

**Playing with Buddha:
Integrating Mindfulness into Play with Young Children
as a Parent, Teacher, or Child Therapist**

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“Quality” time with those we love, especially young children, seems to be increasingly difficult to find in our busy, stressful lifestyles. And it is precisely this “quality” of contact that shapes our relations with each other as well as literally determining the neurological development of children’s brains according to the newest research.¹ Eastern psychology and Buddhism define “mindfulness” as what gives our contact with each other a special, healing quality. Buddhist psychology’s focus on mindfulness in everyday life² can be extended into our play and interaction with young children as parents, teachers, and child therapists to mutual benefit.

Mindfulness:

Mindfulness according to Buddhist psychology, Transpersonal psychology, Inter-subjective Ego psychology, and Dialectical Behavior Therapy is a combination of being present-centered or focused on the moment yet fully cognizant. It is the doorway to many things, including present-centered, kind, and compassionate relating.² It is also the conduit to positive adult-child attachments in the early years, birth to age six.

The Importance of Attachment:

Research across disciplines has shown that the quality of adult-child attachments in the early years is a critical factor in the development of social bonding, resilience, emotional intelligence, and many aspects of brain development as well as the prevention of later violence.^{1%4} Egeland, Carlson, & Stroufe (1993) found that children from poor high-risk environments who thrived and demonstrated resilient traits had secure attachments with their

caregivers. None of the children in this study whose attachments were impaired, due to chaotic homes or abusive caregivers, thrived socially or academically as teens and adults.^{1&4} Shore (1997, 2003) has reviewed and summarized recent findings in brain and attachment research across disciplines. Her research strongly suggests that the prime time for the “neurological” development of social-emotional capacities is from birth to age eight.¹ It is “mindful” early attachment experiences that, in part, determine later healthy capacities such as the ability to understand another’s perspective, respect differences, and show empathy to name a few.⁴

Brain Development:

In utero and in early childhood our brains develop from the bottom to the top, that is from the brainstem at the base or the fight or flight system I call the “reptile” to the emotional (limbic) system in the middle of the brain or the bonding system I call the “puppy”, and the cortex at the top or the thinking system I call the “computer.” Each system has evolved to have different jobs or functions. The reptile can help protect us when we are truly threatened, the puppy can help us bond with others through emotional connections, receiving positive reinforcement, and engaging in play. The computer can help us when we need to think something through by going into the past or projecting into the future to solve a problem or find a solution. And there is what they call in Eastern psychology our “deeper” self that allows us to dis-identify with the reptile, puppy, and/or computer and use each of their functions as needed (if we have learned to).

A New Look at Piaget:

A young child has the ability to be “fully” in the here and now, IF they are in a safe, contactful environment until around age six-to-eight. If not the reptile or unhappy puppy can rule. But children are, by and large, unable to step out of the here and now to use thinking processes needed to function in the phenomenal world such as planning ahead, getting a job, etc. When the child’s cognitive development shifts, around age seven, from Piaget’s preoperational

stage of cognitive development (pre-mental operations or primarily being in the here and now) into the concrete operational stage or early mental operations (like planning, remembering consequences, etc.) the bulk of their energy is shifted from the here and now to developing various mental capacities or operations such as projecting into the future, generalizing from one setting to another, etc. If this stage is not arrested they go on to achieve, by age 11-12, formal mental operations, the most advanced stage of thinking (theorizing, critical thinking, etc.). Of course all thinking takes us out of the here and now and that's the catch I believe, because by the time we have reached the later stages most of us identify our sense of self with the computer or these thinking capacities (or in some cases our puppy or emotions or in others our reptile or fight or flight instincts depending on our developmental experiences). Buddhist psychology teaches that we are not any of these parts and perhaps in a sense all of them. Therefore individuals are taught to dis-identify with these mental formations of self and use mindfulness as the doorway to a state of "being" where we can be fully in the here and now (much like a child) and at the same time cognizant of the phenomenal world (much like an adult)...a perfect union of feeling and thinking allowing us to function in the world while experiencing a deeper aspect of our fully integrated nature.

So when a young child has a behavior problem or trouble adjusting we, as adults (whether parents, teachers, or child therapists), typically focus on the problem behavior, rules, solutions, etc. We can forget that the lack of "being" present-centered with children and ourselves is a very important part of the solution. One of the ways we can be present-centered with young children is through play.

The Power of Play:

Play is perhaps the most developmentally appropriate and powerful medium for young children to build adult-child attachment relationships, develop cause-effect thinking critical to

impulse control, process stressful experiences, and learn social skills.^{3&4} Bernard Guerney's (1964) work in training parents to use methods derived from child-centered play therapy with their children (Filial Therapy) has been shown to significantly improve children's behavior, parental acceptance, and parental behavior. It has also demonstrated that parents can be trained to use play therapeutically (Oxman, 1971; Stover & B. Guerney, 1967). Coufal and Brock (1979) looked at three interventions with parents (parent skills training, parent skills and play, and no treatment) and found that parents in the parent skills and play group showed significant differences in improved "parental" behavior and acceptance. Louise Guerney's Foster Parent Skills (Guerney & Wolfgang, 1981) and her subsequent Parenting Skills (Guerney, 1992) Training Programs have been proven effective in increasing parental acceptance, developing positive parenting skills, and decreasing negative parenting behaviors (Guerney & Wolfgang, 1981). All of these approaches employ a "present-centered" or mindful form of adult-child interaction during play. Louise's parent program also adapts and applies aspects of therapeutic limit setting used by play therapists. One of the central strategies is to teach parents to "give language" first, reflecting the feeling the child is expressing back to the child before setting limits.

Why "Mindful" Play Works:

The reason that play with adults changes children's behavior is that it changes the adult's way of relating to the child through "mindful" interaction. Playing with the child can become an interactive "heart" meditation where the child feels respected, honored, and empowered and the adult learns to allow deeper levels of being both present and heartfelt (which they have often forgotten). The child can almost act like our own inner voice that reminds us gently to come back to the present in meditation, but in this case back to the present in our play with them. One of the common skills play therapists are taught is to "give language" to what they see in play as well as the feelings the child expresses in their play. For instance while leveling with a child playing

with dinosaur miniatures, the adult might give language to what they see the child do or what feelings might be represented. “The dinosaurs are fighting” (saying what you see or tracking) followed by a feeling/thematic statement like “The T-rex is angry” or “The momma long neck is scared!” At this point the child is likely to provide a verbal or nonverbal response letting you know if you’re right or not. Another way to understand what is happening here is to recognize that the adult is modeling mindfulness by being in the here and now and simultaneously cognizant of the child’s play and feelings projected that are onto the toys. At first glance one might think that identifying feelings and giving language is a form of analyzing but in practice it is more akin to the “attunement” between a baby and a caregiver or what is referred to in neuroscience as “limbic resonance,” that is when two limbic systems (adult and child) in the mid-brain or what I call the puppy/bonding part are resonating together.^{5 & 6} We are not closed loops as most women experience when their cycles coincide as a result of spending time together. Our limbic systems are always communicating whether we’re aware of it or not and “mind” is better thought of as the flow of energy and information between brains rather than some internal, individual entity or process.⁶ As a play therapist and school psychologist I can tell you that engaging in this process with children over many years has benefited my own spiritual growth as well as the emotional health of many children. In a way, young children are like “little” Buddha’s hence “playing with Buddha.”

Certain Rules are Necessary:⁴

It is important to note that rules need to be established first before using play in this manner. “Symbolic” expression of feelings (anger, sadness, fear, joy, etc.) through play is acceptable, but no one is for hurting and the toys are not for taking or breaking. It is also important to note that it is simply not true that appropriate symbolic expression of feelings leads to actual aggression or other behavioral problems. When adults state they are angry or sad they

are symbolically (with words) expressing feeling. Young children use and prefer play to express feelings symbolically, hence symbolic play. Toys are literally words and play is language. As children develop they gradually replace symbolic play with symbolic verbal expression. One basic rule though is no movie/TV theme toys or play (Spiderman, Hulk, etc.). Research clearly indicates that watching and emulating super heroes, etc. can lead to later violence.

Some Skills to Practice:⁴

So what are some specific things you can do with young children to facilitate this kind of interaction? First set aside about 30 minutes one-to-two times per week to play with the child using miniatures or pretend play items. During play time the first skill to develop is to simply be non-directive and let the child lead the play or activity. This means no teaching about colors, numbers, etc. or inserting your own scenarios or agendas into the play or activity like “let’s pretend to have a picnic.” The exception is setting limits when necessary. The second skill is to level (sit on the floor, etc.), touch, smile, and make eye contact as you playfully interact in the now with the child. If you start to think about the grocery list gently bring yourself back to the present. If the child gives you a look, as if to say “you’re not here with me anymore,” acknowledge it (“You want me to be here with you”) and come back into the present. The third skill is to simply give language (descriptive tracking statements) to what you see in the play (“The T-rex is growling at the long neck” or “The momma is feeding her baby [doll]”). Ask few, if any questions in favor of making “say what you see/tracking” and “feeling” statements. The fourth and final skill is to make statements or give language to the “feelings” expressed in the child’s play without leading (“The T-rex is angry” or “The long neck is scared” or “The baby feels loved by the momma”). If you find yourself overanalyzing the meaning of the child’s play stop and come back to the now with the child and attune yourself emotionally. If you need to analyze do so after the session or while you’re watching a video of the session. The child’s

verbal or nonverbal response will tell you if you're right or not. It's OK to be wrong and try again.

If you are new to this method it may be best to focus in the first few play sessions on the first three skills of being non-directive, leveling, making eye contact, touching, and using tracking statements. It is very helpful to video or even audiotape a few sessions initially in order to see what your skill level is (asking too many questions, leading the play, spacing out, etc.). After you feel comfortable with the first three skills try adding in the fourth skill of giving language to the feelings the child projects onto the toys or pretend play roles. If you are experiencing behavior or adjustment problems with a child you should see changes after about 6-12 of these 30-minute sessions. This material is part of an early childhood, school-based intervention program called "Positive Attachments & Learning to Succeed™" (PALS) that was developed by the author. The references below will provide additional resources. If you have questions the author can be contacted at: info@pals4schools.com.

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