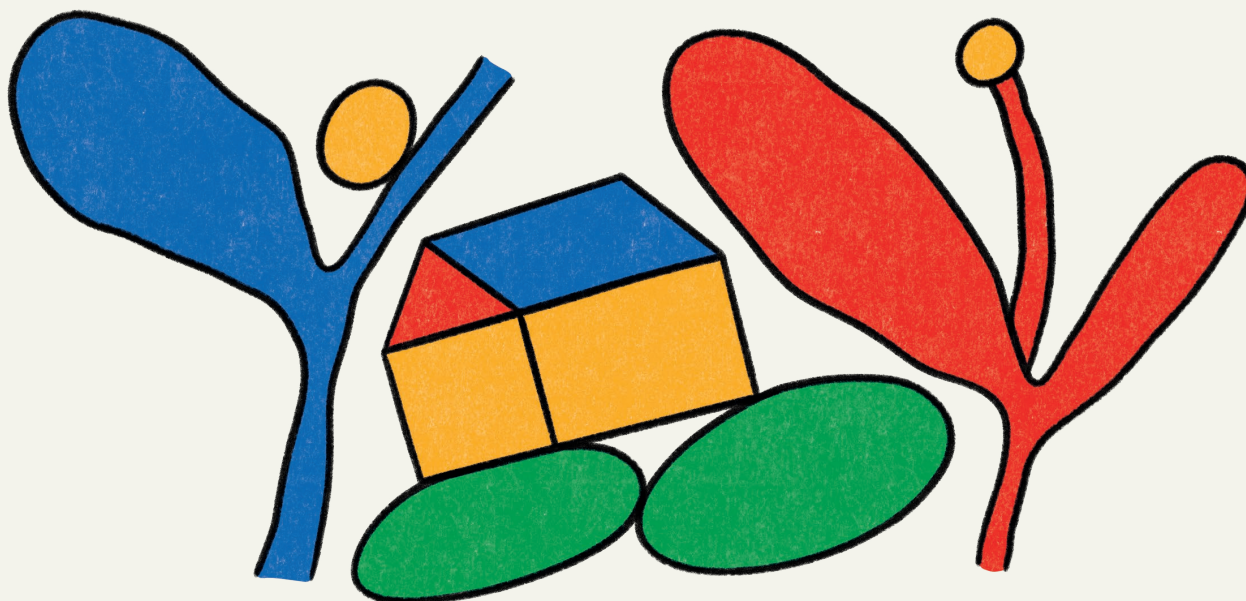
Crafting the right questions helps narrow the evaluation’s focus and create a manageable evaluation plan. It’s a chance to be curious and consider what you hope to learn about your program. Of course, there is the big question, did this program have its desired outcomes and have an impact on its intended audience?<sup>6</sup> But this is not a question you simply ask on a survey. To answer this big question, consider asking smaller sub-questions that, when viewed together, paint a clearer picture. These evaluation questions will be the backbone of your evaluation plan, so you want to align them with your program’s development level. Use different evaluation questions for a new program versus a program that has been operating on a larger scale for many years.

Let’s examine a new program that involves a parent session where you share information about gratitude and how to develop gratitude in children and then do a gratitude activity with parents. Here are appropriate evaluation questions:

- “How well is the gratitude activity implemented?” This measures how closely the actual program delivered was to the intended curriculum.
- “To what extent are parents satisfied with the session they attended?” This measures program satisfaction.
- “To what extent do parents demonstrate an increased understanding of gratitude?” This measures the short-term outcome of knowledge acquisition.

Evaluation questions should be clear, concise, and measurable, using precise and thoughtful language. It’s crucial to be clear about whether a question is probing causality, correlation, or neither, for example.

Finally, one key distinction to keep in mind when you write your evaluation questions is that you are evaluating the program and not the participants. Your evaluation questions must focus on understanding how the program serves parents rather than how parents perform in the program.



## Centering Equity & Honoring Parent Voice

Evaluation ensures our program effectively serves the parents we aim to support. Yet if we are not careful, the evaluation process can feel extractive to program participants.<sup>7</sup> It's important to consider how parents will feel during the evaluation process. Create an evaluation approach that values listening to parent feedback and responding to their voices rather than making parents feel like they're being studied. With intention, evaluation can serve as a tool to build trust and provide a beneficial reflection exercise for parents.

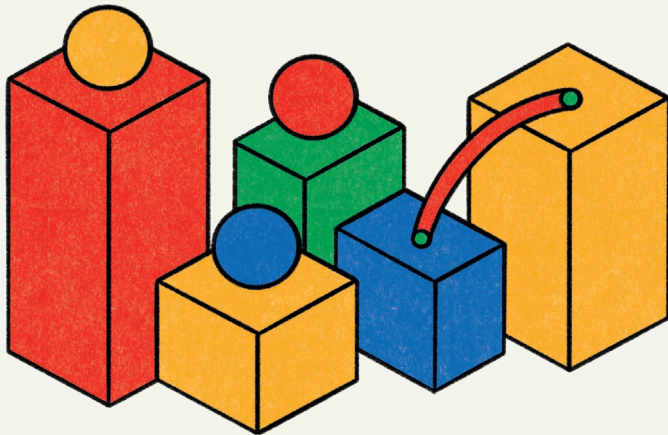
The Equitable Evaluation Framework<sup>8</sup> offers three guiding principles to consider when creating an evaluation plan that centers equity and honors parent voices:

- Evaluation should be in service of equity.
- Evaluation should be multi-culturally valid and oriented toward participant ownership.
- Evaluation should integrate structural and systemic conditions.

**Consider these questions as you plan your evaluation:**

- How can you involve program participants in the evaluation design process?<sup>9</sup>
- Are the data collection methods culturally appropriate for the parents you are working with? Do materials need to be translated?<sup>10</sup>
- How will the staff members conducting interviews, focus groups, and surveys help participants feel comfortable sharing openly?
- Are there power dynamics at play that might make participants uncomfortable giving honest feedback?
- Have you ensured that you are only collecting needed data so that you place the lowest burden on program participants?
- How can you reduce bias during the data analysis process? Have you considered the power that you hold when you synthesize data?
- How are you being transparent in your evaluation process? How are you sharing what you learn with program participants and the community you serve?

Approach this work with humility and flexibility. Parent programs often use intimate spaces where parents connect deeply and share openly. Consider how to integrate data collection seamlessly into the flow of your program. For example, you may not want to end a parent session where a lot of connection and vulnerable sharing just took place with a survey asking scaled questions about learning outcomes. Instead, email a survey later or choose a tool that allows for more open-ended reflection. When the evaluation process is carefully planned, it is an opportunity to build trusting relationships with parents and should not undermine or undo any goodwill or closeness you have cultivated.



## Collecting Data: Getting Started

Once you've formulated your evaluation questions and clarified what you want to learn, it's time to determine how you'll gather the necessary information to answer these questions—that's data collection. There are two primary ways that we think about the data that can help us answer our questions: qualitative and quantitative.

- **Qualitative data:** Think about words. Qualitative data can be a great way to collect success stories and get detailed feedback about how a program can be improved.
- **Quantitative data:** Think about numbers. Quantitative data can be a helpful way to quickly collect data to show how well a program is working on average for a large group of people.

There are several common methods of collecting both qualitative and quantitative data.

**Surveys and Questionnaires:** Among the most common data collection approaches, surveys can be an efficient way to collect data from many participants. Survey questions can include open-ended questions that collect qualitative feedback. Questions about knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes can also be designed to be answered using numerical scales to collect quantitative data.<sup>11</sup> Different kinds of evaluation questions require different survey approaches. For example, measuring change most accurately requires a pre- and post-program survey design. Measuring program satisfaction only requires a post-program survey.

**Focus Groups and Interviews:** Interviews and focus groups can result in rich qualitative data. Both methods essentially structure and standardize program participants' conversations so that themes can be identified across a group of conversations. Interviews are in-depth one-on-one conversations. Focus groups allow you to conduct a group interview, which is also an opportunity to create connections among parents and to offer collective reflection. These powerful tools for reflection can help families feel valued and heard, while building trust and openness.<sup>12</sup>

**Show of Hands:** If you have just a few questions to gather data on, you can present them to the group as agree/disagree statements and ask participants to raise their hands. Photograph the room or count the raised hands for each statement. Participants can keep their heads down or eyes closed during this process to maintain anonymity. During a virtual parent session, the polling app also maintains their anonymity.

**Flip Chart and Dots:** Similarly, write a couple of questions on flip charts placed around the room. Ask participants to answer the questions using colored dot stickers indicating that they agree, somewhat agree, or disagree with the statement on the chart. You can also post open-ended questions on flip chart paper and invite participants to write their answers on the walls as they leave the room.<sup>13</sup>

While these in-session methods can be your primary plan, they can also serve as a backup plan if the program doesn't go as anticipated. For example, you might have a smaller group or simply run out of time. Particularly when evaluation happens at the end of the session, it's helpful to come prepared with alternative ways of collecting the most essential data in case you need to pivot your strategy.

**Demographic Data:** It is important to be clear with yourself and with the families participating about why you are asking the demographic questions you are asking and how the information will be protected and used. Collect the information that you need to make sure that the program is meeting its goals, but do not collect demographic data just for the sake of doing so. For example, if a parent program aims to serve a diverse community and the data shows that parents whose first language isn't English or those from specific racial or ethnic backgrounds report lower levels of learning or satisfaction, it highlights a program issue that may not have been apparent without collecting participant demographics. While demographic information can be needed to address issues of equity and program theory, demographic questions are

sensitive for many participants. It is essential to communicate that questions are optional and only ask necessary demographic questions.

## Putting Learning from Evaluation to Use

Once you have completed your data collection and analyzed the results it is essential that you communicate the findings. This is an important way of letting folks know you value and respect their feedback, time, and experience. It's a way of showing that you care, that you heard them and that you are thinking about what they have told you. There are many ways to do this: write a full report or an executive summary; or perhaps create an infographic, or short video stating the findings. Consider which audiences will benefit most from different results when presenting your findings. Some audiences might need highly detailed results and others might need just a few key takeaways.

Make sure you share findings with community members who participated in the evaluation. This critical step is too often forgotten. Sharing what you learned and how you are going to make changes can be a powerful way of ensuring transparency, building trust, and honoring the time parents took to share their perspectives.

Evaluation is crucial for ensuring your program achieves its intended impact within the parent community, making adjustments based on parent feedback, and advocating for the continuation and expansion of successful programs. Evaluation can build trust, which helps program staff be curious while listening to parents. At its best it helps parents reflect, make sense of their own learning, share their experience and wisdom with program staff, and contribute to a stronger program that better serves them and their community.

## Resources for Digging Deeper:

- The Equitable Evaluation Framework
- The Guide to the Systems Evaluation Protocol
- The Community Toolbook



Equitable  
Evaluation



Systems  
Evaluation



Community  
Toolbook



# Engaging Parents: Facilitating Gatherings

## Building Community

Parenting programs can be a lifeline for parents and families. Parents with sensitive and attentive caregiving styles tend to have securely attached children (see chapter 7). Similarly, practitioners who are sensitive and attentive to the needs of parents and families tend to have more successful outcomes. Just like their children, parents want to feel heard and valued. Parents are likely to trust practitioners who are empathic listeners more than practitioners who tell caregivers how to parent. What's more, programs focused on parent and family strengths tend to be more effective than programs focused on family deficits.<sup>1</sup>

Since participating in parent education is frequently voluntary, sharing power between parents and practitioners is most effective for achieving learning goals.<sup>2</sup> All parents, whether they attend parenting groups voluntarily or they are court-ordered, need to feel heard, valued, and respected as experts on their own families and children. As practitioners, we can cultivate a curious mindset when interacting with parents and families.

Some parenting programs are designed to be primarily educational. In these settings, practitioners are generally in charge of the content, and there can be an expected power differential between the group leader and the participants. Parents and practitioners are co-creators of learning in parent education programs designed to grow parent agency. These

parenting programs often aim to nurture social connection and provide parents opportunities for skill-building as they process and problem-solve with others as much or more than it is to directly teach specific information. As a parenting practitioner, you can model important mindsets and behavior for parents, which, in turn, helps parents model mindsets and behavior for children. For example, you can model cultural humility by ongoing self-reflection and decreasing power differentials (see chapter 9).

The attunement perspective of family education can be a helpful framework for parenting program development. The attunement perspective focuses “on understanding families’ perspectives, situations, and goals and assists them in bringing their situations and their goals into alignment.”<sup>3</sup> An underlying assumption of the attunement perspective is that practitioners need to help change society to support families better rather than try to “fix” families to “fit into an existing culture frame.”<sup>4</sup> As a practitioner, you can include key features of the attunement approach by lessening the power differential between you and participants, listening to families, valuing the families’ point of view, supporting parents to change themselves when change is needed, and helping families notice and close the gap between their reality and their goals.<sup>5</sup> A practical application of the attunement perspective is Reflective Dialogue Parent Education Design (RDPED), an approach to problem-solving that cultivates empathy and helps parents do their own thinking, reflection, and perspective-taking.

Supportive and transformational parent education happens across many contexts. As a parenting practitioner, you may gather parents in large group settings, like parent nights at schools or family events sponsored by community organizations. You may support parents who attend weekly or monthly small group meetings designed as a combination of learning and support. Parent education can also happen in one-on-one conversations such as healthcare visits, counseling sessions, parent coaching, visits with clergy, or court-mandated home visits, to name just a few. Despite these differences, effective parent education has some predictable similarities. Within these various settings, high-quality parent education programs are carefully designed to have a clear purpose, address potential barriers to inclusion, use engaging facilitation strategies, and support parent engagement.



## Purpose for Gathering Parents

When planning a new program, consider your motivation. In other words, shift your thinking from what you'll be doing in your program to why you are doing this program. In her book, *The Art of Gathering*, author and master facilitator Priya Parker suggests these questions to clarify your purpose: "Why is this gathering different from all my other gatherings? Why is it different from other people's gatherings? Why is it different from other people's gatherings of the same general type? What is this that other gatherings aren't?"<sup>6</sup>

Have families in your setting asked for this program? If not, explore how the community will receive the program before setting it up. Sometimes, social service agencies set up programs that do not actually meet the needs of the communities they serve.<sup>7</sup> Co-creating programs with key members of the community often leads to higher attendance and more success rather than programs that are driven by the point of view of one stakeholder, for example, a funders' perspective. Parker suggests that to help you explore your purpose, "Think of what you want to be different because you gathered, and work backward from that outcome...Knowing what you want to happen can help you make the choices to get there."<sup>8</sup>

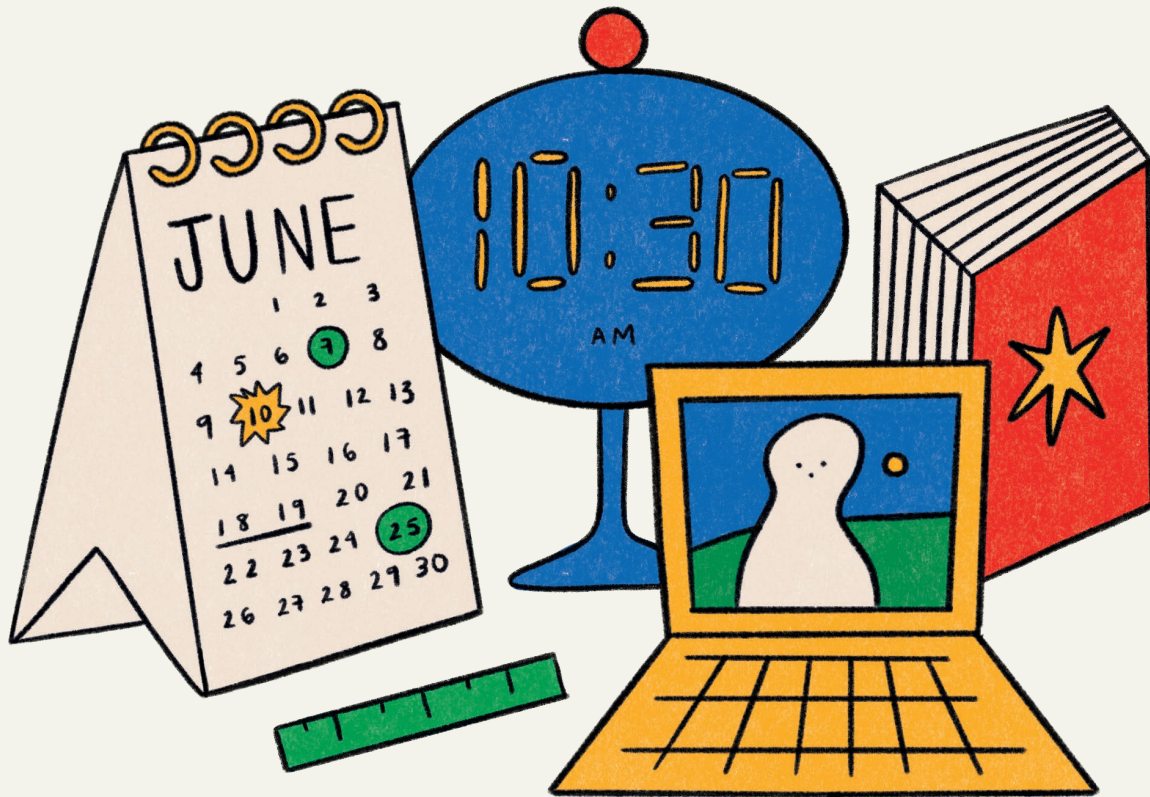


## Reducing Barriers to Participation

Even when families are enthusiastic about programming, there are many things to consider:

- 
- Meeting frequency
  - Number of meetings
  - Time of day/day of the week
  - Meeting length
  - Group size
  - Cost
  - Transportation
  - Traffic and parking
  - Food/beverages
  - Child involvement/childcare
  - Format (for example, online, in-person, hybrid)
-

Many of these decisions have pros and cons, and there is no one right way to run a parent program. Online programs have gained popularity in recent years. They have the advantage of allowing parents to avoid needing transportation or additional child care for children not involved in the program. Parents can choose to monitor their children while they participate or settle children for a nap or bed and then join the group. Some practitioners run multiple sessions of the same group at different times of the day, allowing parents to join when it is most convenient. This can be helpful for groups that use a specific curriculum with a set number of sessions and specific topics. Flexibility to join different groups can help parents juggle multiple responsibilities, but it may not nurture the possibility of parents forming tight group bonds or fostering ongoing social connections (see chapter 2). Parents may not feel comfortable sharing deeply in a group with constantly changing membership.





“We meet parents where they’re at and do it in a nonjudgmental, respectful way. So that whatever vulnerable situation or time of life they may be in, we’re not approaching it as if that defines them...We look at them as more than whatever their vulnerability or their need is, and ...we recognize that there is always more to us and to really be strength-based.”

– Desirée, Director of Early Childhood Parenting Program in Massachusetts

In-person groups can have the advantage of fostering more group cohesion and informal parent and family social connections. Parents can chat as they come and go, share contact information, and arrange playdates for their kids who hit it off or share common interests. Scheduling in-person groups takes careful consideration of busy family schedules. For example, evening meetings may be better for working parents, but these meetings can get in the way of dinner and bedtime. Offering a simple dinner for children as part of the program might alleviate some stress for parents. Stay-at-home parents and parents with non-standard hours or job flexibility may prefer daytime meetings. As a practitioner, it's important to schedule meetings that do not conflict with school pick-up or drop-off times in case families have older children. On the other hand, scheduling a meeting to start shortly after school drop-off can be good timing for some parents.

Very small groups (five or fewer people, for example) have the advantage of giving parents lots of one-on-one attention from the practitioner. Still, it might feel awkward if the parents do not connect or have common experiences. Larger groups often include a wider range of perspectives and experiences, which can give parents more people to connect with and more ideas when problem-solving, but practitioners may need to manage the clock more directly to avoid running out of time for everyone to participate. Many practitioners have a favorite group size, for example, eight to ten parents in a group.

It is important to know your audience and market accordingly. For example, in some areas, families prefer messaging apps to email. Posters can be helpful if parents are already in the building, such as a school, community center, or health care facility. Newsletters from trusted organizations can be a great way to get the word out about a new program, but many families are overwhelmed with email and do not open online newsletters. Word of mouth and one-on-one referrals can be most effective. Simple registration processes and low-cost or free initial programs work well.



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Shift your thinking from what you'll be doing in your program to why you are doing this program.

## Creating a Warm and Welcoming Environment

Consider your space and how it will make parents and children feel as they enter.

- Bright colors create a fun atmosphere, and pastels or muted tones are more calming.
- Pictures of parents and children having fun together can be welcoming if a wide range of families are represented.
- Fathers and other caregivers should be represented as much as mothers.
- When you walk into the setting, imagine whether parents from various backgrounds will feel that this program celebrates and respects them.
- Avoid harsh fluorescent overhead lights, especially for groups that include sleeping infants. Add floor lamps to warm up the space.
- Many practitioners play music as parents arrive. Consider the desired tone when choosing the music.
- The ritual of getting a cup of coffee or tea can encourage informal chatting, which may help break the ice as people settle into their seats.

“I have some statements of equity that I want them to be considering as they’re planning for an event. I have “Who are the people that are benefiting from this event? Who might feel marginalized by this event or may not be able to partake? What are some barriers, and how can we eliminate them? So, pretty simple things. But again, that’s been some good role modeling.”

– Jenny H., Works with a school parent advisory group, Minnesota

- Try having parents sit in a circle so they can see each other rather than in chairs facing the front of the room.
- If parents sit around a table, name tents can be easier to read than nametags.
- Some practitioners have a quote or a question for parents to consider, write about, or discuss while they wait for the group to start.
- Parents may appreciate an area where they can browse resources and pick up hand-outs to take home. Busy parents may need help keeping track of hand-outs as they juggle children, diaper bags, or backpacks. Having a QR code that parents can scan to access handouts can be helpful for tech-reliant parents.

## Opening a Session with Parents

Some groups are formed around a specific curriculum, whereas others use “topic finders” or interest surveys to find out what parents are most excited to discuss. Either way, spending some time helping a group get to know each other will contribute to better connections and conversations across time. Asking parents to introduce themselves can be a good way to start the first session, but be aware of putting parents on the spot by asking them to share information they may not be ready to share with the group. For example, asking parents of newborns to share their birth stories can be isolating for an adoptive, step, or foster parent. Parents may prefer to let their stories unfold over time. Confidentially ask parents about their preferences for the session, ensuring you can read and respond accordingly. Integrate methods to offer parents an automatic out. For instance, provide choices during sessions like, “Share a happy childhood memory or something else you’d like us to know.”

Be cautious of language that might indicate you are making assumptions about family structure, whether someone has a partner, or the partner’s gender if there is one. Try to be inclusive in the use of language. For example, do not assume that the parent who brings a child to a group is the child’s biological parent, but also don’t assume that they are not biologically related just because they do not look alike. Depending on the age of the children involved,

asking them to introduce you to the adult they brought with them can be a way to gather information about the language they use to describe their family relationships. Parents can feel unseen or discounted when practitioners make assumptions about their family relationships, and a parent who has a negative experience in the first session may not return.

Create consistent welcoming opening and optimistic closing rituals. Many practitioners open each group session with a consistent activity such as sharing “joys and concerns,” “three things I’m grateful for,” or “a rose (something good that happened this week), a bud (something I’m looking forward to) and a thorn (something that was not good).” Closing the group with “one thing that you will take with you as you leave” or “one thing that you will try at home this week” can help cement key learnings and take-home messages. Creating a rhythm that is repeated each week helps parents know what to expect and feel more comfortable.

## Group Agreements

As parenting practitioners, fostering belonging in groups by creating shared norms and expectations for group interactions is important. Group agreements are also known as participation guidelines, ground rules, community expectations, group contracts, and codes of conduct. Regardless of the title, these agreements aim to set the tone, address interpersonal dynamics, establish shared understandings between group members, and provide the support needed to deepen group engagement. Here are some tips for developing group agreements.

- **Make it a shared activity:** After the group has gotten to know each other, you can invite parents to create group agreements together. If you are pressed for time, you can generate some items for the agreements in advance and then ask the group to add, subtract, and/or reword the items.
- **Be mindful of power dynamics:** If the group perceives that you, the parenting practitioner, have most of the power, they may want to avoid questioning or changing items the leader proposes. Similarly, if there are perceived power differentials between group members, some group members may feel uncomfortable speaking up. You can make it clear that everyone is an equal participant in the process. One strategy for doing this is to ask everyone to write one item for the group agreements on a sticky note and put them up where it

is easy to rearrange the ones that overlap. Online groups can easily do this using readily available collaboration tools.

- **Create shared understanding:** Group agreements need to be sufficiently broad so that they will apply to a wide range of group interactions but not so broad that they are interpreted differently by each person. For example, “everyone participates” is commonly used. What does it mean in the context of your group? Does that mean that everyone must talk? Engagement can look different for different people, and silence can be active listening rather than a sign of disengagement. Taking time to create a shared understanding of the group agreement will make it most useful.
- **Remind the group of the agreements:** The group agreements should be displayed in the meeting space and revisited periodically, for example, when a new member joins or visits the group. If group membership changes every session, it might be necessary to point to the group agreements at the beginning of each session. A low-barrier way of getting everyone to engage at the start of a group meeting is to invite parents to name a part of the agreements they will focus on that day.

New groups tend to be polite and “on their best behavior.” As group members get to know each other, they feel more comfortable disagreeing or contradicting each other, which can deepen the discussions.<sup>9</sup> It can be a good idea to revisit the group agreements as group interactions evolve.

## Handling Emotions

Parenting is an emotional topic, and practitioners can build up skills to handle emotions in the group. Every parent has their own style and comfort level when it comes to talking about feelings. Some find it easy and natural, while others might feel shy or uncomfortable, especially in groups where big emotions run high. One way to prepare for emotions is to invite them into the room by setting the stage at the beginning of the session. Let people know that the topic might stir up emotional responses and that sharing emotions is welcome.<sup>10</sup> Have boxes of tissue available and point them out to help people feel permission to express sadness or other emotions in the group. Discuss with parents that they might feel angry or hurt watching

a particular video or reading a case study and that there will be time and space to process their feelings so that they know you will be a supportive guide for them to engage with difficult topics. Experiencing deep emotions can help enhance learning, and watching others get emotional about a topic can help parents practice empathy. Practitioners can support empathic listening by naming the emotions in the room (see chapter 3).

## Navigating Disagreements

Parenting is deeply personal based on many factors, like individual personalities, experiences in families of origin, culture, religious beliefs, current family structure, family dynamics, and knowledge of child development. What works for one family may not work for every family. Promoting an atmosphere where differences are welcomed and accepted is important.<sup>11</sup> You can nurture less widely held opinions in order to help the group feel comfortable exploring a wide range of ideas and perspectives. Asking, “Does anyone have an alternative point of view?” or “Let’s hear from someone who has tried something different” shows that a variety of perspectives are valued. If a small number of people do all of the talking, you can redirect by asking, “Will someone who has not already spoken share an idea or opinion?”

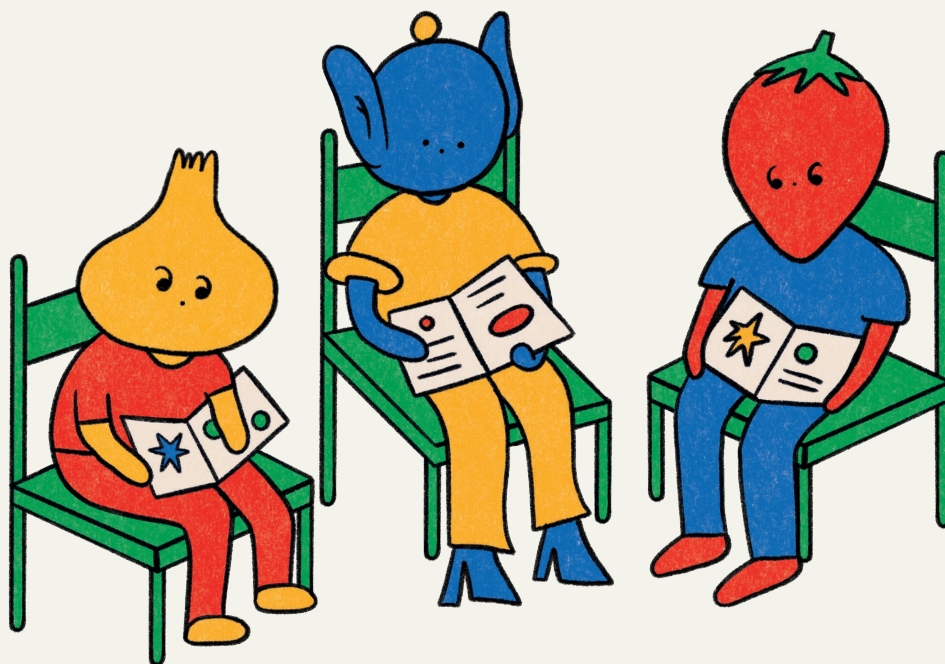
Conflicts will sometimes arise. Sometimes you can simply suggest that group members agree to disagree and move on. This can work well when the topic is outside the scope of the group or goes against the group agreements. However, this approach can leave some parents feeling dissatisfied or shut down. Rather than avoid the conflict, you can shine a light on it. Acknowledging strong feelings, taking time to hear multiple perspectives, and finding areas of agreement can all help diffuse the situation. You can model civil discourse even when you feel worked up or dysregulated yourself. Encouraging parents to pause by saying, “Let’s all take a deep breath and take a few moments to reflect before we continue,” calms things down and models mindfulness (see chapter 4). Going around the group and asking each person to briefly share a word or phrase that describes how they are feeling in the moment also helps everyone feel heard and supported.

If one person consistently dominates the group discussion or makes inappropriate comments, approach that person individually before or after a session and talk about what is underlying their behavior. For example, you can show curiosity by gently saying, “I’ve noticed that you seem to be having strong reactions that have made ‘sharing the air’ with other people in our group out of balance recently. Can you tell me about how you have been feeling in our group

lately?” Some people talk a lot when they feel out of control, are nervous or uncomfortable with long pauses or silence. They may not be aware of how their behavior affects others in the group. New practitioners might feel nervous about starting a tough conversation with parents, but having a caring, understanding talk can make a difference. It lets struggling parents know they’re understood and valued and boosts the group’s dynamics. Ultimately, it is probably worth the initial discomfort.

## Ongoing Facilitation Skills

Great facilitators learn to read the group, which is generally accomplished by listening more than talking.<sup>12</sup> An experienced practitioner intuitively knows when to let a conversation keep going and when to jump in. New practitioners often over-rely on talking and giving information as a way to maintain order in the group. Practitioners are encouraged to become very comfortable waiting for group members to respond without filling the silence with chatter. They also need to feel at ease with their material and have plenty of creative ideas at hand. This will allow them to let the group take the lead and know they can guide things back on track if needed. This is an acquired skill that takes time to develop. Take time for self-reflection, learn from your mistakes, and practice self-compassion (see chapter 5). Remember, even experienced practitioners have off days. Keeping a journal or debriefing with a mentor or colleague can also be helpful.







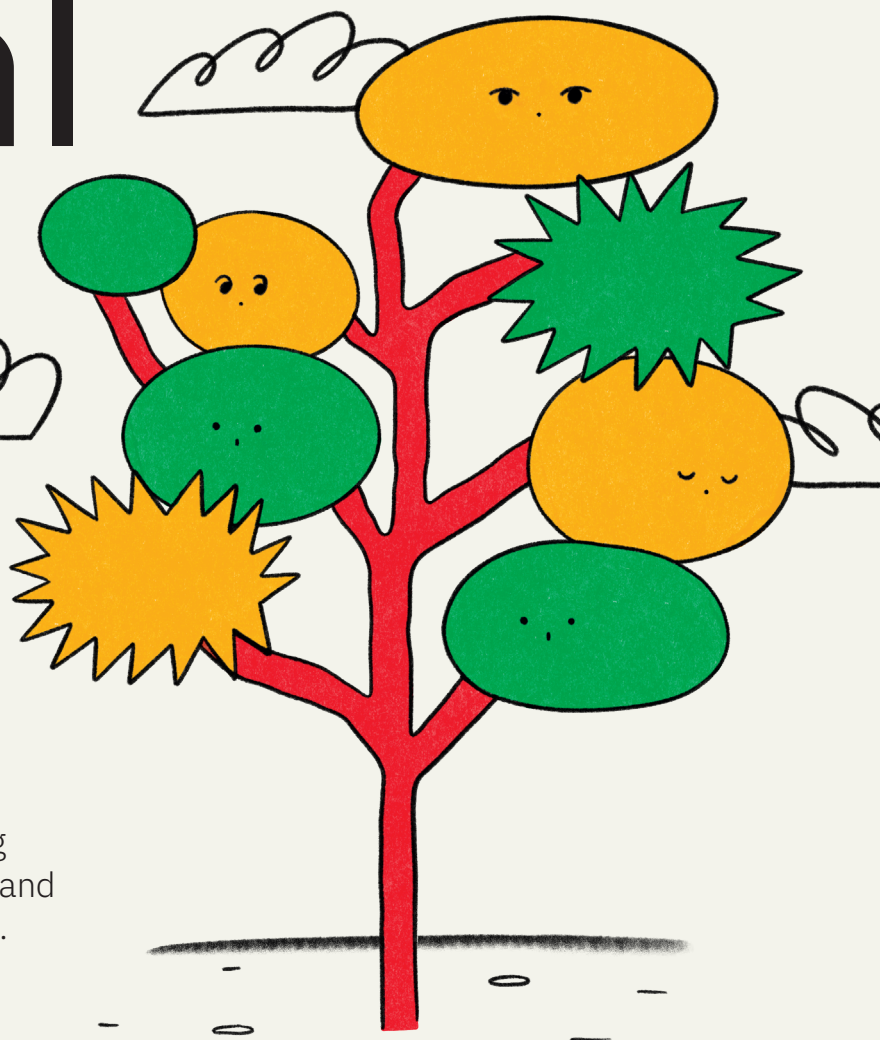
# hand outs

Printable  
Take-Home  
Resources for  
Parents





# social con- nec- tion



Social connection encompasses our feelings of closeness to others during interactions and within relationships and our sense of belonging within groups.

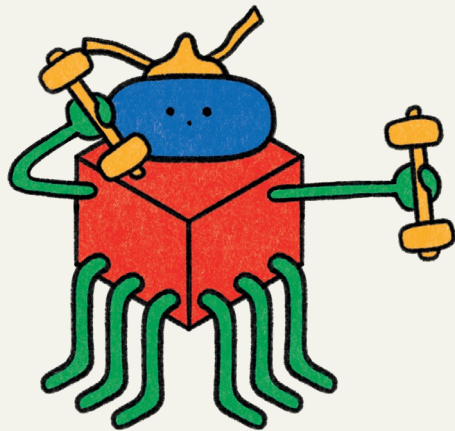
## Reflection Questions for Parents

Reflect on the following statements<sup>1</sup> and consider how much you agree or disagree with the statements as well as opportunities for growth in your social connections?

- There are several people that I can talk to when I feel lonely.
- I interact with people who make me feel like part of a larger community.
- There are people I can turn to for advice

## Why cultivate social connections?

Decades of research<sup>2</sup> have shown that people with stronger social connections tend to live longer compared to those with weaker social connections. Social support<sup>3</sup> for parents leads to greater emotional well-being and resilience in both parents and children. Yet, about one-third of parents<sup>4</sup> feel chronically lonely, which can be detrimental to both our well-being and the well-being of our children.



### Practices to Help Parents Foster Social Connections

**Feeling Connected:**  
A writing exercise to foster connection and kindness



Research suggests that reflecting on feelings of connection can increase people’s motivation to help others. Helping others can, in turn, increase happiness and improve relationships.

**Savoring Moments of Connection with Kids:**  
Reflect on caring memories to feel closer



Remembering a positive experience with your child can help you hold on to feelings of connection with your child that can become an enduring reservoir of positivity that you can dip into when you’re under parenting stress.

### Why support children and teens in cultivating social connections?

Our early childhood experiences with social connection can profoundly impact our lives.

Children who experience more loving relationships with their parents also tend to be more compassionate and helpful<sup>5</sup> toward others later in life.

Securely attached children tend to have higher self-worth,<sup>6</sup> show better self-control,<sup>7</sup> and perform better in school.<sup>8</sup>

Having just one friend can help children be more invested in their schoolwork and protect them from being bullied.<sup>9</sup>

### Practices to Help Children Foster Social Connections

**36 Questions to Help Kids Make Friends:**  
Help children to build closeness.



Knowing how to talk to others in a way that fosters genuine connection and paves the way for real friendship—particularly with those different from us—is a valuable life skill.

### Read More About Cultivating Social Connection in *Greater Good*



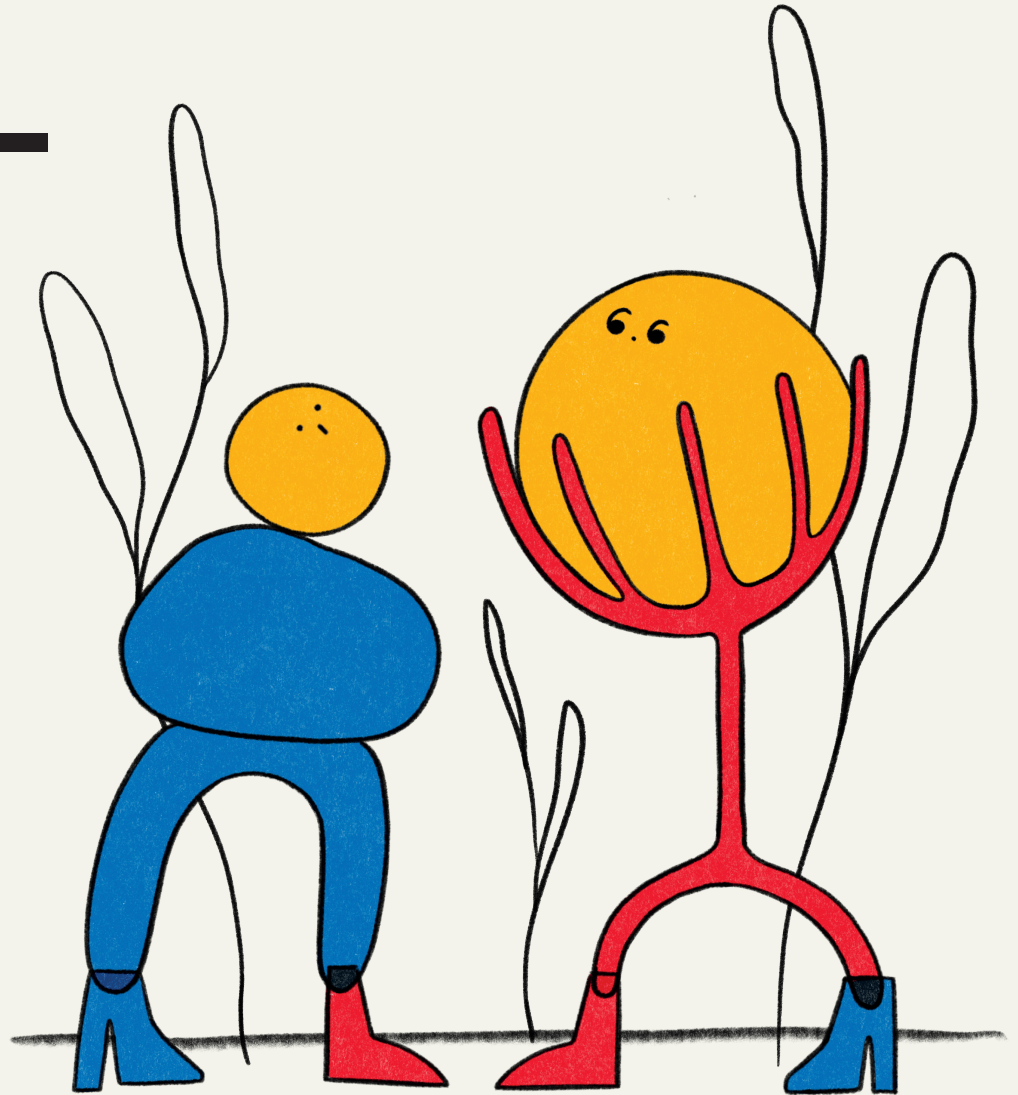
**Six Ways to Help Your Child Deal with Social Exclusion**

Though parents may feel powerless when a child is excluded, there is much they can do to help with this painful experience.



# em- pa- thy

Empathy is the ability to sense other people's emotions and imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling.



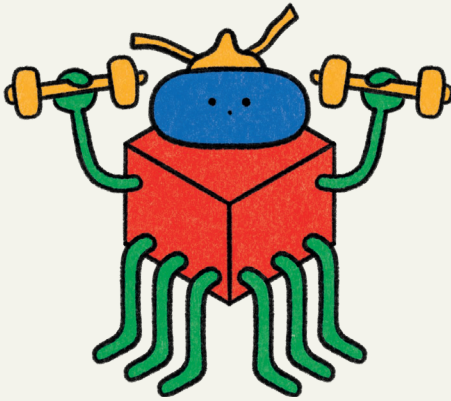
## Reflection Questions for Parents

Reflect on the following statements<sup>1</sup> and consider how much you agree or disagree with the statements as well as opportunities for growth in your empathy towards others.

- I easily feel sad when the people around me feel sad.
- Before criticizing somebody, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place.
- I find that I am “in tune” with other people’s moods.

## Why cultivate empathy?

Empathy helps parents understand their child’s perspective and anticipate their needs. Adolescents with more empathic parents are better able to regulate their emotions. What’s more, parents with greater empathy tend to have greater self-esteem and life purpose than parents with less empathy.<sup>2</sup>



## Practices to Help Parents Foster Empathy

**Active Listening: Connect with someone through empathy and understanding.**



Active listening helps listeners better understand others' perspectives and helps speakers feel more understood and less threatened.<sup>3</sup> This technique can prevent miscommunication and spare hurt feelings on both sides. Active listening can make relationships more enduring and satisfying by improving communication and preventing arguments from escalating.

**Read More About Cultivating Empathy in Greater Good. Six Ways to Respond to Your Kids' Big Feelings**



When adults help children feel heard, it helps everyone feel less distressed and more calm.

## Why support children and teens in cultivating empathy?

Research suggests that teaching children empathy skills helps them socially and morally.

Studies<sup>4</sup> have found that empathy decreases bullying and aggression among kids and makes them kinder and more inclusive toward their peers.

With more empathy, kids may be more willing to help and share with others—one type of empathic response—which can foster greater social competence and positive relationships.<sup>5</sup>

## Practices to Help Children and Teens Foster Empathy

**Talk With Kids About Emotions: Labeling feelings can help elicit your child's empathy and generosity.**



When adults label the emotions of others, children can make sense of internal experiences that people may be having that are not obvious on the surface.

**Listening to Teens With Love: Create a warm, non-judgmental space for teens to talk.**



When teens can rely on parents to be good listeners, they feel a sense of freedom and confidence in their capacity for self-expression and a greater sense of connection with their parents.





# mind- ful- ness

Mindfulness invites us to become the observer of moment-to-moment awareness of our thoughts, emotions, physical sensations, and surrounding environment with curiosity and kindness.

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## Reflection Questions for Parents

Reflect on the following statements<sup>1</sup> and consider how much you agree or disagree with the statements as well as opportunities for becoming more mindful.

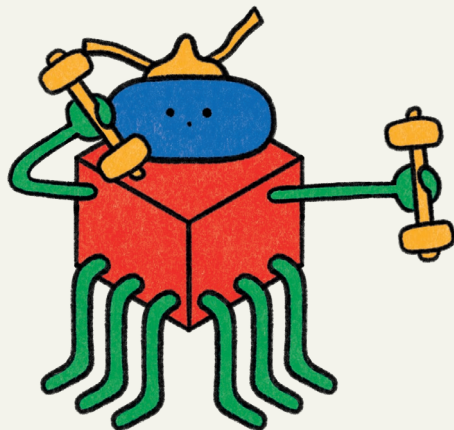
- I am aware of what thoughts are passing through my mind.
- I notice changes inside my body, like my heart beating faster or my muscles getting tense.
- I am aware of thoughts that arise when my mood changes.




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## Why cultivate mindfulness?

Mindfulness can also help support parental resilience and well-being, which has downstream benefits for children. More mindful parents of preschoolers<sup>2</sup> have less parenting stress, depression, and anxiety. Parents who engage in more mindful parenting also share more positive emotions during difficult conversations with their adolescent<sup>3</sup> children, and their children are less likely to use drugs or have anxiety, depression, or act out.<sup>4</sup>



### Practices to Help Parents Foster Mindfulness

**Mindful Breathing: A way to build resilience to stress, anxiety, and anger.**



The impact of stress, anger, and anxiety extends beyond our health, affecting our ability to focus and make sound judgments. Mindfulness offers a solution by fostering attentive awareness of our thoughts, emotions, and sensations in the present moment, free from judgment.

**Read More About Cultivating Mindfulness in Greater Good**



### Can Living in the Moment Make You a Better Parent?

According to research, mindfulness may lead to a happier, healthier parenting experience.

### Why support children and teens in cultivating mindfulness?

Children of all ages can benefit from mindfulness practices.

More mindful elementary school-aged children were less negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>5</sup>

More mindful adolescents have a higher pain tolerance<sup>6</sup> and are less likely to struggle with internet “addiction.”<sup>7</sup>

More mindful college students are better able to bounce back from academic challenges.<sup>8</sup>

### Practices to Help Children and Teens Foster Mindfulness

**Raisin Mindfulness: Cultivating mindfulness, easing stress, and savoring simple joys.**



Being more attuned to the sensations of eating can heighten children’s enjoyment of their meals and foster more profound gratitude for the chance to satisfy their hunger. Mindfulness activities offer children a means to recognize and relish the simple joys of everyday life.

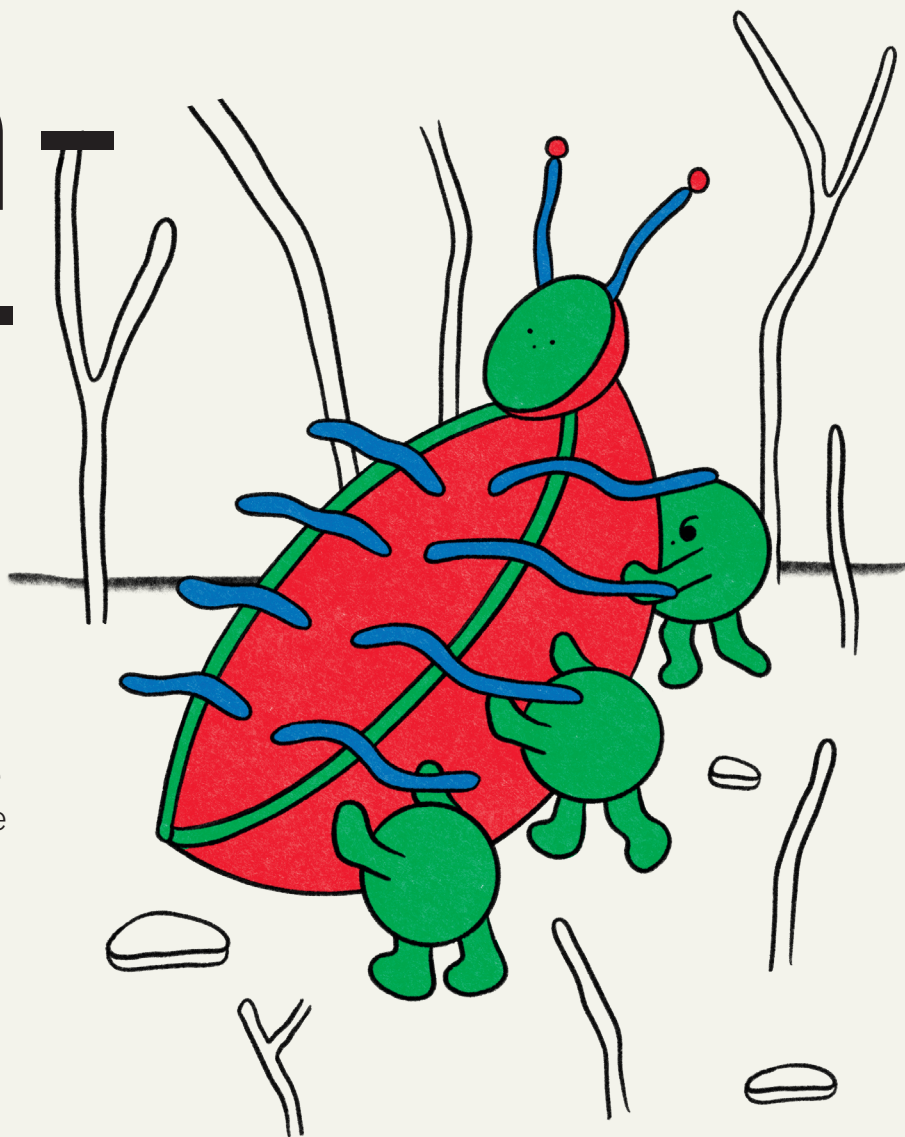
**Walking Meditation: Turn an everyday action into a mindfulness and stress reduction tool.**



Through heightened awareness of mental and physical states, walking meditation—similar to mindfulness overall—can empower us with greater control over our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, enabling us to respond more constructively to negative thoughts or feelings.



# com- pas- sion



Compassion means “to suffer together.” Among emotion researchers, it is defined as the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another’s suffering and feel motivated to relieve that suffering.

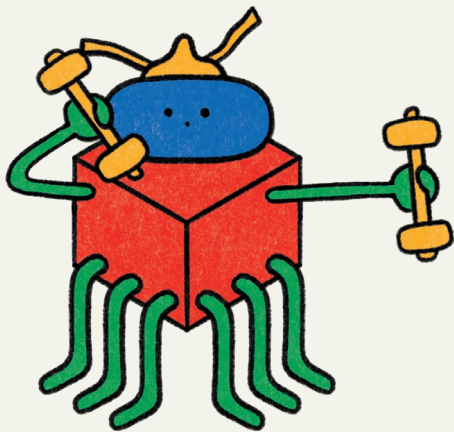
## Reflection Questions for Parents

Reflect on the following statements<sup>1</sup> and consider how much you agree or disagree with the statements as well as opportunities for becoming more compassionate towards yourself.

- When I’m feeling down, I try to approach my feelings with curiosity and openness.
- I’m kind to myself when I’m experiencing suffering.
- I try to see my failings as part of the

## Why cultivate compassion and self-compassion?

Compassionate parenting has psychological benefits for parents, including higher levels of parenting satisfaction and meaning in life.<sup>2</sup> Fostering self-compassion helps parents build their emotional reserves. Parents who practice loving-kindness<sup>3</sup> meditations tend to be calmer, more sympathetic, and less angry and frustrated about com-



## Why support children and teens in cultivating compassion and self-compassion?

Children who experience more loving relationships with their parents also tend to be more compassionate and helpful<sup>4</sup> toward others later in life.

Self-compassion is particularly important for teens and can help protect them against trauma,<sup>5</sup> peer victimization,<sup>6</sup> depression and self-harm,<sup>7</sup> perfectionism,<sup>8</sup> low self-esteem,<sup>9</sup> and climate anxiety.<sup>10</sup>

## Practices to Help Parents Foster Compassion and Self-Compassion

**Feeling Supported:** Recalling how others have comforted us can make us more compassionate.



Reflecting on the people in our life who love and support us can increase our feelings of security and also remind us of the qualities we want to embody when supporting others.

**Fierce Self-Compassion Break:** Cultivate the clarity and courage to protect yourself from harm.



When adults help children feel heard, it helps everyone feel less distressed and more calm.

## Practices to Help Children and Teens Foster Compassion and Self-Compassion

**Loving-Kindness Meditation:** Strengthen feelings of kindness and connection toward others



Loving-kindness meditation increases happiness in part by making people feel more connected to others—to loved ones, acquaintances, and even strangers

**Pleasant Events Calendar for Kids:** Help children cultivate self-compassion by planning enjoyable activities.



Like adults, children experience stress that feels overwhelming at times. Research suggests that taking care of and being kind to themselves can help adolescents reduce stress and increase feelings of curiosity and gratitude.

## Read More About Cultivating Self-Compassion in *Greater Good*

**Self-Compassion for Parents**

Do you beat up on yourself for being a bad parent? There's an alternative.





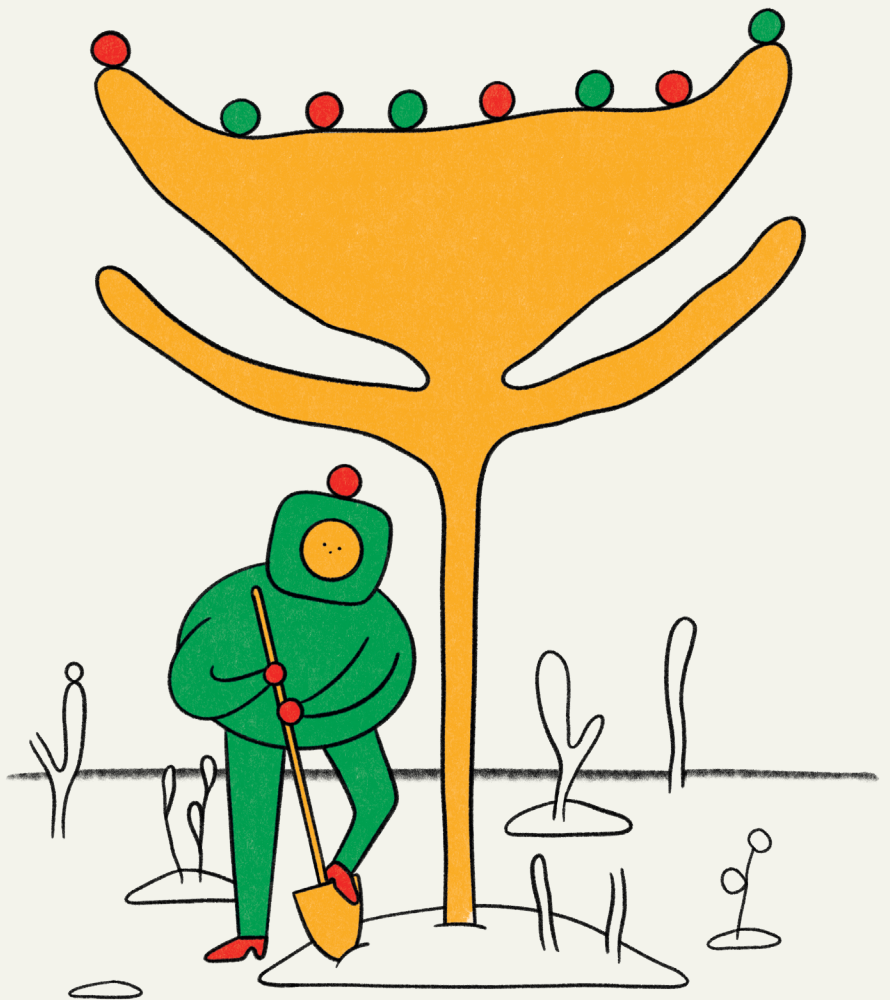
# pur- pose

Purpose is an abiding intention to achieve a long-term goal that is both personally meaningful and makes a positive mark on the world, potentially changing the lives of others.

## Reflection Questions for Parents

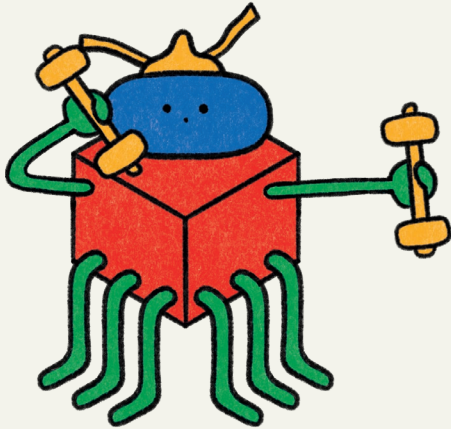
Reflect on the following statements<sup>1</sup> and consider how much you agree or disagree with the statements as well as opportunities for developing a greater sense of purpose.

- I know how to use my talents to contribute meaningfully to the larger world.
- I understand what it is that makes my life feel worthwhile.
- I put effort into making my goals a reality.



## Why cultivate purpose?

Having a sense of purpose can help parents sustain their energy and be persistent when times are tough. Fostering a sense of purpose may also make parents healthier. Parents tend to have a greater sense of purpose than non-parents. What's more, people with a greater sense of purpose tend to engage in healthier behaviors, like eating well and exercising.



## Practices to Help Parents Foster Purpose

**Life Crafting: Sharpen your sense of purpose by defining and committing to your goals.**



By reflecting on your present and future life, this practice can help you make sense of your priorities in life, better articulate the values and passions that are important to you personally, and also possibly contribute to the wider world.

**Reflect on Your Purpose as a Parent: Connect with your sense of purpose in your parenting by writing a short reflection.**



This short reflection helps parents recenter themselves by allowing them to remember just how meaningful their role is and how well-aligned it is to what matters to them.

## Why support children and teens in cultivating purpose?

While early life may set the stage for finding a purpose, the process really begins when we're teens as we explore who we are, what we value, and what we want out of life.

Only about one in five teens has a strong sense of purpose.<sup>2</sup>

Youth who have a sense of purpose tend to have greater coping skills, resilience, and well-being.<sup>3</sup> As they get older, more purposeful adults have better physical and psychological health, including better sleep, less chronic pain, less depression and anxiety, greater life satisfaction, and even a longer life.<sup>4</sup>

Mentorship is an important part of the process of discovering a sense of purpose, as children often need inspiration. Adults can support children in identifying how to best use their talents and provide encouragement to motivate them to move forward with their commitments.<sup>5</sup>

## Practice to Help Teens Foster a Sense of Purpose

**Talk with Teens about Purpose: Help adolescents start exploring and reflecting on meaningful life goals.**



Research shows that a sense of purpose can develop from early experiences that trigger ever-growing commitments in life.<sup>6</sup> These initial commitments do not have to be particularly noteworthy; what's important is that children identify a cause they are interested in or ways their talents can be used for the greater good.

## Read More About Cultivating Purpose in Greater Good

### Five Ways to Foster Purpose in Adolescents



Research suggests that young people rarely have a sense of purpose—but we can take steps to help them cultivate it.









# Refer- ences



Parenting For  
The Greater Good

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# Welcome

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Chapter 02

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Chapter 03

# Empathy

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Part One.

Chapter 05

# Compassion

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Part One.  
Chapter 06

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# Purpose

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Chapter 7.

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Part Two.

Chapter 9

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Part Two.  
Chapter 10

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Part Two.  
Chapter 11

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