

Meditating Mothers and Fathers: Long-term Meditators' Perceptions of the Influences of
Mindfulness on Parenting

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Abstract

While there is a growing body of research to expand our theoretical and conceptual understanding of the multi-faceted construct mindfulness, the majority of studies have thus far focused on the efficacy of short-term mindfulness-based interventions to mitigate symptoms associated with myriad physiological and psychological conditions. Research investigating the relational effects of mindfulness within families is limited. This qualitative study examined eight long-term meditators' perceptions of how their mindfulness practice influenced their parenting behavior. Using thematic analysis, the central themes to emerge included (1) increased communication skills, (2) decreased emotional reactivity, (3) increased perspective-taking, and (4) greater self-understanding. Limitations of the study as well as future research and clinical implications are also discussed.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Problem and Its Setting

Eastern philosophy intersected with Western science over thirty years ago when Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn and colleagues at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center introduced mindfulness meditation to behavioral medicine through the development of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program. Initially developed as a self-regulation strategy to help individuals manage chronic pain and stress-related disorders, as well as promote well-being, MBSR is a manualized 8-10 week, group-based program that integrates mindfulness techniques, including sitting and standing meditations, body scans, and hatha yoga (Kabat-Zinn, 1982). MBSR has influenced the development of other mindfulness-based interventions and therapeutic modalities. Referred to as MBSR's kissing cousin, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) blends elements of mindfulness training from MBSR with cognitive-behavioral therapy techniques to intervene in negative thought and rumination cycles in individuals predisposed to chronic depression (Teasdale et al., 2000). Furthermore, Carson, Carson, Gil, and Baucom (2004) adapted the MBSR program and developed a mindfulness-based intervention to enhance the relationships of nondistressed couples. In addition to stand-alone interventions, mindfulness components have also made their way into Western behavioral therapies including dialectical behavior therapy (DBT: Linehan, 1993), acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT: Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999) and relapse prevention (RP: Marlatt & Gordon, 1985).

Mindfulness is a complex theoretical construct and there is no one agreed upon definition or conceptualization in the current research. Kabat-Zinn (1994) proposes that "mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally" (p. 4). Brown and Ryan (2003) suggest, "mindfulness can be considered an

enhanced attention to and awareness of current experience or present reality” (p. 822). Bishop and colleagues (2004) offer a two-component operational definition of mindfulness:

The first component involves the self-regulation of attention so that it is maintained on immediate experience, thereby allowing for increased recognition of mental events in the present moment. The second component involves adopting a particular orientation toward one’s experiences in the present moment, an orientation that is characterized by curiosity, openness, and acceptance (p. 232).

Common to these definitions is “what” to focus on, the present moment, and “how” to focus on the present moment, in a nonjudgmental, curious, open and accepting manner (Dimidjian & Linehan, 2003). State mindfulness develops through consistent formal practice as well as by “being mindful” in everyday experiences (Bishop et al., 2004). “In state mindfulness, thoughts and feelings are observed as events in the mind, without over-identifying with them and without reacting to them in an automatic, habitual pattern of reactivity” (Bishop et al., 2004, p. 232).

Research into the application of mindfulness-based interventions to treat physical and psychological problems in clinical and non-clinical populations has burgeoned within the last decade (Baer, 2003). Despite methodological flaws, research suggests that mindfulness is efficacious in reducing symptoms associated with chronic pain, psoriasis, fibromyalgia, and cancer (Kabat-Zinn, 1982; Kabat-Zinn et al., 1998; Kabat-Zinn, Lipworth, Burney, & Sellers, 1987; Kaplan, Goldenberg, & Galvin-Nadeau, 1993; Miller, Fletcher, & Kabat-Zinn, 1995; Speca, Carlson, Goodey, & Angen, 2000). Research also indicates that mindfulness promotes psychological well-being (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Mindfulness has been shown to be beneficial in the treatment of anxiety and panic disorder, substance abuse, binge eating disorder, borderline

personality disorder, and relapse in major depression (Bowen et al., 2006; Kabat-Zinn et al., 1992; Kristeller & Hallett, 1999; Linehan, Armstrong, Suarez, Allmon, & Heard, 1991; Teasdale et al., 2000).

The majority of research thus far has focused on the efficacy of mindfulness as a therapeutic intervention for myriad physiological and psychological conditions (Baer, 2003; Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004). Few studies, however, have explored how mindfulness may impact interpersonal relationships. While there is limited research on the effects of mindfulness on couple relationships, preliminary evidence suggests that mindfulness training positively affects romantic relationship well-being and marital satisfaction (Barnes, Brown, Krusemark, Campbell, & Rogge, 2007; Burpee & Langer, 2005). A small number of relational-based mindfulness studies with couples have emerged, which provide insight into mindfulness and relational variables (Carson et al., 2004; Pruitt & McCollum, 2010; Wachs & Cordova, 2007). Carson and colleagues developed a mindfulness-based intervention for non-distressed couples, which was successful at “favorably impacting couples’ levels of relationship satisfaction, autonomy, relatedness, closeness, acceptance of one another, and relationship distress” (p. 471). Moreover, research by Wachs and Cordova found that “mindfulness contributes to greater intimate relationship satisfaction by fostering more relationally skillful emotion repertoires” (p. 464). Mindfulness was also described as lessening emotional reactivity in couple relationships (Pruitt & McCollum, 2010). The findings from the studies on mindfulness and couples’ relationships suggest that mindfulness increases 1) partners’ stress coping skills, 2) identification and communication of emotions, 3) regulation of anger reactivity, 4) connectedness, and 5) empathy (Carson et al., 2004; Pruitt & McCollum, 2010;

Wachs & Cordova, 2007). In addition, there seems to be a linear relationship between treatment outcomes and consistency of mindfulness practice.

Mindfulness research is beginning to incorporate families and children. Current mindfulness and parenting research focuses on mindfulness-based parenting intervention efficacy with different populations. Preliminary results suggest that mindfulness increases parenting satisfaction and children's pro-social behavior and reduces parental stress and child aggression (Singh et al., 2006; Singh et al. 2007). Singh and colleagues (2006) examined whether or not parents of autistic children could decrease their child's negative behaviors through changes in their own behavior and how they interacted with their child. Following mothers' mindfulness training, there was a decrease in the children's maladaptive behaviors. Singh et al. (2007) next extended this work with parents of children with developmental disabilities. The results of this study revealed a decrease in negative behaviors as well as an increase in positive sibling interactions. Moreover, mothers reported an increase in satisfaction with their parenting skills and social interactions with their children. Duncan, Coatsworth, and Greenberg (2009a, 2009b) developed a preventive mindful parenting intervention for parent-adolescent relationships to enhance relationship quality by incorporating mindfulness techniques into an already empirically validated intervention, the Strengthening Families Program: For Parents and Youth 10-14 (SFP: Molgaard & Spoth, 2001). Results of a randomized controlled trial indicated that the parenting program enhanced with mindfulness concepts and activities positively benefited families at risk during the transition to adolescence. (Coatsworth, Duncan, Greenberg, & Nix, 2010).

Research that explores the relational effects of mindfulness within family relationships is limited to a handful of outcome studies and little is known about how mindfulness influences

parenting behavior. Effective parenting practices involve a combination of high demandingness and responsiveness (Maccoby & Martin, 1983); however, parenting stress may affect parental psychological well-being. Deater-Deckard (1998) defines parenting stress as “the aversive psychological reaction to the demands of being a parent” which “is experienced as negative feelings toward the self and toward the child or children” (p. 315). High levels of parenting stress are not only associated with negative parental well-being but also dysfunctional parenting behavior and negative child outcomes, including deviant child development and child psychopathology (Abidin, 1995). Since parenting stress and parenting practices are associated with parental well-being and child development, interventions aimed at decreasing parental stress and developing effective parenting practices have the potential to reduce emotional and behavioral problems in both adults and children. Thus far, parenting interventions have been predominantly cognitive-behavior based and skills oriented. Whereas cognitive-behavioral techniques are designed to change negative patterns of thinking, mindfulness training invites individuals to change how they relate to their thoughts and feelings (Hayes, 2005). For example, mindfulness practice trains individuals to experience their thoughts as “just thoughts,” instead of absolute truths and to understand that negative thoughts are not necessarily accurate or useful (Baer, 2003). Mindfulness meditation may offer an alternative to traditional parenting interventions and further investigation is warranted.

Interest in mindfulness and families is beginning to emerge and preliminary mindfulness-based intervention research suggests that mindfulness positively influences parent-child interactions (Coatsworth et al., 2010; Singh et al., 2006; Singh et al., 2007); however, these studies target families at risk and families with children with behavioral issues. Moreover, these studies are short-term interventions with beginners who have practiced mindfulness for short

periods of time. Little is known about the long-term effects of mindfulness on parenting behavior and how mindfulness mechanisms operate within parent-child relationships. Formal mindfulness meditation practice may be beneficial to mediate parenting stress, since research indicates that mindfulness practice reduces stress and anxiety (Astin 1997; Kabat-Zinn et al., 1992; Miller et al., 1995; Shapiro, Schwartz, & Bonner, 1998) and increases psychological well-being (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Moreover, mindfulness may also positively influence parental responsiveness and sensitivity. When attention is focused on the present moment, parents may be better able to accurately perceive their child's emotional cues as well as listen more fully when their child is speaking to discern a greater richness and understanding of their child's experience. This, in turn, may influence the parent's capacity to respond promptly and appropriately to their child's needs. Parental responsiveness and sensitivity may also be influenced if parents approach their children in a non-judgmental, open, accepting and curious manner, as they do their own thoughts and feelings during formal mindfulness practice. When parents needs and expectations conflict with their child's, present-moment awareness may enable parents to disidentify with their thoughts and feelings so that they may choose how to respond to their child, rather than becoming reactive (Kabat-Zinn & Kabat-Zinn, 1997). Through mindfulness meditation, parents may also learn how to accept and manage themselves rather than trying to change their child's behavior. In addition, one may expect that the positive affects of mindfulness training for couples, such as increased empathy development, closeness, acceptance as well as distress reduction and less reactivity would be similar for parents who practice mindfulness meditation, however, there is a lack of research to support this hypothesis.

The descriptive perspectives of long-term meditators have been incorporated within relatively few, current research studies. Experienced meditators are believed to possess enhanced

capacities in the following areas: attentional control, sense withdrawal, lucidity, emotional intelligence, equanimity, and moral maturity (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). Long-term meditators may, therefore, provide insights into how mindfulness influences parenting behavior as well as mindfulness mechanisms that operate in parent-child relationships. To fill the gap in the current mindfulness and parenting literature, the current study uses qualitative design and methods to gather long-term meditators' perceptions of how their mindfulness practice influences their parenting behavior.

Significance

Over the years, there has been an increasing interest in mindfulness research. A title search of mindfulness in peer-reviewed journal articles in the PsycInfo database returned nearly eight hundred results. The majority of research thus far has focused on the intrapsychic affects of mindfulness and its efficacy as a therapeutic intervention for myriad individual physiological and psychological conditions. Few studies, however, have explored the relational effects of mindfulness, which may prove valuable to creating a more integral understanding of the construct. A small number of relational-based mindfulness interventions for couples and families have emerged, which provide insight into mindfulness and relational variables but further investigation is necessary. Furthermore, there is limited qualitative information in this area. This study, therefore, seeks to fill the gap in the relational mindfulness literature by understanding long-term meditators' perceptions of how mindfulness influences their parenting using qualitative phenomenological methodology. Furthermore, Shapiro, Walsh, and Britton (2003) call for researchers to clearly delineate among meditation styles in research since "most likely, different techniques have overlapping but by no means equal effects" and "there will be both general and specific effects of different types of meditation" (p. 84). This study will, therefore,

specifically focus on advanced meditators who practice mindfulness meditation.

Long-term meditators were targeted as subjects for this study for a variety of reasons. The descriptive perspectives of experienced meditators have been incorporated within relatively few, current research studies. Research thus far has relied upon data gained from beginners who have practiced mindfulness for short periods of time. Long-term meditators are more experienced than beginning practitioners and are believed to possess enhanced capacities in the following areas: attentional control, sense withdrawal, lucidity, emotional intelligence, equanimity, and moral maturity (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). Walsh and Shapiro suggest, “because of their unusual psychological capacities, meditators may prove to be uniquely valuable subjects. For example, their introspective sensitivity may make them exceptional observers of subjective states and mental processes” (p. 234). Moreover, it is believed that long-term meditators develop through the same stages but more quickly. For these reasons, long-term meditators were selected as participants for this investigation into mindfulness and parenting.

Rationale

This study seeks to explore long-term meditators’ perceptions of mindfulness and parenting using qualitative phenomenological methodology. Qualitative research methods enable the researcher to gather detailed, subjective information through interviews in order to provide a more full and rich understanding of the phenomenon being studied from the individuals’ unique perspectives. Phenomenology was selected as a guiding framework because this study seeks to understand several individuals’ common experience of a phenomenon.

The majority of mindfulness research thus far has utilized quantitative methodologies in order to assess the efficacy of mindfulness-based interventions. While quantitative methodologies are useful to determine whether or not mindfulness is effective, they limit our

understanding of the phenomenon under investigation to objective and quantifiable components. Creswell (2007) states, “to level all individuals to a statistical mean overlooks the uniqueness of individuals in our studies” (p. 40). It is precisely the unique, subjective experiences of experienced mindfulness meditators that this study seeks to capture in order to provide a more comprehensive and integral understanding of the subject under investigation. Qualitative methodology was also selected because this study seeks to further understand the ways in which mindfulness may impact interpersonal relationships and “interactions among people are difficult to capture with existing measures” (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). Furthermore, Shapiro and colleagues (2003) suggest, “the subtlety and depth of meditation experiences do not lend themselves to quantification” (p. 85). Since mindfulness meditation “is inherently experiential, not theoretical” (Gunaratana, 2002, p. 38), qualitative phenomenological methodology was selected to gain a more full picture of mindfulness that may have been overlooked or lost through reduction to component parts in quantitative analysis.

Theoretical Framework

Systems theory and phenomenology were selected to guide the present study. Systems theory provides a framework to understand the relational effects of mindfulness. Phenomenology allows for in-depth descriptions to capture the essence of participants lived experiences.

Systems theory. Systems theory developed out of various fields including biology, cybernetics, and mathematics and was first applied to families through the work of Bateson and colleagues in the 1950s. A foundational assumption of systems theory is that the whole is greater than the sum its part. The whole can be understood through an investigation of the interactions and relationships among the system components, rather than by examining the system parts in isolation (Nichols & Schwartz, 2008). Thus far, the majority of research has focused on the

intrapersonal affects of mindfulness and reducing mindfulness into its component parts. Systems theory was selected as the framework to guide this study since it provides a holistic lens through which to understand the relational effects of mindfulness within the parenting domain.

White and Klein (2002) define a system as “a unit that can be distinguished from and that affects its environment” (p. 124). Living systems, such as families, are considered open systems, which continually interact with their environment. Furthermore, within systems theory it is assumed that system components are interconnected and influence one another (White & Klein, 2002). Resources or information exchanged between an individual and the environment not only impact the individual but also the family system to which the individual belongs. Mindfulness enters the family system from the environment through the meditator. Since elements of a system are interconnected and affect one another, one would assume that mindfulness not only impacts the long-term mindfulness practitioner but also the meditator’s family members and the functioning of the entire family system.

Family system theory posits that changes in one family member will affect the entire family system. Changes experienced by the parent through practicing mindfulness, therefore, have the potential to change child behavior. Cultivating mindfulness through a consistent practice may serve as an avenue to shift how parents relate to themselves and their children, which, ultimately, changes the dynamics and quality of the parent-child relationship. Thus, it is through the parent’s cultivation of mindful awareness that changes in the parent-child relationship may occur.

Phenomenology. Phenomenology allows for multiple realities of a single object, event or situation to provide a rich and textured description of the essence of a phenomenon under investigation. Moreover, phenomenology provides an avenue to investigate “how family

members experience their everyday worlds and how their perceptions of what they experience lead to differing meanings” (Dahl & Boss, 2005, p. 65). For the present study, phenomenology provides a lens through which to access the subjective parenting experiences of long-term mindfulness meditators to expand our understanding of the multi-faceted construct mindfulness. Dahl and Boss explain that “the goal of phenomenological inquiry is to produce a deep, clear, and accurate understanding of the experiences of participants and of the meanings found in or assigned to those experiences” (p. 80). This goal provides a roadmap to guide data collection and analyses for the present study. Interview questions and data analysis will focus on the meaning of the participants lived experiences.

An underlying philosophical assumption of phenomenology is that the researcher is not distinct from the phenomenon under investigation and, thus, cannot be entirely objective (Dahl & Boss, 2005). A subjective “research reality” requires an ongoing “explicit process of self-reflexivity and self-questioning” (Dahl & Boss, 2005, p. 67) when employing phenomenology, since the researcher’s experiences, values and beliefs will affect the development of the research questions and how the data are interpreted. Since “the reality of an object is only perceived within the meaning of the experience of the individual” (Creswell, 2007, p. 59), research participants are viewed as experts of their experience within phenomenology, which helps to position both researcher and participant within the research process (Dahl & Boss, 2005).

Purpose of the Study

Interest in mindfulness and families is beginning to emerge and preliminary mindfulness-based intervention research suggests that mindfulness positively influences parent-child relationships (Coatsworth et al., 2010; Singh et al., 2006; Singh et al., 2007); however, these studies target families at risk and families with children with behavioral issues. Moreover, these

studies utilized short-term interventions with beginners. Little is known about the long-term effects of mindfulness on parenting behavior and the underlying mechanisms of mindfulness within parent-child relationships. Mindfulness training has the potential to influence parenting behavior in a number of ways including increasing parental responsiveness, parental sensitivity, appropriate emotional expression, and empathic development but these possibilities have not yet been explored.

The primary aim of this study is to gain a more rich understanding of the multi-faceted construct mindfulness by collecting and analyzing data on mindfulness and parenting behavior. This study seeks to answer the following, broad research question: How does mindfulness meditation influence the parenting behavior of long-term mindfulness meditators?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This study seeks to contribute to understanding how mindfulness influences the parenting behavior of long-term mindfulness practitioners. This literature review begins with an overview of mindfulness research that is relevant to the present study. Next, effective parenting behavior and parenting practices are discussed. This chapter ends with a section describing how mindfulness meditation may positively affect parenting stress and parenting behavior.

What is Mindfulness?

Throughout the centuries, meditation has been practiced in various forms as part of myriad spiritual traditions, including Buddhism, Chinese Taosit, neo-Confucian, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and indigenous spiritualities (Shapiro et al., 2003). Shapiro and colleagues define meditation as “a family of practices that train attention and awareness, usually with the aim of fostering psychological and spiritual well being and maturity” and can be “used to cultivate specific mental qualities such as concentration and calm, and emotions such as joy, love and compassion” (p. 70-71). There are numerous styles of meditation, however, they are commonly divided into two types: concentration and awareness (Gunaratana, 2002; Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). Concentration practices, such as transcendental meditation (TM), Qiyong Yoga, and Samatha meditations, attempt to focus conscious awareness on a singular object such as a word (mantra), object or sound. In contrast with concentration meditations that narrow attentional focus, awareness-based approaches expand attention (Ivanovski & Malhi, 2007). In awareness-based approaches, attention moves fluidly and the meditator becomes an observer of their transient thoughts, feelings and sensations. The vipassana style, also known as “insight” meditation or mindfulness, is a type of awareness meditation. The purpose of vipassana is “to

give the meditator insight into the nature of reality and an accurate understanding of how everything works” (Gunaratana, 2002, p. 2). Gunaratana explains, “in vipassana meditation we cultivate this special way of seeing life. We train ourselves to see reality exactly as it is, and we call this special mode of perception *mindfulness*” (p. 33).

Mindfulness Research

The Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program continues to be the most widely referenced mindfulness-based clinical intervention (Salmon, Santorelli, & Kabat-Zinn, 1998). MBSR was initially developed as a self-regulation strategy to help individuals manage chronic pain and stress-related disorders as well as promote well-being (Kabat-Zinn, 1982). As of 1997, the program was offered in over 240 hospitals and clinics worldwide (Salmon et al., 1998) and over 18,000 people have completed MBSR training (University of Massachusetts Medical School, n.d.). In a 2-year study with 784 participants, 76% completed the 8-week MBSR program, indicating a high completion rate (Kabat-Zinn & Chapman-Waldrop, 1988).

The Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program has influenced the development of other mindfulness-based interventions. Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) blends elements of mindfulness training from MBSR with cognitive-behavioral therapy techniques. Mindfulness techniques are used to intervene in negative thought and rumination cycles. Research has shown that MBCT is an effective treatment to prevent relapse in individuals predisposed to chronic depression (Teasdale et al., 2000). Furthermore, Carson and colleagues (2004) adapted the MBSR program and developed the Mindfulness-Based Relationship Enhancement Program (MBRE), which research has shown to enrich the relationships of well-functioning, nondistressed couples.

Mindfulness components have also made their way into behavioral therapies including dialectical behavior therapy (DBT: Linehan, 1993) and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT: Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999). Dialectical behavior therapy has been shown to decrease self-harm and suicidal behaviors in individuals with borderline personality disorder (Linehan et al., 1991). The approach is based upon a dialectical worldview with the goal of synthesizing two opposing forces: acceptance and change. “Clients are encouraged to accept themselves, their histories, and their current situations exactly as they are, while working intensively to change their behaviors and environments in order to build a better life” (Baer, 2003, p. 127). Mindfulness techniques are taught in addition to emotional regulation, interpersonal effectiveness, and distress tolerance skills.

At the center of acceptance and commitment therapy is the concept that “human suffering is universal” (Hayes, 2005, p. 10). Rather than trying to work around psychological problems, ACT invites individuals to accept and work through them. This requires “a fundamental change in perspective” and “a shift in the way individuals deal with personal experience” (Hayes, 2005, p. 2). ACT techniques are categorized within three categories, which include mindfulness, acceptance, and values-based living (Hayes, 2005). Mindfulness is taught alongside techniques to decrease cognitive defusion and experiential avoidance. In ACT, mindfulness assists individuals with how they relate to their thoughts and feelings to move them toward living a values-based life.

Mindfulness has garnered a great deal of interest among researchers and has been the focus of numerous studies. Many studies have centered on assessing the efficacy of mindfulness-based interventions. Research suggests that mindfulness may be beneficial in the treatment of various physiological and psychological conditions, including chronic pain (Kabat-Zinn, 1982;

Kabat-Zinn et al., 1987), fibromyalgia (Kaplan et al., 1993), psoriasis (Kabat-Zinn et al., 1998), anxiety and panic disorder (Kabat-Zinn et al., 1992), binge eating disorder (Kristeller & Hallett, 1999) and relapse in major depression (Teasdale et al., 2000).

In addition to studies designed to determine whether or not mindfulness is efficacious for symptom reduction in a variety of disorders, research has also focused on understanding how mindfulness works (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). Psychological mechanisms that may explain how mindfulness mitigates symptoms and affects behavior change include exposure, cognitive change, relaxation, and acceptance (Baer, 2003). Walsh and Shapiro, however, caution that “mechanistic explanations sometimes lend themselves to inappropriate reductionism” and point out “whereas mechanistic explanations attempt to explain phenomena in terms of lower levels of a system, processes can refer to any level and are less susceptible to inappropriate reductionism” (p. 231). Walsh and Shapiro identify two processes of mindfulness: refinement of awareness and disidentification. Refinement of awareness may serve as a precursor to disidentification, which is described as “the process by which awareness (mindfulness) precisely observes, and therefore ceases to identify with, mental content such as thoughts, feelings, and images” (Walsh & Shapiro, p. 232). Similarly, Bishop and colleagues (2004) explain,

We see mindfulness as a process of regulating attention in order to bring a quality of nonelaborative awareness to current experience within an orientation of curiosity, experiential openness, and acceptance. We further see mindfulness as a process of gaining *insight* into the nature of one’s mind and the adoption of a de-centered perspective (Safran & Segal, 1990) on thoughts and feelings so that they can be experienced in terms of their subjectivity (versus their necessary validity) and transient nature (versus their permanence) (p. 234).

In sum, mindfulness has garnered a great deal of interest among researchers and has been the focus of numerous studies. Many studies have centered on assessing the efficacy of mindfulness-based interventions. Reviews of the literature, however, suggest that mindfulness research is fraught with methodological flaws including, small sample size, lack of control groups, a failure to operationalize the concept, dependence on self-report methods, and short-term follow-ups (Baer, 2003; Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). Despite these methodological problems, research suggests that mindfulness may be beneficial in the treatment of various physiological and psychological conditions. Research has predominantly focused on the intrapsychic effects of mindfulness, however, interest in the relational effects of mindfulness is emerging. Parenting provides a rich context within which to explore the interpersonal effects of mindfulness, which researchers are beginning to explore.

Mindfulness-Based Parenting Interventions

Duncan et al. (2009a) developed a preventative mindful parenting intervention for parent-adolescent relationships to enhance relationship quality. Their mindful parenting model is based upon the following five dimensions: “(a) listening with full attention; (b) nonjudgmental acceptance of self and child; (c) emotional awareness of self and child; (d) self-regulation in the parenting relationship; and (e) compassion for self and child” (p. 258). Rather than create a new intervention, Duncan and colleagues adapted the empirically validated Strengthening Families Program: For Parents and Youth 10-14 (SFP: Molgaard & Spoth, 2001) to include mindfulness concepts and activities (Mindfulness-enhanced SFP: MSFP). An initial pilot study was conducted to test the acceptability of the new model to parents (Duncan et al., 2009b). Participants included four dual parent families and one single mother and their children. Families participated in a seven-week pilot of the mindfulness-enhanced SFP and were assigned to MSFP,

SFP only, or wait list control groups. Results of the pilot revealed that the intervention was acceptable and beneficial to the participants. Based upon the pilot results, the curriculum was revised and a second pilot study was conducted in three small towns in central Pennsylvania (Coatsworth, et al., 2010). The study used a randomized controlled trial with 65 families of 5th-7th grade students. The study focused on mother and youth reports, since fathers were not included in 20% of the families. Results of the pre-post intervention self-report assessments revealed “stronger effects on measures of mindful parenting and parent-youth relationship qualities” of the MSFP program, which indicates that “infusing mindful parenting activities into existing empirically validated parenting programs can enhance their effects on family risk and protection during the transition to adolescence” (Coatsworth et al., 2010, p. 203).

Singh and colleagues (2006) examined whether or not parents of autistic children could decrease their child’s negative behaviors through changes in their own behavior and interactions. The study sought to explore how parent mindfulness training affected three problem behaviors (aggression, noncompliance, and self-injury) engaged in by their children as well as assess mothers’ satisfaction with their ability to parent and parent/child interactions. Prior to this study, mothers had attended myriad parent training programs and sought out mindfulness training because they had observed positive results in group home-care providers who had mindfulness training. Three mother-child dyads participated in a 12-week mindfulness training. Subjective measures and an experimental design were utilized. In addition, both mothers and fathers used a personal digital assistant to record the occurrence of targeted problem behaviors as they transpired in real time. Each of the mothers received individualized mindfulness training, which was based upon the work of Kabat-Zinn and Kabat-Zinn (1997). Results indicated that during and following mothers’ mindfulness training there was a decrease in the children’s aggression,

noncompliance, and self-injury. Furthermore, mothers reported an increase from baseline levels in satisfaction with their parenting skills and mother-child interactions, which peaked when mothers used mindfulness more consistently.

Singh and colleagues (2007) set out to replicate and extend the work of Singh et al. (2006) with parents of children with developmental disabilities, who exhibited aggressive behavior and decreased social skills. The design and procedures of this study were similar to the earlier study. The targeted children's behaviors in this study were aggression and social interactions with siblings. Four mother-child dyads participated in the study. The results of the study revealed a decrease in aggressive behavior and an increase in positive interactions with their siblings as well as a decrease in negative social interactions. Mothers reported increased satisfaction with their parenting and social interactions with their children. There was also a decrease in parenting stress following mindfulness training. During the informal interviews mothers reported that mindful parent training was unlike other trainings they received. They reported that "whereas previous training had focused on specific techniques or rules that the mothers had to implement with their child with developmental disabilities, this training was about their own inner work, which produced transformational change in themselves" (Singh et al., 2007, p. 761). These mothers also found that the transformation affected their interactions with other family members. This study supports the earlier findings of the effectiveness of mindfulness training of parents with autistic children (Singh et al., 2006).

Mindfulness appears to improve parenting satisfaction of mothers with autistic and disruptive children as well as relationship quality between parents and adolescents. Viewed through a systemic lens, research conducted by Singh et al. (2006) and Singh et al. (2007) illustrated how changes in one member of a family system could impact the rest of the family

system. Parent mindfulness training decreased negative child behaviors and increased mother's parenting satisfaction and interactions with their child as well as improving sibling interactions. Similar to mindfulness and romantic relationship studies, treatment outcomes peaked when mothers practiced more consistently. Moreover, mothers reported the importance of attending to their own inner work to produce changes in their parent-child relationships.

The preliminary evidence from the small body of research into mindfulness-based parenting interventions provides support for the utility of mindfulness meditation to positively impact parent-child relationships. The current study seeks to expand upon the limited research on mindfulness and parenting by exploring how mindfulness influences the parenting behavior of long-term meditators.

Parenting Behavior and Parenting Stress

Belsky (1984) set out to answer the question, "why parents parent the way they do" (p. 83). He developed a process model of the determinants of parenting behavior, based on child maltreatment literature, that include the following three domains: (1) personal psychological resources of parents, (2) characteristics of the child, and (3) contextual sources of stress and support including marital relationship, social support, and work. Moreover, Belsky identified parental developmental histories as influencing individual personality and parental psychological well-being, which, in turn, impact parental functioning. Parental developmental histories seem to be a direct predictor of parenting behavior (Abidin, 1992). The psychological resources of the parent, including developmental histories, are avenues through which change may be affected in parenting behavior.

Abidin (1992) recognized the importance of Belsky's contribution of the "interior of the parent" and developed an integrative model of parenting behavior that emphasizes the parental

personality as central to parenting behavior. Abidin writes,

The model hypothesizes that parenting behavior and child adjustment are influenced by a number of sociological, environmental, behavioral, and developmental variables. The current model attempts to capitalize on those relationships, but suggests that the path of influence of those variables is through the component of the parent's personality relating to the parenting role. Further parental cognitions and beliefs are seen as playing a key role (p. 410).

Thus parental personality, including cognitions and beliefs, are pivotal components to understanding parenting behavior.

Numerous studies have investigated the effects of parenting style on child outcomes. The substantial amount of research based on Baumrind's typology of parenting styles (Baumrind, 1966) has consistently shown that authoritative parenting, as compared with the permissive and authoritarian styles, positively influences child and adolescent competence and development (Baumrind, 1971, 1978, 1991). Authoritative parenting is characterized by high levels of parental demandingness and responsiveness (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Baumrind (1991) writes,

Demandingness refers to the claims parents make on the child to become integrated into the family whole by their maturity demands, supervision, disciplinary efforts and willingness to confront the child who disobeys. *Responsiveness* refers to actions which intentionally foster individuality, self-regulation and self-assertion by being attuned, supportive and acquiescent to the child's special needs and demands (p. 748).

Authoritative parents view the rights and needs of parent and child as complementary and balance the child's need for individuality and autonomy with disciplined conformity (Baumrind, 1966). Moreover, the parent's ability to accurately interpret the needs of the child and respond in

a supportive and accepting manner is central to authoritativeness. In addition to high levels of warmth, acceptance and firmness, Steinberg, Elmen and Mounts (1989) incorporate a high degree of psychological autonomy or democracy as part of optimal parenting. “Adolescents who describe their parents as treating them warmly, democratically, and firmly are more likely than their peers to develop positive attitudes toward, and beliefs about, their achievement, and as a consequence, they are more likely to do better in school” (Steinberg et al., 1989, p. 1433).

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) also highlights the significance of parental responsiveness in parent-child relationships. Attachment theorists maintain that a child’s early experiences of their primary caregiver significantly influence their attachment relationship. During infancy and childhood, attachment behaviors become organized into attachment styles which characterize relationships with caregivers (Bowlby, 1969). These attachment styles are thought to influence significant relationships throughout the life span. Maternal sensitivity has been shown to be important in the development of secure attachment and child adjustment (De Wolff & van IJzendoorn, 1997). Sensitivity, as defined by Ainsworth and colleagues, is the mother’s ability to accurately perceive the infant’s signals and respond to them promptly and appropriately (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Children who experience their caregiver as supportive and responsive to their needs are expected to develop a secure attachment, which has been associated with a range of positive outcomes (Bohlin, Hagekull, & Rydell, 2000; Ranson & Urichuk, 2008). In addition to the relationship between parent and child during infancy, experiences between the child and their primary caregivers during childhood, and extending as late as adolescence, shape attachment style (Allen & Land, 1999).

Effective parenting is also associated with the parent’s ability to empathize with their children in the present moment. “Parent-child interaction goes more smoothly when parents

adopt the child's momentary goals as their own. To do so calls for considerable empathy with children's emotional states and ways of thinking" (Maccoby, 1992, p. 1015). In addition to the capacity to empathize, how parents manage and respond to their own emotions, as well as those of their children, is essential to effective parenting. "When invested in the interests of children, emotions organize sensitive, responsive parenting. Emotions undermine parenting, however, when they are too weak, too strong, or poorly matched to child rearing tasks" (Dix, 1991, p. 3). Emotional regulation is, thus, a necessary component of optimal parenting practices.

Research indicates that children's healthy social, emotional and cognitive development is associated with parenting that responds to children's needs in a sensitive and supportive manner. Parenting stress, however, may interfere with how parents interpret their children's emotional cues and how they respond to their children's needs and demands, which can lead to dysfunctional parent-child interactions. Abidin (1995) observed that the development of dysfunctional parenting patterns that resulted in children experiencing behavioral and emotional problems was a result of one or more factors in the following domains: (1) child temperament (distractibility/hyperactivity, adaptability, reinforces parent, demandingness, mood and acceptability), (2) parental personality characteristics (competence, isolation, attachment, health, role restriction, depression, spouse), and (3) situational/demographic life stress (e.g. death of a family member, unemployment). Distressed parents are more likely to employ negative parenting practices (Crnic & Low, 2002; Webster-Stratton, 1990).

In sum, parenting behavior is not only influenced by child characteristics and sources of social support and stress but also the internal resources of the parent and the parental personality, including "enduring characteristics of the individual, characteristics that are, at least in part, a product of a person's developmental history" (Belsky, 1984, p. 84). The type of parenting that is

describe as effective blends high demandingness with high responsiveness. Responsiveness has been defined by attachment theorists in terms of maternal sensitivity as well as in Baumrind's parenting typologies. Healthy cognitive, psychological and social child development is fostered through parenting that is responsive, warm, nurturing, and supportive. Parenting stress may negatively impact parenting behavior and has been linked to a number of negative outcomes in both parents and children.

Mindfulness, Parenting Behavior and Parenting Stress

Parental personality affects parenting behavior. Therefore, interventions aimed at affecting change in the psychological resources of parents, including cognitions, beliefs and developmental histories, may positively influence parenting behavior. Mindfulness meditation training allows one to become an observer of one's inner experience in a curious, non-judgmental, and accepting manner, which may lead to a shift in how a person relates to their subjective experience. Mindfulness may, therefore, be a pathway through which to affect how parents relate to cognitions, beliefs and childhood history that impact their parenting behavior.

When parenting stress develops into dysfunctional parenting practices, parents and children are at greater risk to develop psychopathologies (Abidin, 1995). Research has shown that mindfulness decreases anxiety and stress in clinical and non-clinical populations (Astin 1997; Kabat-Zinn et al., 1992; Miller et al. 1995; Shapiro et al., 1998). Repeated exposure to uncomfortable sensations during formal mindfulness practice is believed to lead to desensitization and reduced emotional reactivity to anxiety symptoms (Baer, 2003). In addition, preliminary research into the efficacy of short-term mindfulness-based intervention research suggests that mindfulness positively affects relationship stress in couples and parent-child

relationships, however, further investigation is necessary to understand how long-term mindfulness practices influences parenting stress.

Cultivating mindfulness through a consistent practice may provide meditators with skills that are more aligned with optimal parenting practices. Effective parenting is characterized by a blend of high demandingness and high responsiveness. Responsiveness is a key component in both Baumrind's parenting style typology as well as the conceptualization of maternal sensitivity within attachment theory. Effective responsiveness is characterized by attentiveness, warmth, sensitivity, and nurturance. Since long-term mindfulness practitioners are keen observers of their own internal states they may also possess skills that help them perceive the subjective states of others more accurately, which in turn may affect how they respond to the needs of others. Moreover, mindfulness meditators observe their internal state in a non-judgmental, accepting and curious manner and may approach and respond to their children in a similar manner or in a way that is more "sensitively attuned" (Belsky, 1984) to the child's needs.

Empathic development has important implications for healthy interpersonal functioning (Block-Lerner, Adair, Plumb, Rhatigan & Orsillo, 2007). Limited research suggests that mindfulness training positively impacts empathic development. Research of medical students found that mindfulness training increased empathy levels as well as other variables (Shapiro et al., 1998). Wachs and Cordova (2007) found associations between mindfulness and empathy in intimate couples' research. Furthermore, empathy is one of three foundations of Kabat-Zinn and Kabat Zinn's (1997) model of mindful parenting. In addition to being aware of their own internal experience, parents are encouraged to see things from their child's perspective in the moment. Empathy enables a parent to honor their child's sovereignty during challenging situations. Kabat-Zinn & Kabat-Zinn (1997) write,

It is easy to empathize with a child when he is hurting. It is much harder to do when he is kicking and throwing things and screaming. It is also hard to do when his interests or views seem to conflict with ours. Our ability to empathize in a broader range of situations takes intentional cultivation (p. 64).

Furthermore, appropriate emotional expression is also central to effective parenting. Mindfulness facilitates the development of the skill to observe uncomfortable thoughts, feelings and sensations in a detached manner, which affects how one responds in the present moment. The “dispassionate state of self-observation is thought to introduce a ‘space’ between one’s perception and response. Thus mindfulness is thought to enable one to respond to situations more reflectively (as opposed to reflexively)” (Bishop et al., 2004). Disidentifying with thoughts and feelings during challenging parenting situations may provide parents with an alternative to negative automatized patterns of behavior and decrease emotional reactivity in parent-child interactions. Reactive responding may instead be replaced with interactions that increase connection between parent and child.

Conclusion

In sum, this literature review describes the current theory and research on mindfulness and mindfulness-based parenting interventions. While there is a substantial body of research investigating the efficacy of mindfulness-based interventions to alleviate symptoms associated with myriad physiological and psychological problems, there is a paucity of research investigating the interpersonal effects of mindfulness within the parenting domain. Interest into mindfulness and families is beginning to emerge and preliminary mindfulness-based intervention research suggests that mindfulness increases parenting satisfaction and children’s pro-social behavior and reduces parental stress and child aggression (Singh et al., 2006; Singh et al., 2007).

Incorporating mindfulness concepts and activities into an empirically validated behavioral intervention was shown to be beneficial to enhancing parent-adolescent relationship quality during the transition to adolescence (Coatsworth et al., 2010). These studies, however, target families at risk and families with children with behavioral issues. Moreover, these studies are short-term interventions with beginners. Little is known about the long-term effects of mindfulness and parenting behavior. Consistent mindfulness training has the potential to influence parenting behavior in a number of ways, including increasing parental responsiveness, parental sensitivity, appropriate emotional expression, empathic development as well as decreasing parenting stress. Moreover, mindfulness practice may also positively impact parental cognitions, beliefs and developmental histories but there is minimal research exploring these areas. This study seeks to fill the gap in the current mindfulness and parenting literature through an investigation of how mindfulness influences the parenting behavior of long-term meditators.

Chapter 3: Methods

Design of the Study

The primary aim of this study was to gain a more rich understanding of the complex construct mindfulness through an exploration of the perceived impact of mindfulness on the parenting of long-term meditators. Qualitative methodology was chosen in order to capture the richness and depth of the participants' lived experiences and how they perceived those experiences. The following sections describe in more depth the participants, procedures and analysis.

Participants

This study used purposive criteria as well as convenience and snowball sampling techniques. The study recruited eight long-term mindfulness meditators, which was defined as an individual practicing mindfulness meditation for a minimum of seven years. In addition, following the purposive criteria of Pruitt and McCollum (2010), meditators identified mindfulness meditation as an important part of their life. Moreover, the participants were also required to have been a parent for a minimum of 3 years. Semi-structured interviews were used with the long-term mindfulness practitioners to answer the research questions.

Participants for the study were recruited through contact with mindfulness meditation organizations such as the Insight Meditation Community of Washington, psychotherapists using mindfulness, certified Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction teachers, and organizers of mindfulness meditation groups (Appendix A). Recruitment was also conducted through word of mouth. With the appropriate permission, informational flyers (Appendix B) were distributed via email and posted in suitable locations to recruit research participants. Participation in the study was voluntary and confidential.

Procedures

Recruitment procedures included a pre-interview over the phone or via email to ensure that individuals met the inclusion criteria listed above (Appendix C). In addition, potential participants were provided with a brief overview of the study as well as the researcher's contact information during the pre-interview. Individuals that met the inclusion criteria and were interested in participating in the study were asked to set up a 90-minute meeting with the researcher at a mutually pre-determined time and location. For individuals that did not live locally, interviews were conducted over the phone.

At the interview meeting, the researcher explained the informed consent form (Appendix D), including the purpose of the study, confidentiality, and the potential risks and benefits. For interviews conducted over the phone, the informed consent form was sent via email and the participant was required to return the signed form to the researcher prior to the interview. Next, the participants filled out a demographic questionnaire (Appendix E). For interviews conducted via phone, the researcher emailed the form to the participant to be filled out and returned via email. The researcher then conducted an approximately 90-minute semi-structured interview with the long-term meditator (Appendix F). The researcher engaged in active listening. Probes and other related questions were used to elucidate the participant's experience and perceptions during the interview process. The semi-structured interviews were recorded with an audio recording device.

Interviews were transcribed after the interviews took place. To ensure confidentiality, all interviews were assigned a code during the transcription process and all identifiable information was removed. Only a code number was associated with the participants' verbal responses and written information. The study codes were stored separately from the data documents in a locked

file cabinet. The primary researcher was the only one who had access to the codes and study data. The audio recordings were destroyed after the interviews were transcribed, except in cases where selected audio clips were kept to be used in the final presentation, with the permission of the participants.

Instruments

Semi-structured interview questions were used with the long-term mindfulness practitioners to answer the research question (Appendix F). The semi-structured interview consisted of questions aimed at understanding advanced meditators' perceptions of how mindfulness impacted their parenting. Participants were informed that there were no right and wrong answers to these questions and asked to answer the questions as genuinely and honestly as they could.

Data Analyses

Analysis of the data employed thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Braun and Clarke highlight the importance of researchers familiarizing themselves with their data through immersion, which “usually involves ‘repeated reading’ of the data, and reading the data in an *active* way” (p. 87). The semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim and carefully listened to and reread twice by this researcher to ensure accuracy. The second phase of analysis involved generating initial codes from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Since the researcher can never truly separate herself from the data (Creswell, 2007), this researcher bracketed thoughts as they arose in a journal. This researcher also wrote down emerging ideas, thoughts and themes in the same journal. After the data had been coded and collated, this researcher identified potential overarching themes from the different codes and organized the pertinent coded data extracts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At this stage of analysis, this researcher

began to think about “the relationship between codes, between themes, and between different level of themes (e.g. main overarching themes and sub-themes within them)” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 90). A thematic map began to coalesce at this stage of analysis. Once the candidate themes, sub-themes, and relevant data extracts were collected and organized, this researcher reviewed and refined the themes. During this stage, Braun and Clarke explain, “it will become evident that some candidate themes are not really themes (eg, if there are not enough data to support them, or the data are too diverse), while others might collapse into each other (eg, two apparently separate themes might form one theme). Other themes might need to be broken down into separate themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91). When the collated data extracts for the themes were reviewed and found to create a sound pattern then this researcher reflected on “the validity of the individual themes in relation to the entire data set” (p. 91). This researcher then defined and named the themes. The patterns and themes informed the results of the study. To ensure credibility throughout the process, a second coder was utilized, the Thesis Committee Chair, Dr. Eric McCollum.

Chapter 4: Manuscript

Abstract

While there is a growing body of research to expand our theoretical and conceptual understanding of the multi-faceted construct mindfulness, the majority of studies have thus far focused on the efficacy of short-term mindfulness-based interventions to mitigate symptoms associated with myriad physiological and psychological conditions. Research investigating the relational effects of mindfulness within families is limited. This qualitative study examined eight long-term meditators' perceptions of how their mindfulness practice influenced their parenting behavior. Using thematic analysis, the central themes to emerge included (1) increased communication skills, (2) decreased emotional reactivity, (3) increased perspective-taking, and (4) greater self-understanding. Limitations of the study as well as future research and clinical implications are also discussed.

Meditating Mothers and Fathers: Long-term Meditators' Perceptions of the Influences of Mindfulness on Parenting

Eve R. Hornstein

Introduction

Eastern philosophy intersected with Western science over thirty years ago when Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn and colleagues at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center introduced mindfulness meditation to behavioral medicine through the development of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program. Initially developed as a self-regulation strategy to help individuals manage chronic pain and stress-related disorders, as well as promote well-being, MBSR is a manualized 8-10 week, group-based program that integrates mindfulness techniques, including sitting and standing meditations, body scans, and hatha yoga (Kabat-Zinn, 1982). MBSR has influenced the development of other mindfulness-based interventions and therapeutic modalities. Referred to as MBSR's kissing cousin, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) blends elements of mindfulness training from MBSR with cognitive-behavioral therapy techniques to intervene in negative thought and rumination cycles in individuals predisposed to chronic depression (Teasdale et al., 2000). Furthermore, Carson, Carson, Gil, and Baucom (2004) adapted the MBSR program and developed a mindfulness-based intervention to enhance the relationships of nondistressed couples. In addition to stand-alone interventions, mindfulness components have also made their way into Western behavioral therapies including dialectical behavior therapy (DBT: Linehan, 1993), acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT: Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999) and relapse prevention (RP: Marlatt & Gordon, 1985).

Mindfulness is a complex theoretical construct and there is no one agreed upon definition or conceptualization in the current research. Kabat-Zinn (1994) explains that “mindfulness

means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (p. 4). State mindfulness develops through consistent formal practice as well as by “being mindful” in everyday experiences (Bishop et al., 2004). Researchers suggest “in state mindfulness, thoughts and feelings are observed as events in the mind, without over-identifying with them and without reacting to them in an automatic, habitual pattern of reactivity” (Bishop et al., 2004, p. 232).

The majority of research thus far has focused on the intrapsychic effects of mindfulness and its efficacy as a therapeutic intervention for myriad individual physiological and psychological conditions (Baer, 2003; Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007; Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004). Few studies, however, have explored the relational effects of mindfulness. Research investigating couples’ relationships suggests that mindfulness may positively influence romantic relationship well-being and marital satisfaction (Barnes, Brown, Krusemark, Campbell, & Rogge, 2007; Burpee & Langer, 2005). A small number of relational-based mindfulness studies have emerged, which provide insight into mindfulness and relational variables, such as communication, empathy, and emotional regulation (Carson et al., 2004; Pruitt & McCollum, 2010; Wachs & Cordova, 2007). Research that explores the relational effects of mindfulness within families is limited to a handful of outcome studies and little is known about how mindfulness influences parenting behavior.

Effective parenting practices involve a combination of high demandingness and responsiveness (Maccoby & Martin, 1983); however, parenting stress may affect parental psychological well-being. Deater-Deckard (1998) defines parenting stress as “the aversive psychological reaction to the demands of being a parent” which “is experienced as negative feelings toward the self and toward the child or children” (p. 315). High levels of parenting stress

are not only associated with negative parental well-being but also dysfunctional parenting behavior and negative child outcomes, including deviant child development and child psychopathology (Abidin, 1995). Since parenting stress and parenting practices are associated with parental well-being and child development, interventions aimed at decreasing parental stress and developing optimal parenting practices have the potential to reduce emotional and behavioral problems in both adults and children. Thus far, parenting interventions have been predominantly cognitive-behavior based and skills oriented. Whereas cognitive-behavioral techniques are designed to change negative patterns of thinking, mindfulness training invites individuals to change how they relate to their thoughts and feelings (Hayes, 2005). For example, mindfulness practice may lead to individuals experiencing their thoughts as “just thoughts,” instead of absolute truths and to the understanding that negative thoughts are not necessarily accurate or useful (Baer, 2003). Mindfulness meditation may offer an alternative to traditional parenting interventions, which researchers are beginning to explore.

Current mindfulness and parenting research focuses on mindfulness-based parenting interventions with different populations. Preliminary results suggest that mindfulness increases parenting satisfaction and children’s pro-social behavior and reduces parental stress and child aggression (Singh et al., 2006; Singh et al., 2007). Singh and colleagues (2006) examined whether or not parents of autistic children could decrease their child’s negative behaviors through changes in their own behavior and how they interacted with their child. Following mothers’ mindfulness training, there was a decrease in the children’s maladaptive behaviors. Singh and colleagues (2007) next extended this work with parents of children with developmental disabilities. The results of this study revealed a decrease in negative behaviors as well as an increase in positive sibling interactions. Moreover, mothers reported an increase in

satisfaction with their parenting skills and social interactions with their children. Duncan, Coatsworth, and Greenberg (2009a, 2009b) developed a preventive mindful parenting intervention for parents and adolescents to enhance relationship quality by incorporating mindfulness techniques into an already empirically validated intervention, the Strengthening Families Program: For Parents and Youth 10-14 (SFP: Molgaard & Spoth, 2001). Results of a randomized controlled trial indicated that the mindful parenting program positively benefited families at risk during the transition to adolescence (Coatsworth, Duncan, Greenberg, & Nix, 2010).

Interest in mindfulness and families is beginning to emerge and preliminary mindfulness-based intervention research suggests that mindfulness positively influences parent-child interactions (Coatsworth et al., 2010; Singh et al., 2006; Singh et al., 2007); however, these studies target families at risk and families with children with behavioral issues. Moreover, these studies are short-term interventions with beginners who have practiced mindfulness for short periods of time. Little is known about the long-term effects of mindfulness on parenting behavior and how mindfulness mechanisms operate within parent-child relationships. Formal mindfulness meditation practice may be beneficial to mediate parenting stress, since research indicates that mindfulness practice reduces stress and anxiety (Astin 1997; Kabat-Zinn et al., 1992; Miller, Fletcher, & Kabat-Zinn, 1995; Shapiro, Schwartz, & Bonner, 1998) and increases psychological well-being (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Moreover, mindfulness may also positively influence parental responsiveness and sensitivity. When attention is focused on the present moment, parents may be better able to accurately perceive their child's emotional cues as well as listen more fully when their child is speaking to discern a greater richness and understanding of their child's experience. This, in turn, may influence the parent's capacity to respond promptly and

appropriately to their children's needs. Parental responsiveness and sensitivity may also be influenced if parents approach their children in a non-judgmental, open, accepting and curious manner, as they do their own thoughts and feelings during formal mindfulness practice. When parents needs and expectations conflict with their child's, present-moment awareness may enable parents to disidentify with their thoughts and feelings so that they may choose how to respond to their child, rather than becoming reactive (Kabat-Zinn & Kabat-Zinn, 1997). Through mindfulness meditation, parents may also learn how to accept and manage themselves rather than trying to change their child's behavior. In addition, one may expect that the positive affects of mindfulness training for couples, such as increased empathy development, closeness, acceptance, distress reduction, and decreased reactivity (Pruitt & McCollum, 2010; Wachs & Cordova, 2007) would be similar for parents who practice mindfulness meditation, however, there is a lack of research to support this hypothesis.

The descriptive perspectives of long-term meditators have been incorporated within relatively few, current research studies. Experienced meditators are believed to possess enhanced capacities in the following areas: attentional control, sense withdrawal, lucidity, emotional intelligence, equanimity, and moral maturity (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). Walsh and Shapiro suggest "because of their unusual psychological capacities, meditators may prove to be uniquely valuable subjects. For example, their introspective sensitivity may make them exceptional observers of subjective states and mental processes" (p. 234). Long-term meditators may, therefore, provide insights into how mindfulness impacts parenting as well as mindfulness mechanisms. To fill the gap in the current mindfulness and parenting literature, the current study uses qualitative design and methods to gather long-term meditators' perceptions to understand how mindfulness practice influences parenting behavior.

Methods

Eight participants were recruited for this study using convenience and snowball sampling techniques. Meditation teachers and groups in the Washington D.C. metro-area and Fairfield County in Connecticut were contacted through word of mouth, flyers, phone calls and emails. The purposive criteria for inclusion in the present study were that participants had practiced consistent mindfulness meditation for a minimum of seven years and that they identified mindfulness meditation as an important part of their life. Moreover, experienced mindfulness meditators were required to have at least three years of parenting experience. Recruitment procedures included a pre-interview over the phone or via email to ensure that individuals met the inclusion criteria. The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University prior to recruitment and data collection (Appendix G).

Seven out of the eight interviews were conducted in person and one interview was completed by phone. Semi-structured interview questions were used to gather information. The participants were first asked about how their mindfulness practice had influenced their parenting. Participants were then asked to share some of their parenting stresses and the ways that their practice affected those stresses. Follow-up questions were used throughout the interview to help participants expand and elucidate their answers.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim after each interview was conducted. Analysis of the data utilized thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Braun and Clarke highlight the importance of researchers familiarizing themselves with the data through immersion, which “usually involves ‘repeated reading’ of the data, and reading the data in an *active way*” (p. 87). Once thoroughly familiar with the data, initial codes were generated. After

the data had been coded and collated, potential overarching themes from the different codes were identified and the relevant coded data extracts were organized. The researchers looked at “the relationship between codes, between themes, and between different level of themes (e.g. main overarching themes and sub-themes within them)” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 90). Themes were then reviewed and refined. Finally, the themes were defined and named. To ensure credibility throughout the process, the second author was used as an additional coder and discussions were held to reach agreement upon the final set of themes. The patterns and themes informed the results of the study.

Results

Demographics

Of the eight participants, five were female and three were male. All of the participants were Caucasian, well-educated, and mostly middle class or upper middle class. Ages ranged from 39 to 68 years old. The participants had been practicing meditation between 7 and 37 years. Two of the participants practiced Vipassana; one participant practiced mindfulness in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hahn; and five participants reported practicing an eclectic mindfulness tradition. The average age of participants when they began meditating was 31, with the youngest starting at age 24 and the oldest developing a practice at 53 years old. The average age at which participants had their first child was 30 years old. Three of the eight participants began meditating before their first child was born; two participants began within the same year of their first child’s birth; and three participants began practicing mindfulness after the birth of their first child. Children’s ages and family composition varied, which was connected to the current life phase of the participants. One quarter of the participants reported that their spouse was also a

long-term practitioner. Six of the eight participants were married to their children's biological parent. For a summary of participant demographics refer to Table 1.

Mindfulness and Parenting Stress

Participants were asked to describe stresses related to parenting. Common stresses included trying to keep up with and manage busy schedules, wondering if they were doing things “right,” concern about their child's safety and happiness, times of transition, developmental shifts, differentiation from their child, and balancing their children's needs with those of their own. Participants also described specific medical and mental health problems experienced by their children, including ADHD, Bipolar II, cutting behavior, eating disorders, and acting out behaviors during adolescence, which created more pronounced feelings of stress. For example, one father described his son's ADHD as his greatest parenting challenge, since he sometimes felt like a failure when becoming reactive to his son's behavior. When talking about how his mindfulness practice assisted him with parenting a son with ADHD, he said,

It gives me my best chance, you know. If there is anything that is going to help me be a good parent for him I haven't encountered anything better, you know. It's kind of like what he said, “Dad, imagine what would happen if you didn't have it?”

Participants believed that mindfulness minimized the stresses experienced from dramatic life changing events. As one participant stated,

I mean I have found it to be profoundly stress-reductive. Whether we were talking about the stress of the death of my sister, the death of my father-in-law, the birth of our children, my daughter's acting out ... those didn't take the kind of toll that they might have, if meditation wasn't part of my life.

Participants with young children described the tiny losses they grieved as their children grew up and transitioned from one developmental phase to another. One participant said:

They're changing every day and they're changing a lot more rapidly...so there is a constant letting go, they are constantly growing and there is such an intensity with this sort of parental love, but the practice helps me have a better, I think a healthy perspective of balancing impermanence with the love.

Minor transitions, such as returning to school, and more major developmental shifts, such as entering into adolescence, created stress for some of the children of the participants, which permeated throughout the entire family system. One participant described his daughter's way of shifting into adolescence as "profoundly shocking" because "she started acting out in some very powerful, very dangerous, very negative ways." Participants reported they were able to utilize their practice to support them through stresses related to their parenting role:

If I stop and pause, and sit on the cushion, it gives me insights, it calms my mind down...So, sitting on the cushion, meditating, will help me let go, and feel comfortable with that, and there is a huge shift that can happen in that short time.

In addition to a return to the cushion to gain calm and clarity, one participant described being able to access peace off the cushion as a result of her consistent practice:

I think just remembering that place of peace is possible having experienced it and embodied it you can always go back to it. It is a safe peaceful place and the rest of the stuff all falls off the back of the truck (laughter). You recognize that it is just not important. It is just life and, you know, the expression "this too will pass," it always does...Whatever you want to call it, just that curiosity and that gratitude, that you bring when you have a practice helps get through all of those stressful situations.

The practice created a greater awareness for one father, which affected how he responded to his son during a significantly challenging and stressful family situation. The father was able to focus on finding ways for his son to feel good and connected to him, which buffered the son from absorbing some of the stresses experienced by other family members:

When my daughter was going through what she was going through, I had a son at home who was really struggling to understand what was going on cause we weren't really telling him a lot at the time, especially when it first broke. So, trying to figure out ways to be connected to him and say, "Yeah, okay what is going on with [name] is going on with her. What is going on for you right now?" And just trying to help him find a way to feel good.

One participant explained that his meditative practice helped him with processing emotions during stressful transitions:

My wife and I dropped my son off at college and left his room and went out and sat in the van we had rented to be able to move stuff around for him, and the two of us sat down in the car and we cried for about, oh, fifteen minutes, taking turns holding each other crying. Got to the end, smiled at each other and said, "Wow, let's go have some fun now"...

There was an ease of being able to move through the process. And I think that it is, it is largely due to having done a meditative process.

In summary, the participants turned to their practice to support them through myriad parenting-related stresses, both small and large. As one person explained, "you can't expect to draw upon it in the hard times unless you spent the time practicing." Thus, it may be that consistent practice is necessary to more fully reap the benefits of mindfulness during stressful parenting situations.

Mindfulness and Parenting Behavior

The participants were asked to describe how they believed their mindfulness practice had influenced their parenting. The themes that emerged consistently throughout the interviews included: increased communication skills, decreased emotional reactivity, increased perspective-taking, and greater self-understanding.

Increased communication skills. All of the participants reported that their mindfulness practice affected how they communicated with their children. Responses fell into three categories: greater awareness of non-verbal communication, asking questions to gain clarity, and increased listening skills. Half of the participants reported that as a result of their consistent mindfulness practice they developed a greater awareness in their ability to read their children's non-verbal language. A greater awareness of their own experience seemed to have also translated into a heightened sense of awareness in observing and tracking a more full and textured richness of detail in their children's non-verbal communications. Through their mindfulness practice, participants' perceptions seemed to shift to being able to "see more clearly" what was happening for their child. In addition to non-linguistic and paralinguistic indicators, the participants identified linguistic cues, including a greater awareness of "the tone of voice, hearing the mood, hearing the meaning of the words, hearing behind the meanings of the words." For one participant, following non-verbal cues provided information about how to interact with her son:

I think that the skill of observation that gets developed in a mindfulness practice is really, really a great skill. A great skill because you start to watch someone's eyes, you start to watch how they are standing, their posture, maybe their hand goes to a particular area of their body, you know, where they are feeling something or they can't make eye contact,

their breathing changes. All those things are indicators of something, you know, and so just following that and really, you know, asking about it.

Retrospectively, one participant was cognizant about how his ability to pick up on his son's non-verbal communication had changed over the years:

I think there were lots of subtleties to my son's communication that I was missing before. Even though, you know, if I compared myself to my parents I was much more present but then when I look at the difference between that comparison and the comparison between then and post-mediation, it was astonishing how much I had been not picking up on.

Being aware of the subtleties in their children's non-verbal cues impacted how the participants communicated and responded to their children. On the cushion, the mindfulness mediators became observers of their internal states and approached their thoughts, feelings and sensations in a curious, non-judgmental manner. Two of the participants described bringing the same curiosity and non-judgmental questioning into their interactions with their children when the natural rhythm between their child and them shifted:

There just was something off and it is more than intuition. It is just watching and that watchfulness translates outside of myself, you know, like I'm watching myself and I'm also watching my child. There is a different flow here happening and it's not quite comfortable...so I am going to start asking questions the same way I would ask questions of myself while I am meditating.

In addition to asking questions to gain a clearer sense of their child's reality, participants also reported that their mindfulness practice assisted them with becoming better listeners. One participant became aware that her son's behavior was different and was able to have an internal dialogue in the moment in order to choose how to respond to him:

I said, “Wait a minute, he’s very quiet, you are going to have to really listen, you are going to just have to not have all of your fabulous stories about things but just be still and listen.” So, again, it’s just that like waking up, knowing...now is the time to really be aware and make the most of this.

Participants also explained that their mindfulness practice helped them to create a space for their children to express their thoughts and feelings, which the participants believed created a deeper understanding and connection between them and their children. One participant described how mindfulness enabled her to choose to connect with her children through listening rather than telling them what to do:

I don’t have as much [of an] agenda as I used to...If my kids come to me and say, “You know, I’m having trouble with such and such class,” the first thing I want to do is tell them what to do. So mindfulness allows me that moment to see what’s coming up in my mind and say, “Okay, I want to tell her what to do” and I have that moment to say, “Okay, well, is that really going to be connecting, is that really what I want I to do?” And then, if I, I can choose, you know, “Okay, what I really want [is] to connect and I know the best way to connect is just listen” and so I listen.

One participant explained that she cultivated a deeper sense of compassion for herself and others through her mindfulness practice. Cultivating compassion on the cushion permeated throughout her daily interactions with her daughters. Specifically, she believed that compassionate listening, listening with an open heart, created safety and trust in her relationships with her children:

[Being mindful] enables me to connect by listening, really listening, being able to put my agendas back there and when you really listen I think you are able to guide in a much

more, from a greater truth, truthful place and it just, again, it has your heart open which allows them to feel safe to be open.

Increased patience was an outcome reported by a majority of the participants (six out of eight). Participants' believed that their mindfulness practice enabled them to be patiently aware of when their children had finished communicating their thoughts and feelings as well as when they needed more time to express themselves. As one participant said about his mindfulness practice,

It allowed me to be a really good listener and what I have learned over the years is that to be a really good listener you have to be able to listen and add nothing. Because as soon as we start interjecting with people, you may not have heard really what they had to say yet so you really have to wait until they are kind of done. Like with my kids I had to wait until they were really done talking about what was moving in them or else I wouldn't really get to the root of what was going on and how to help them.

Mindfulness also enabled participants to be patient by letting their older children come to them to talk, rather than pursuing their child and crossing personal boundaries. One participant explained how her practice allowed her to let the dialogue flow naturally, rather than forcing conversations with her son:

It may not be talked about right away but again it comes up and that organic "don't push the river," just allow things to, like, come up organically. I think that that has been the essence of my practice so far is just that learning. For myself having patience...also allows me to have patience for him.

Two participants explained that their mindfulness practice allowed them to prioritize others by letting them have "center stage" in the conversation. One participant described being

able to get her needs met as a result of her mindfulness practice, which enabled her to be more present for others in conversation:

Practicing mindfulness allowed me to meet my own needs so I don't feel so needy, like in a conversation... Now with mindfulness and practice, I am able to let them sort of be the star of the conversation, the star of the show.

Participants also reported that mindfulness helped them to stop and name emotional states, for both their children and themselves, in a non-threatening and non-judgmental manner, which for one participant stopped “the dominos from falling in the patterns they have fallen.” Being specific and identifying emotions that came up gave one participant and his family “the vocabulary for talking with each other,” which assisted them in “detaching from the emotions.” Similarly, one participant spoke about how mindfulness helped her to pause to state what she is feeling out loud, which created a space for dialogue and clarity with her son:

Just saying, “I don't know what to say or do right now. I can tell you that this is how I feel.” And, you know, that also creates a doorway or a window for him to say, “Well, I am feeling this”... So, I think stating it out loud is important and then there is no assumptions made of how someone might be reacting colored by your lens or what you are assuming they may be feeling, which might not be the case at all.

All the participants mentioned that they are not mindful and present all the time. Participants described parenting situations during which they became reactive. They credited their mindfulness practice with the capacity to be aware and recognize their automatic reactive patterns after the fact. For some participants, this awareness served to facilitate the repair process with their children. As one participant said:

It's definitely not that I don't screw up. It's that I think the practice helps me to catch it. It may not be in the moment, but it may be you know, after the energy has the chance to dissipate. I can come back and communicate to my kids my sincere remorse, you know, and honestly say I'm sorry that I did that, that I acted that way.

In summary, mindfulness seemed to influence how participants communicated with their children. First, participants seemed to develop a greater observation in the details of their children's non-verbal communications, which impacted how they responded to their children in the present moment. Secondly, participants valued asking their children questions in order to gain more clarity about their children's experience. Moreover, rather than telling their children what to do, participants asked their children questions in a curious, non-judgmental way to help their children arrive at solutions to their problems rather than telling them what to do. Participants also described themselves as better listeners as a result of their consistent mindfulness practice. Patience cultivated through their practice seemed to influence the participants' ability to let their children express themselves completely and without interrupting or cutting them off. Finally, when the participants became reactive in parent-child interactions, their mindfulness practice help to facilitate the repair process through the communication of an apology.

Decreased emotional reactivity. The majority of the participants (seven out of eight) reported that they were less reactive in parent-child interactions as a result of their mindfulness practice. Reactivity was described by the participants as an escalation of overwhelming emotions that they were unable to control. The participants identified the activation of personal "triggers" as a source for the escalation of emotions. The participants reported that their mindfulness practice created "a space" between the activation of their emotions and their response. One of the

participants described being able “to step outside the chain reaction” in order to choose how to respond in a more positive way, as an outcome of his practice.

On the cushion, the breath serves as an anchor for meditators as they observe how internal and external stimuli affect them. Participants explained that they brought their breath-work off of the cushion and into parent-child interactions to mitigate automatic responses when triggered. When talking with his children when he was upset with something that they had done, one participant said,

For me, it’s taking that breath before I engage, you know, and the mindfulness gives me that best chance, kind of disengaging from that initial energy that arises that is, you know, angry or fearful or stressful or impatient.

Mindfulness helped one participant with the development of the ability to “stay” with her emotions and experience them from beginning to end, when triggered by her children, rather than getting frustrated, angry or withdrawing from them:

Staying with your emotion right now. Stay and riding through it and not running away from it, so physically staying and not saying “I’ve had enough!” It’s a tendency for me to feel trapped in my life, not just parenting, I just want to be free and let go. So staying, staying, staying.

In addition to using the breath as a way to dissipate intense emotions, participants reported that an outcome of their mindfulness practice was the development of the skill to “pause” when they became reactive. One participant said:

There can be a lot of blaming in our family, me included. Blaming and judging and pointing fingers, and so, my practice has helped me to see that more quickly. See at least when I’m doing it more quickly, and stop. And pause. And let go of that, you know.

Pausing while in the midst of emotional parent-child interactions enabled participants to choose how they wanted to respond to their children. One participant explained,

What it did was it allowed me to see beyond that immediate defensiveness, that immediate you know knee-jerk reaction to see the deeper thing is, that connection with my kids that I wanted and, therefore, once I could see it then I could move toward it.

A couple of the participants reported pausing when writing texts or emails to consider the appropriateness of the messages they were conveying. When writing texts to her college-aged daughter who was struggling with substance abuse issues at the time, a mother described how she worked with her habitual way of expressing things, which was to tell her daughter what to do, to creating the kind of connection she wanted to have with her daughter, which was more loving and compassionate. Pausing in the moment provided this mother with the opportunity to consider and shift to another perspective. Moreover, a mother of a sixth month-old foster child shared how shifting her perspective in the moment helped her get through sleepless nights:

I'm never going to have another opportunity to have those sleepless nights, to have those delicious moments, it can either be delicious or miserable, and it is a conscious choice.

And I feel like the mindfulness practice allows you to choose the more productive healthy attitude, which is, this isn't going to last forever ... I'm not going to pass this moment up just because I am tired and I'm not going to be frustrated at her or at anyone because I am tired. It's just tired and tomorrow is a new day and tomorrow night is a new night.

In addition, mindfulness was reported to decrease emotional reactivity when the children's needs conflicted with those of the parent. By shifting her focus in the present moment, one mother was able to find "me time" while also caring for her children's needs:

I feel like that is what I signed up for. I signed up to care for these little beings and my time will come and it is okay to give up my time right now...I chose to be a parent and they are helpless and I can have me time while I am giving to them. It is all a perspective and, again, that is the mindfulness practice.

All the participants commented that they are not perfect parents and described situations in which they became angry or frustrated with their children. Mindfulness helped them to decrease their negative response time so that they were better able to recognize inappropriate responding more swiftly:

It enables you to catch yourself quicker. You are not always going to respond well in the moment and the mindfulness practice allows you to have less lapse time between the reaction and, or, hopefully catching the reaction before it even happens, which is incredibly mindful and enlightened but if you don't catch it before it actually comes out of your mouth you are able to catch it quicker, you know, in one minute versus one hour and so I know that I rely on my practice to be able to shorten my lapse time of connecting to what I know to be the right appropriate response.

In summary, mindfulness seemed to lessen emotional reactivity in parent-child interactions. For one participant developing the ability to stay with her emotions and allow them to peak and recede prevented her from disengaging and withdrawing during difficult situations with her children. Pausing during emotionally intense states provided participants with a moment within which to decide how they preferred to respond or behave. In addition to pausing and choosing how to respond, participants reported that shifting their perspective lessened their emotional reactivity in their relationships with their children. Even when participants were not able to stop themselves from becoming, angry, fearful or upset, they believed that their

mindfulness practice helped them to shorten the negative response time in order to respond in a more appropriate way.

Increased perspective-taking. Four out of the eight participants described more openness to consider the perspective of another family member as a result of their practice. Through mindfulness practice, these participants became familiar with the lens through which they viewed reality and recognized that their children viewed the world from their own unique lenses. Participants described that through mindful awareness they were able to value multiple perspectives about an event or experience. One participant said,

I have my version of events, and I have my particular set of desires for the moment or what's going to happen and they come at it with their own.

Participants believed that acknowledging the perspectives and realities of their children created trust and respect between parent and child. One father credited his mindfulness practice for deepening his ability to take his children's perspectives into consideration when disagreements arose:

I may still be very forceful in what it is I want to have happen. I don't think you get any argument from the kids about that statement. But I have much more of an ear for their, again, version of reality than I would otherwise.

Letting go and becoming less attached to thoughts, feelings, objects and expectations is an outcome of consistent mindfulness practice. In the parenting context, one participant described how viewing situations from his children's perspective lessened his emotional reactivity:

What began to happen was the dissolution [of] my attachment to particular images and values, whereby I could, you know, hold my children's experience for what it was for

them, not getting lost in the reactivity that might be generated in, you know, them at that particular time, valuing what they were going through differently than I would have valued it.

In addition to being able to acknowledge their children's perspectives, participants were also able to value and take their spouses' perspective into consideration when making parenting decisions:

I see it as a legitimate other way of doing it. It's not my way, it's not what I prefer to do most of the time, but that's her way, that's her approach.

One participant explained that making conjoint parenting decisions had been a relatively seamless process because he and his wife were able to acknowledge and support the other's perspective:

The mindfulness practice has allowed us both to inform each other of a wholly other dimension of reality. At times, with some sparking. But at the same time, being able to be empathic, understanding, and compassionate for each other's position.... And, so I think that, the potential was really, could have been a disaster, and I think it's been, it's been rather smooth and the process of making decisions, you know, we would always find a way of getting to a singular decision that even the other one might not totally concur, that we could be really supportive of it. That there was a way in which we did not undercut each other as parents.

In sum, the participants credited their mindfulness practice with the capacity to be more open to the perspectives of their children, even when there was disagreement. For one participant, being able to value his son's experience in the way his son valued it, rather than from his own perspective, decreased his emotional reactivity. In addition to parent-child interactions,

some of the participants believed that their increased ability to take another person's perspective into consideration, developed through their mindfulness practice, positively influenced conjoint parent decision-making.

Greater self-understanding. For these eight participants, time spent sitting on the cushion translated into a greater awareness and understanding of who they are and how they “dance in the world.” Participants described sitting in meditation as a chance to honestly take a look at themselves in a curious and non-judgmental way:

We get a chance to see what sort of forces would otherwise be dominant if we weren't sort of going in there and questioning them. And by questioning them I mean being clear about their presence, and pausing enough so that they aren't operative.

Participants were able to identify the dominant forces in their lives, such as individual temperament and personality traits that negatively impacted their interactions with their children. Several participants reported that their intense need to be in control or perfectionist was tempered by their practice through an intention to let go and move on:

My practice has allowed me to let go, I tend to be a perfectionist and it runs in the family, my kids, too. Letting go and constantly using my practice to help me with that. Letting it go that things are just fine.

Moreover, when participants were asked what their life would be like without mindfulness, responses included being more feisty, argumentative, self-centered, blunt, impatient, anxious, mean, dismissive, selfish, punitive, and less available and connected to their children. As one participant said,

I think I would have been very, very punitive. I think I would have been very, very controlling...I think it would have been much darker, it would have been a certain

amount of vindictiveness, you know, a certain amount of sadistic-ness, I think, would have come through, nothing in any large version, but I think that in the process of being mindful, the discovery that I had a dark side, that I had a lower self, allowed me to find that and work with it, not act it out in my parenting process.

Participants commented that the true test of their practice was through their interpersonal relationships. Specifically, interactions off the cushion with their children provided opportunities to take an honest look at themselves:

Children highlight all of your stuff. It like throws in your face all of your things, you know, your issues, whether they were your issues as a child that you have brought into adulthood and your baggage whether it be control, insecurity, whatever it is for you and I feel like your kids give you ample opportunities in a day to really take a look at that and if you don't take a look at it they just offer you more opportunities the next day.

The skill of pausing and checking in with themselves in the present moment allowed participants to penetrate and gain clarity about how childhood events from the past may be still operant in the present:

There are contracts you make with yourself growing up saying, "I will never" and, then, you start seeing yourself doing it and then a judgment comes up and you are stuck in this place of "I've got to do something but I promised myself I wasn't gonna" and now I hear my parent coming out of my mouth, "what is that?" and now I am really getting angry because I hear my parent and I am pissed at my parent and I never resolved that and (laughter). All of that, that is what I mean checking in with myself and where it is coming from. Maybe, perhaps, from my past somewhere and stuff like that still comes up all the time.

Mindfulness practice trains participants to sit with and experience uncomfortable, thoughts, feelings and memories. One participant explained that mindfulness enabled him to work through difficult historical material by first being able to tolerate the experience and then collaborate with it. This process allowed him to, ultimately, reach a place of acceptance and forgiveness:

Mindfulness allows you to really, allowed me to really recognize that what happened is what happened... We have to bring it all into the light and kind of dance with it and say, "Okay." I guess the mindfulness aspect of life really allowed me to let go of a lot of the things that happened as a child... just accepting the fact that whatever happened to me happened to me.

Processing through childhood experiences served to decrease one father's emotional reactivity in his parenting:

Beginning to do the meditation, there was something else I had that I could do with that emotional reactivity whereby a lot of it was working through historical material that would come up, memories of experiences with my parents and the way that they disciplined or my parents and the way in which they treated me. And as I worked my way through that, I became more spacious... Right, so what I found was that I was just more spacious. That I was able to, you know, be witness to what it was my son was doing, being, what have you, without a lot of reactivity coming into play.

Through mindfulness practice, participants reported being able to understand themselves more fully, both on the cushion as well as in everyday parenting experiences. More deeply comprehending their strengths, weaknesses and historical material seemed to change how the participants reacted to them. By affecting change in the individual doing the parenting through

mindful self-explorations, the parenting of the individual reportedly changed over time. Self-understanding seemed to translate into participants taking ownership and responsibility of their communications and interactions with their children.

Discussion

Parenting Stress

When parenting stress develops into dysfunctional parenting practices, parents and children are at greater risk to develop psychopathologies (Abidin, 1995). Findings from the current study lend support to research that indicates that mindfulness is efficacious in decreasing parenting stress and increasing parenting stress coping skills (Singh et al., 2006; Singh et al., 2007). The findings are also consistent with the literature indicating that mindfulness decreases anxiety and stress (Astin 1997; Kabat-Zinn et al., 1992; Miller et al., 1995; Shapiro et al., 1998). The participants utilized their practice as a coping strategy during everyday parenting stresses as well as during more challenging parenting situations. Mindful awareness, both on and off the cushion, enabled participants to become centered and access feelings of calm and peace. The current study suggests that consistent long-term mindfulness meditation seemed to decrease parenting related stresses, which, ultimately, impacted the participant's parenting behavior. Research with couples indicates that mindfulness positively affects relationship stress. Coupled with the results from the present study, it appears that mindfulness may decrease relationship stresses across different interpersonal domains.

Parenting Behavior

In addition, the results suggest that mindfulness meditation positively impacts the parenting of long-term meditators in a number of ways that seem to be consonant with optimal parenting behavior. Attachment theorists maintain that a child's early experiences of their primary caregiver significantly influence their attachment relationship. During infancy and childhood, attachment behaviors become organized into attachment styles which characterize relationships with caregivers (Bowlby, 1969). These attachment styles are thought to influence

significant relationships throughout the life span. Maternal sensitivity has been shown to be important in the development of secure attachment and child adjustment (De Wolff & van IJzendoorn, 1997). Sensitivity, as defined by Ainsworth and colleagues, is the mother's ability to accurately perceive the infant's signals and respond to them promptly and appropriately (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Children who experience their caregiver as supportive and responsive to their needs are expected to develop a secure attachment, which has been associated with a range of positive outcomes (Bohlin, Hagekull, & Rydell, 2000; Ranson & Urichuk, 2008). In addition to the relationship between parent and child during infancy, experiences between the child and their primary caregivers during childhood, and extending as late as adolescence, shape attachment style (Allen & Land, 1999).

The study participants reported a greater richness in the details of their children's non-verbal cues suggesting that long-term meditators may be better able at recognizing and interpreting their children's non-verbal communications. Sustained mindfulness practice not only seemed to influence how the participants perceived their children's signals but also how they responded. When their awareness was piqued by their children's non-verbal communications, the participants described responding to their children in a similar manner as to how they responded to their own thoughts, feelings and sensations while meditating, which was in a curious, non-judgmental manner. Participants believed that communication skills enhanced by their mindfulness practice helped to create safety, trust and connection in their relationships with their children. Mindfulness meditation may, therefore, increase maternal sensitivity and appropriate parental attachment behaviors during childhood and adolescence in long-term practitioners that foster secure attachment and further exploration is warranted.

Numerous studies have investigated the effects of parenting style on child outcomes. The substantial amount of research based on Baumrind's typology of parenting styles (Baumrind, 1966) has consistently shown that authoritative parenting, as compared with the permissive and authoritarian styles, positively influences child and adolescent competence and development (Baumrind, 1971, 1978, 1991). Authoritative parenting is characterized by high levels of parental demandingness and responsiveness (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Authoritative parents view the rights and needs of parent and child as complementary and balance the child's need for individuality and autonomy with disciplined conformity (Baumrind, 1966). Moreover, the parent's ability to accurately interpret the needs of the child and respond in a supportive and accepting manner is central to authoritativeness. Not only did participants in the study describe responding to their children in a curious and non-judgmental way but they also explained that they made a conscious choice, in the present moment, to connect with their children in a compassionate and supportive manner. Moreover, participants described being able to accept their children's view of reality as different from their own. This flexibility to take someone else's perspective into consideration suggests that the practitioners valued the autonomy and individuality of their children, which is a hallmark of authoritative parenting. Participants spoke primarily about their responsiveness to their children and there was little discussion about the ways in which mindfulness affected their demandingness. Whether or not mindfulness contributes to a more authoritative parenting style is a question for future research.

The findings from the current study may also suggest that mindfulness is efficacious in increasing communication skills. Specifically, participants reported that their consistent mindfulness practice assisted them with identifying and communicating emotions and increased their capacity to listen. Furthermore, the long-term meditators described that they approached

conversations with their children in a more curious and non-judgmental manner as a result of their continued practice. A deepening of patience that they cultivated on the cushion translated into more patience for their children off the cushion, which affected the quality of parent-child communications. Participants believed that the ways in which they communicated with their children increased trust, respect and connection between them and their children.

How parents manage and respond to their own emotions, as well as those of their children, is essential to effective parenting. “When invested in the interests of children, emotions organize sensitive, responsive parenting. Emotions undermine parenting, however, when they are too weak, too strong, or poorly matched to child rearing tasks” (Dix, 1991, p. 3). The detached state that results from the disidentification of thoughts, feelings and sensations, is thought to create a “space” between what is being observed and the response (Bishop et al., 2004). It has been proposed that an outcome of this process is a decrease in emotional reactivity. With their own words, participants described a “pause” in their awareness, which had the hypothesized result of decreased reactivity to automatic patterns of behavior, which, in turn, seemed to affect how the participant’s responded and interacted with their children

Broadly defined, empathy “refers to the reactions of one individual to the observed experiences of another” (Davis, 1983, p. 113). Using a multidimensional approach, Davis’s conceptualization of empathy integrates both cognitive and affective components and is operationalized by the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), which measures four individual characteristics of empathy, including Perspective-Taking, Fantasy, Empathic Concern and Personal Distress. Perspective-Taking is the cognitive capacity to assume the psychological outlook of others. The descriptions of the participants’ experiences seems to be consistent with Davis’s definition of perspective-taking and the findings from the current study suggest that

long-term mindfulness practice may increase the capacity for perspective-taking. Further investigation is warranted to understand the relationship between empathy and mindfulness.

Belsky's model of parenting behavior (1984) highlights the influence of the personal psychological resources of parent, including personal developmental history. Moreover, Abidin (1992) recognized the importance of Belsky's contribution of the "interior of the parent" and developed an integrative model of parenting behavior that identifies the parent's personality as the pathway through which sociological, environmental, behavioral, and developmental variables influence parenting behavior. Parenting behavior is further affected by the cognition and beliefs of the parent (Abidin, 1992). Moreover, Siegel and Hartzell (2003) propose that parents can prevent the intergenerational transmission of negative family patterns to their children through self-understanding of how their childhood experiences affect their parenting.

The findings of the present study provide preliminary evidence that mindfulness impacts the interior of the parent in myriad ways. Practitioners were not only able to identify their own dominant personality characteristics but also how their personality traits negatively influenced parent-child interactions. Participants seemed to possess an awareness of when their childhood memories or experiences surfaced when parenting their own children. A greater self-understanding through self-exploration on the cushion seemed to translate to greater self-responsibility and ownership of their actions and behaviors in parent-child interactions. Participants were able to recognize their negative habitual patterns of interactions and express their remorse and apologize to their children. Being able to repair minor ruptures, after becoming emotionally reactive, through taking responsibility and communicating with their children was believed by the participants to create security, trust and connection. Furthermore, mindfulness appeared to assist the participants with attending to their own psychological needs. In sum,

mindfulness seemed to affect change in how the practitioners related and responded to their thoughts and feelings. Increased self-understanding through long-term practice seemed to influence how the participants related to specific personality traits and their developmental histories, which, in turn, affected their parenting behavior in the present moment.

In addition to providing insights into mindfulness and parenting, the themes that emerged in the present study also contribute to our understanding of the relational effects of mindfulness more broadly. Thus far, the majority of research on the interpersonal effects of mindfulness has been conducted within the domain of couples' relationships. Wachs and Cordova (2007) found that partners who were more mindful were better at identifying their own emotions as well as communicating their emotions. Their findings also suggested that "mindfulness promotes more skilled empathic responding" (Wachs and Cordova, 2007, p. 475). More mindful couples also seemed better able to regulate control over aggressive impulses and aggressive behaviors, indicating less emotional reactivity. Similarly, Barnes, Brown, Krusemark, Campbell and Rogge (2007) found that "higher state mindfulness predicted some forms of better communication quality, including lower verbal aggression and negativity and conflict" (p. 495). Using qualitative methodology, Pruitt and McCollum (2010) investigated the effects of traits developed through meditation on intimate relationships and found that mindfulness decreased emotional reactivity. In sum, within couples' relationships, mindfulness appears to decrease emotional reactivity, improve communications skills, such as the identification and communication of emotions, and increase empathy. The findings of the present study are consistent with the findings from the couples' research on mindfulness, which suggest that the relational effects of mindfulness may include increased communication skills, lessened emotional reactivity, and increased empathy. It may be pointed out that empathy in the couples' research focused on

empathic responding while the factor of Davis' three-dimensional model of empathy to emerge in the current study was perspective-taking. Thus, further investigation into the different dimensions of empathy and mindfulness within interpersonal relationships is warranted.

The participants believed that they were not the only beneficiaries of the positive effects of their mindfulness practice. They described how changes in their behavior, which they attributed to their consistent mindfulness practice, influenced other members in the family system. One participant explained, "I don't know if it's just because I'm the mom...but when I was able to be calm the whole house definitely shifted." In addition, a father described how mindfulness influenced the quality of connection created and experienced by his children:

There were times in which, I would put my daughter on my chest and just, you know, do some mindfulness breathing practice and put her to sleep. My son, I would do the same thing... I would lie on the floor next to his bed and find his breathing pattern and breathe with his breathing pattern, just go into deep states of relaxation and he would fall asleep. So there was-there was that and the kids knew that I was doing this and would want me to do it and it became, you know, the foundation for a very deep connection. This kind of connectedness between people became sort of the family culture.

Mindfulness offers an alternative to traditional parenting interventions and further inquiry is necessary to expand our understanding of the systemic effects of mindfulness meditation on families.

Mindfulness Mechanisms

The experiences described by the long-term meditators in the present study begin to suggest mindfulness mechanisms operating in parent-child relationships. Mindfulness mechanisms identified in the current literature base include, but are not limited to, exposure, self-

regulation, and cognitive, emotional and behavioral flexibility (Baer, 2003; Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006). Time spent on the cushion cultivating mindfulness seemed to affect how the participants related to their internal experiences. Through repeated exposure to their own thoughts, feelings and sensations, participants were able to take an honest look at themselves in a non-judgmental manner. Repeated exposure to uncomfortable thoughts and feelings seemed to allow for a deeper penetration into the reality of those experiences and a greater clarity into the origins of those thoughts and feelings. It is believed that with repeated exposure comes desensitization. It may be that exposure is a precursor to self regulation and cognitive, emotional and behavioral flexibility.

Cognitive and emotional flexibility seemed to occur through the participants understanding of their personal psychological resources, personality traits and developmental history. Greater understanding and insight into the practitioners' internal landscapes also seemed to help dissolve attachments to belief systems and created a space within which multiple realities were considered. In addition, an expansion of awareness of self seemed to also translate into an expansion in some of the participants' capacity to take in other family member's perspectives, and thereby hold two perspectives simultaneously. Mental rigidity seemed to be replaced with a more open and flexible way of experiencing themselves and their family members. The practice also seemed to increase authenticity of self as well as self-responsibility and self-ownership in parent-child interactions. Self regulation was evidenced by the participants' ability to intervene in habitual patterns of behavior and lessened emotional reactivity during parent-child interactions.

Altmaier and Maloney (2007) believe that "as parents become more mindful, they become more aware of how their responses influence their interactions with their child and learn

to be more intentional in their parenting and choose ways that enhance and sustain a positive emotional connection” (p. 1232). Intention is one of three axioms in Shapiro and colleagues (2006) model of mindfulness. Self-understanding coupled with intentionality seemed to affect how the participants responded and communicated in parent-child interactions. Participants seemed able to pause and intentionally shift their behavior in the present moment, which may have been in part a result of greater cognitive and emotional flexibility.

Participants repeatedly stated that they are not perfect parents or mindful all the time. The participants, however, believed that when they were able to be in the present moment with their children their interactions were characterized by compassion, safety and trust. Communications were positively affected when parents were equanimous and non-reactive, open to the perspectives and goals of their children, and able to listen to their children in a curious and non-judgmental way. It seemed that open, calm, supportive communication occurred through changes in the parent’s self-understanding developed through their mindfulness practice and the parent’s intention to create warm, supportive and nurturing relationships with their children.

Limitations

There are several limitations to the current study. First, the sample was modest in size, with a total of eight mindfulness practitioners participating in the present study. In addition, there was a lack of diversity within the sample. The participants were Caucasian, well-educated, and mostly affluent and, therefore, the results may not be generalizable to different populations. Perhaps, the most significant limitation of the study is that the data were obtained through self-report, semi-structured interviews with practitioners, as opposed to including interviews with the practitioners and their family members. This is significant to mention, since the practitioners described the qualities of their relationships with their children, however, this is only their

perception and their spouse and children may have different thoughts and feelings. Moreover, this impacts our full understanding of some of the relational effects of mindfulness meditation within the parenting domain, since only the practitioners' perspectives are provided. In addition, the sample was heterogeneous in that participants were at different life stages, some early in the parenting process while others had raised their families and their children were no longer living with them. Another limitation of the study is that the reports were retrospective for some participants, rather than perceptions of their present experience. Furthermore, confounding factors such as aging and therapy may have contributed to the parenting of long-term meditation practitioners. The participants were asked what other resources they turned to for parenting support in addition to mindfulness during stressful situations. Participants reported that they attended individual, couple and family therapy and parenting seminars and also engaged in yoga and other meditative practices, such as chanting. For some participants, parsing out the specific effects of mindfulness meditation from the other factors was difficult, since they were viewed as complementary and mutually reinforcing. Finally, the participants self-selected by volunteering to participate in the study. They seemed to create a unique population in that each of the participants seemed dedicated to improving themselves as well as their parenting and sought out resources to assist them. Furthermore, the majority of the study participants taught mindfulness in different capacities, which may further add to the distinctness of this population.

Future Research and Clinical Implications

Researchers may expand on the current study in a number of ways. This qualitative study was designed in order to gain a more global understanding of how mindfulness influences parenting behavior. This big-picture approach yielded preliminary results, which warrant further investigation into specific areas of inquiry, such as empathy, maternal sensitivity, and parenting

style. Moreover, the majority of mindfulness research studies have utilized beginning practitioners. The continued incorporation of the perspectives of long-term meditators will further our theoretical understanding of the relational effects of mindfulness, within the parenting context, specifically, as well as the interpersonal affects of mindfulness, more generally. Furthermore, the present study included only the perspectives of the practitioners and did not include data from other family members. Broadening the sample to include the spouse and children's perspectives would greatly expand our understanding of the relational and systemic effects of mindfulness meditation. It would also be important to study practitioners and their families longitudinally, using both qualitative and quantitative methods, in order to answer questions regarding the effects of mindfulness meditation on empathy, maternal sensitivity, and parenting style.

In addition to future research, the themes identified in the current study have important implications for clinicians, particularly family therapists. Mindfulness components have made their way into behavioral therapies including dialectical behavior therapy and acceptance and commitment therapy and it may be beneficial to develop family therapy models that incorporate mindfulness meditation and techniques. Mindfulness may also serve as a complementary adjunct to existing relational models. For example, family therapists may refer parents to Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction or Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy courses, in addition to traditional family therapy to lessen symptoms associated with stress or chronic depression. Mindfulness within the therapeutic context may provide parents with a more clear sense of how their personalities, developmental histories, and communication styles impact parent-child interactions. Mindfulness components may be incorporated within current models to help parents with understanding their internal subjective landscape. For example, qualities such as

compassion, curiosity, and calm that are associated with “the Self” within Internal Family Systems Therapy (IFS: Schwartz, 1995), were consistently recognized as characteristics experienced by long-term mindfulness meditators. Exploring how mindfulness practice compares and contrasts with the goals of IFS as well as how mindfulness techniques may work in tandem with IFS therapy may be fruitful. Mindfulness practice might serve as a beneficial adjunct to IFS therapy in order to more seamlessly identify and facilitate understanding of managers and firefighters in order to access the Self. In addition, since preliminary evidence suggests that mindfulness decreases emotional reactivity in couples and parent-child relationships, mindfulness techniques may be a useful complement during the de-escalation phase of Emotionally Focused Family Therapy (EFFT: Johnson, 2004).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study is significant to begin to understand how mindfulness influences parenting behavior as well as the relational effects of mindfulness meditation. This study adds to the small but growing body of mindfulness and parenting literature that may, ultimately, influence the evolution of therapeutic models and the development of parenting interventions that are alternatives to traditional cognitive-based and skills oriented approaches. It is also important that long-term meditators were the focus of this research, since few studies have incorporated the perceptions of this population within the mindfulness dialogue. Experienced Western practitioners differ greatly from their counterparts living in traditional monastic settings and they have a great deal to impart about the myriad ways mindfulness impacts their modern daily lives and relationships. Comprehending the complexities of the multi-faceted construct mindfulness remains for future inquiry.

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Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Age	Years of Practice	Age of Children	Years of practice when first child born
1	M	48	19	M, 12; F, 18	0
2	F	44	23	F, 1.5; M, 7 M, 10	11
3	M	68	37	M, 22; F, 25; Step-child: M, 46	Step-son: -7 First biological: 10
4	F	48	20	M, 19	0.5
5	F	49	11	M, 18; F, 20 (twins) F, 21	-3
6	M	55	30	M, 21; F, 23	8
7	F	39	8	F, 0.5 (foster child, in adoption process) F, 4	4.5
8	F	64	11	M, 27; M, 34	-23

Appendix A

Recruitment Script

Phone and E-mail:

Hello, my name Eve Hornstein. I am a graduate student at Virginia Tech's Marriage and Family Therapy Program. I am conducting a research study on the influences of mindfulness meditation on parenting. I am looking to interview experienced meditators, who have been practicing mindfulness meditation for at least seven years. I would greatly appreciate it if you would distribute the attached flyer to anyone who you know who may be willing to participate in this study. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions. Thank you for your help.

Appendix B

Informational Flyer

EXPLORING THE INFLUENCES OF MINDFULNESS MEDITATION ON PARENTING

*Have you been practicing mindfulness meditation
for at least seven years?*

Are you a parent?

*Are you interested in contributing to a research
study on mindfulness?*

The voices of long-term mindfulness meditators have thus far been largely unheard in the current mindfulness research dialogue. This research study seeks to incorporate the experiences and perceptions of experienced mindfulness meditators to contribute to our understanding of how mindfulness affects interpersonal relationships. Specifically, this study seeks to understand the influences of mindfulness on the parenting of long-term mindfulness meditators.

If you would like to participate in this study, you will be asked to fill out a brief questionnaire and be interviewed about your experiences and perceptions about mindfulness and parenting. Interviews can be conducted in person or over the phone and will take about an hour and a half. All the information you provide will be kept confidential.

To learn more about this research study and set up an interview time, please contact Eve at 203.434.4092

Please feel free to pass this information along to others who may be interested in contributing to advancing our knowledge about mindfulness meditation.

Appendix C

Pre-Interview Script

I am a graduate student in the Marriage and Family Therapy program at Virginia Polytechnic and State University. I am conducting a research study designed to understand the influences of mindfulness on interpersonal relationships. Specifically, my study focuses on how mindfulness influences the parenting of advanced meditators. If you agree to participate, I would interview you for approximately an hour and a half about your experiences of mindfulness and parenting. All the information you provide will be kept confidential. Are you interested in participating in this study? When would be a convenient time to arrange an interview? Where would you like to meet for the interview? If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at 203.434.4092. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study.

Appendix D

VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY Informed Consent for Participants in Research Projects Involving Human Subjects

Title: Advanced Meditators' Perceptions of the Influences of Mindfulness on Parenting
Principal Investigator: Dr. Eric McCollum,
Co-Investigator and Interviewer: Eve Hornstein

I. Purpose of the Research

While there is a growing body of research to expand our theoretical and conceptual understanding of the multi-faceted construct mindfulness, the majority of studies have thus far focused on intrapersonal effects. A small number of relational-based mindfulness interventions for couples and families have emerged, which provide insight into mindfulness and relational variables but further investigation is necessary. Furthermore, there is limited qualitative information in this area. This study, therefore, seeks to fill the gap in the relational mindfulness literature by understanding advanced meditators' experience of parenting using qualitative phenomenological methodology. It is the hope of the researchers that the findings of the perceived influences of mindfulness meditation on parenting will ultimately enhance the clinical practice of psychotherapists and therapeutic intervention development as well as provide information that will positively impact client care.

II. Procedures

As a participant in this study, you will be asked to fill out a brief demographic questionnaire and you agree to participate in an audio-recorded interview about the influence of mindfulness meditation on parenting. You can expect the interview to last approximately 90 minutes. The interview will take place face-to-face or over the phone.

III. Risks

There are only minimal risks to participants of this study. The interview does focus on relational and family issues. If you find that you would like to explore these issues further, you may be referred to the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists (AAMFT) website for a list of therapists in your area. In addition, the researcher has referral information for mental health resources should you wish to further process any difficult thoughts or emotions evoked during the interview process. Payments associated with counseling referrals will be the responsibility of the subject, not the research team or Virginia Tech.

IV. Benefits

It may be considered a benefit to discuss your experiences as a way to enhance your thoughts and experiences around the subject matter. In addition, you will assist with adding to the limited body of research regarding the interpersonal effects of mindfulness.

V. Anonymity and Confidentiality

All of the information provided during the interview and over-the-phone or email is confidential. All identifying information will be removed and replaced before the transcription process begins. All identifying information provided during the audio-recorded interview will be removed and

replaced with aliases in the typed transcript and study report. The only individuals with access to the audio recording and original audio transcript will be the Principal Investigator, Co-Investigator, and the individual transcribing the interviews. Portions of your interview text may be used verbatim in the report of the project and/or in subsequent publications. Portions of the audio file may be used verbatim in academic and professional presentations. The audio file will be destroyed after thesis approval with the exception of audio clips selected for use in academic and professional presentations. The expected thesis completion date is September 2011. You should be aware that the researcher has a duty to report a suspicion of child abuse, or potential harm to yourself or someone else.

VI. Compensation

There is no compensation for taking part in this study other than our gratitude and appreciation for your time in participating.

VII. Freedom to Withdraw

You have the right to refuse to answer any question at any time. You have the right to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

VIII. Participant Responsibilities and Permission

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. In agreeing to participate, I understand that I have the following responsibilities: to discuss, to the best of my ability, my experience of the ways in which mindfulness influences parenting during a ninety-minute interview.

I have read and understand the Informed Consent, which states the conditions of this project. Any questions I have prior to beginning my participation in this study have been answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent for participation in this project:

Participant Signature

Date

If you have any questions about this research in any capacity, research subjects' rights, and/or whom to contact in the event of a research-related injury, you may contact:

Dr. Eric McCollum
Principal Investigator
Telephone: (703) 538-8460
Email: ericmccollum@vt.edu

David M. Moore
Chair, Virginia Tech Institutional Review
Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Office of Research Compliance
2000 Kraft Drive, Suite 2000 (0497)
Blacksburg, VA 24060
Telephone: (540) 231-4991
Email: moored@vt.edu

Appendix E

Demographic Questionnaire

Gender: Male Female

What is your age? _____

Marital status: Single Married Separated Divorced Remarried

Occupation _____

Do you teach mindfulness meditation? If so, in what capacity?

Who else lives in your household?

- Spouse
- Partner
- Biological children. How many? _____
- Stepchildren. How many? _____

What is your ethnic background?

- White
- Black (African American, Negro)
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
- Other. Please specify: _____

What is your religious preference?

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Catholic | <input type="checkbox"/> Jewish |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Protestant | <input type="checkbox"/> Muslim |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Baptist | <input type="checkbox"/> Buddhism |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Episcopal | <input type="checkbox"/> Hindu |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Methodist | <input type="checkbox"/> Other. Please specify: _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mormon | <input type="checkbox"/> No religious affiliation |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Evangelical | |

What is your highest level of education?

- High school incomplete
- High school
- Some college/university
- Community College
- Tertiary, non-university degree
- Bachelor's Degree
- Master's Degree
- JD/MD/Doctoral Degree

What is your annual household income?

- Less than \$20,000
- Between \$20,000 and \$40,000
- Between \$40,000 and \$70,000
- Between \$70,000 and \$100,000
- Over \$100,000

Appendix F

Interview Script

Background questions – Mindfulness Practice

- When did you begin your mindfulness meditation practice?
- How long have you been practicing meditation?
- Briefly explain some of the reasons you began a mindfulness practice.
- Please tell me about your mindfulness practice (e.g. when, where, duration, frequency individual/group, retreats).
- How does the logistics of your practice (e.g. duration, frequency, location) affect your parent-child relationship/s and spousal/partner relationship in terms of parenting?

Background questions – Family Composition and Children’s Background

- How many children do you have?
- Ages of children?
- How old were you when you had your first child?
- How old were your children when you started meditating?
- Does your child/children have any special needs?
- Describe the makeup of your household (spouse/partner/biological children/step-children).

Questions regarding how mindfulness influences parenting

- Describe the ways in which your mindfulness practice has influenced your parenting.
- If a family member were here, what might they say about how your mindfulness practice has influenced your parenting?

- What are the ways in which mindfulness has impacted your relationship with your child/children?
- How has mindfulness influenced how you interact with your child/children?
- How has your relationship with your child evolved as a result of your mindfulness practice?
- Describe how mindfulness may impact experiences in which your needs are conflicting with your child's/children's needs.
- Could you give me an example of how mindfulness influenced how you reacted when your needs conflicted with your child's?
- Describe how mindfulness may influence how you behave when your child reacts inappropriately?
- Could you give me an example of how mindfulness influenced how you reacted when your child was behaving inappropriately?
- What are some of your stresses related to parenting?
- How has mindfulness affected stresses related to parenting?
- How would your parenting be different if you did not practice mindfulness?
- Describe the ways in which mindfulness has influenced your interactions with your partner about making decisions together about your child/children?
- What are the ways in which your mindfulness practice influences how your partner/spouse parents?
- How does mindfulness influence how you view how your spouse/partner parents?
- Does your mindfulness practice spill over into how your children interact with one another? If so, how?

- Other than mindfulness, what other resources did you seek out to help you as a parent?
- Is there anything else that we have not talked about that you would like to add regarding how mindfulness has affected your parenting?

Appendix G

IRB Approval Letter



VirginiaTech

Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board
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Blacksburg, Virginia 24060
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MEMORANDUM

DATE: June 6, 2011

TO: Eric E. McCollum, Eve Hornstein

FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572, expires October 26, 2013)

PROTOCOL TITLE: Advanced Meditators Perceptions of the Influences of Mindfulness on Parenting

IRB NUMBER: 11-480

Effective June 3, 2011, the Virginia Tech IRB Chair, Dr. David M. Moore, approved the new protocol for the above-mentioned research protocol.

This approval provides permission to begin the human subject activities outlined in the IRB-approved protocol and supporting documents.

Plans to deviate from the approved protocol and/or supporting documents must be submitted to the IRB as an amendment request and approved by the IRB prior to the implementation of any changes, regardless of how minor, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects. Report promptly to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at <http://www.irb.vt.edu/pages/responsibilities.htm> (please review before the commencement of your research).

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Approved as: **Expedited, under 45 CFR 46.110 category(ies) 6, 7**

Protocol Approval Date: **6/3/2011**

Protocol Expiration Date: **6/2/2012**

Continuing Review Due Date*: **5/19/2012**

*Date a Continuing Review application is due to the IRB office if human subject activities covered under this protocol, including data analysis, are to continue beyond the Protocol Expiration Date.

FEDERALLY FUNDED RESEARCH REQUIREMENTS:

Per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.103(f), the IRB is required to compare all federally funded grant proposals / work statements to the IRB protocol(s) which cover the human research activities included in the proposal / work statement before funds are released. Note that this requirement does not apply to Exempt and Interim IRB protocols, or grants for which VT is not the primary awardee.

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this IRB protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this IRB protocol, if required.

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