



Mindfulness for Parents and Kids: Simple Practices for Healing, Resilience and Presence

Dr. Christopher Willard

Interviewed by Dr. Laura Markham

Laura Markham (00:04):

This summit is brought to you with love by Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids. Welcome. Hello, I'm Dr. Laura Markham, founder of Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids and organizer of this online summit. Nurturing hearts, nurturing minds, the neuroscience of peaceful parenting. I can't wait for you to meet my next guest, Dr. Christopher Willard. Dr. Christopher Willard is a clinical psychologist who teaches at Harvard Medical School. He's the author of 20 books, including *Alphabreaths*, *Growing up Mindful*, and his upcoming, *Feelings Are Like Farts*. Dr. Christopher Willard has spoken in over 35 countries, has presented it to TEDx events, and his thoughts on mental health have been featured in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *CNN*, and many other places. So Chris, I'm so excited to be able to ask you, what does mindfulness mean in the context of parenting? I know you're a parent as well as a mindfulness expert.

Dr. Christopher Willard (01:02):

I am. And parenting really added a new challenge to my attempts at mindfulness. I was thinking about this question recently. Mindfulness is being in the moment and all that stuff, we know. But realizing, for me, I think when it comes to parenting, so often we are unconsciously either repetition compulsion of what our parents said and

those words coming out of our mouths or we're reacting and rebelling and it's like, "I was spoiled. I'm going to deny my kids," or, "I was denied, I'm going to spoil my kids." And it's like, let's not either mindlessly reenact or mindlessly rebel. Let's see what we can take from our own growing up and caregivers and let's figure out how to respond in the moment to the moment of what our kids bring us and to the moment of, 2024 is different than the seventies and eighties when I was growing up, and we have to respond to the present in a really different way.

(01:58):

And so that to me is a big part of it. And it comes with finding those ways that we can slow down, that we can co-regulate with our kids. People ask me, "How do we get more mindful kids?" And I realized, "Well, I know how to do the opposite." If you want stressed out, miserable kids, you surround them with stressed out, miserable adults. If you want more mindful, compassionate kids... It really is contagious. We have to surround them with more mindful, compassionate adults. So as much as so many of us want to go out there and tell our kids to breathe and meditate, we do unfortunately have to start with ourselves. I believe that more and more the more I've been doing this work, is the good news and the bad news. So I think that's how I think about it. But I'm happy to share practices for kids and for parents.

Laura Markham (02:48):

Let's do both. Let's jump right into the concrete, practical application of mindfulness. I'm assuming you're going to tell parents that they don't need to sit down and meditate every morning for an hour because they probably won't do that, they don't have time. So let's start with the parents themselves. How can they use mindfulness in their daily lives?

Dr. Christopher Willard (03:09):

Yeah, absolutely. I've been talking about a father I work with in my clinical practice who's got a very high needs, special needs kid, will probably be institutionalized for his whole life. And the dad is a wreck and the marriage was at its very wit's end when he reached out. And we worked together around acceptance and around different strategies and talked about his feelings and this and that. And we finished up our work a few years ago and I was like, "What do you think was the most helpful thing we did?" And he said, "Chris, in all of our conversations, the most helpful thing was, you told me, 'Drive home from work...'" And he's this high-powered lawyer probably driving his Audi SUV, bombing down the highway. "Pull into my driveway and then just turn off the engine and just take three breaths in the car, in the driveway."

(04:04):

And then I walk into the house. And I used to bring the chaos and I don't know if I now bring the calm, but at least I'm not bringing the chaos into the house. And the house is already chaos. My wife is working from home and trying to manage the kids and there's a sibling and there's a nanny, a special needs nanny, and it's dinnertime. At least I'm not making the situation worse when I walk in. And I really do feel like we're busy parents, we don't have that hour. We need to take that three minutes in the car. After drop off just pause for a minute. I was talking with a friend, I was like, "When my kids were little, I get a couple minutes of practice, the kids are watching Daniel Tiger." And I'm just like, "All right, I'm just going to focus on my [inaudible 00:04:56]." That's when it's got to be.

(04:57):

And honestly, 22 minutes of Daniel Tiger is a luxury. I've also got to be cooking dinner and exercising, all these other things. So hopefully, as the kids get older, practice a bit with them, check in with our partners, if we're lucky enough to have one, around the positive and what's working. We spend so much time as parents that you're only as happy as your least happy child. "We've got to fix this and fix that." But like, "Oh, here's really working. Let's treasure these moments and bringing our mindfulness to that." So it's really all of this I think, because you can't parent from a meditation cushion. You just can't. You have to live it. You have to embody it.

Laura Markham (05:46):

I heard there are a few things. I heard the pause.

Dr. Christopher Willard (05:51):

Mm-hmm.

Laura Markham (05:51):

I heard the breathing, just a few minutes to breathe. I heard the checking in with yourself, with partner. I heard the, "focus on the positive." You're bringing an overall frame to the home, which is, "How do we show up?" Is that right?

Dr. Christopher Willard (06:18):

I love how you say that it's, "How do we show up? How are we present?" We have to be present to parent, that's for sure, but on multiple levels. Parenting can feel so chaotic, and I think that's why a lot of people fall into rigidity around routines and structure. And I'm a believer in more rhythm than structure and routine than structure. I think when we have rhythm to our lives, there's the busy part of the day and then there's the reflection part of the day. There's the beginning and the end,

and where can we bring in some awareness, some reflection, some pausing a little bit in the morning? As a family, we do roses and thorns in the evening where we're reflecting on the day. Doing a bud, looking to the next day ahead. Having these things as part of the rhythm, I feel like is a really helpful way that we can all show up. Of course, we have to show up for our kids. But as parents... And I'm a white dude. I have it probably the easiest in some ways. But how're we showing up for ourselves? Because we lose track of that a lot I think as parents because society is telling us to focus so much on our kids. And of course we need to, but we also have to find ways to show up for ourselves so that we can show up in many ways.

Laura Markham (07:46):

So before we get into mindfulness practices for the kids or the whole family, let me just ask you what happens in the brain and the nervous system? What does stress do, and as the antidote, what does mindfulness do?

Dr. Christopher Willard (08:06):

What stress does... And I often invite people to just notice in your body, if you tense your muscles up, which is a fight or flight response, you can feel in your body, your heart rate changes, your breath changes, your bandwidth shuts down. You're actually only taking in a certain amount of stuff and letting a certain amount of stuff back out. You're actually filtering out the positive. I mean we always do that, but even more so, the brain is looking for more danger, looking to reinforce danger and problems. Critical thinking shuts down and compassion shuts down. The perspective part of the brain where we have social-emotional intelligence, perspective taking mirror neurons, that shuts off when we're stressed out. Cortisol, which is the stress hormone, it actually blocks... And I learned this actually in birthing class with my wife. I wasn't doing the birthing, my wife was, but I learned it in the birthing class, cortisol shuts off oxytocin. Oxytocin is the love hormone, the attachment hormone. Pitocin is what's given to people when they're giving birth. It's artificial oxytocin.

(09:15):

So all those things shut down. But if we then open up in a mindful posture of this or a self-compassion posture like this, the whole brain starts working, the amygdala and limbic system quiet down, the blood flows into the outer cortices of the brain. We think things through, we take perspective. We don't take it personally when our kids are being difficult. We're like, "Oh, they're having a hard time," not, "They're giving me a hard time." Those cliches actually work in our brains chemically. The oxytocin is flowing. We're able to build those strong and secure attachments that we know kids

need and we're able to show up for them. We're able to show up for ourselves. All those other good changes start to happen. So it's really amazing.

(10:07):

And then what I love about mindfulness learning recently is that it's contagious. That truly, people that live together, just one parent practices and the kids are happier and getting along better. One teacher practices and the kids are behaving better in school, these amazing contagion effects. One person in the couple is practicing, the other person is happier. [inaudible 00:10:33] start with yourself. It's like, "Oh, there's science to starting with myself. It's not just a great thing to say." I find that stuff just so exciting and compelling. So even if your kids don't do any breathing themselves... Well, hopefully they're breathing. But I mean if they're not doing any mindfulness themselves, you doing it is actually... And the most important thing for kids is that strong, secure, stable, compassionate attachment figure. And the more we take care of our stress through mindfulness or compassion or whatever we do, the more we're able to be present and show up. So, yeah.

Laura Markham (11:10):

Yeah. So I'm imagining a parent who's listening to this, who's saying, "Okay, but when I get upset, breathing doesn't really calm me down." So how would you answer that?

Dr. Christopher Willard (11:23):

Yeah, and I hear this from my own kids. I remember my son, when he was learning how to spell, he was like, "Dad, how do you spell breathing?" And I'm like, "B-R-E..." And he's writing this down in black marker. I was like, "I wonder what he's doing." Then he picks up a red marker, makes a big circle and a slash through it, like a no breathing sign. I was like, "Okay, I've got to do something different." So I think making breathing fun. But I think also, how do we do mindful movement? How do we do visualizations? With teenagers, listen to your music more mindfully. Put on your favorite song. Listen to just the guitar, not the drums, or listen to just the piano, not the lyric. These kinds of things, that four or five minutes of listening to a song like that is so much more interesting than, "Focus on your breath." Which again, "Focus on your breath," is great, but we can find these other ways, even just changing our posture. I love learning this one for teenagers, just going like this, it's really hard to not breathe deeply and slowly when you do this. A lot of us do this automatically, and it's like what a good self-regulation practice. And for teens especially, it's like secret.

Laura Markham (12:47):

Secret is good for teens in the classroom.

Dr. Christopher Willard ([12:48](#)):

Exactly.

Laura Markham ([12:51](#)):

Yeah. It's cool. It looks cool.

Dr. Christopher Willard ([12:52](#)):

Right. Exactly. Exactly, exactly. So I think these kinds of things... I loved this year... It's been true for a while, but this year, the Olympics, which I was watching with the kids, so many athletes talking about mindfulness, breath-regulation, visualizations, talking openly about mental health. I think it's just been a wonderful, wonderful thing for young people and for society, that people are talking so openly about these things. So some of those role models I think can be helpful too for our kids.

Laura Markham ([13:30](#)):

When you describe the music, I would never have thought of that. "Listen to the guitar and not the drums." But I think what you're talking about is bringing conscious awareness to the present moment. It brings us more present. Right?

Dr. Christopher Willard ([13:42](#)):

Exactly. Exactly. And I'm a big believer in our senses... We know from research, your thoughts are going to the future. Your thoughts are going to the past. Are they going to comparing ourselves? Which you're a teenager and you have this comparison machine in your pocket. You're a parent and you're like, "Every other parent on the playground has their act together except for me." We always feel bad. But when we focus on our senses, we're actually in the present. Growing up, I often tell this story of I went to this camp, it was this very sweet nature camp. And they'd be like, "We're going to go in the woods and just listen to all the sounds." And like, "We're not going to hear anything." And then sure enough, you hear the birds, you hear the wind, you hear this. Or walk without making a sound at all. Instead of saying do mindful walking, it's like walk like a ninja. And you're focused only on each footstep. You're focused on what's the texture of the ground? You're focused on every movement. Instead of saying, "Do mindful walking," it's playful, it's in the moment. Your mind is focused on that, not on the past, the future, comparison.

([14:52](#)):

Finding these ways to make it a little bit more playful, a little bit more of a game, especially with kids, but with teens too, I think is a really important way to think about teaching, because kids learn through play. And so do we adults, for that matter.

Laura Markham (15:10):

Those are great for beginning mindfulness practice with a 6-year-old or 16-year-old. What are your other favorite things to recommend to kids or to their parents for kids?

Dr. Christopher Willard (15:23):

Yeah. I think if we can go back to breathing, I think breathing can be mixed. A friend and I did an alphabet book about breathing with A is the alligator breath, then breathe in and breathe out, and B is the butterfly breath, C is the hot chocolate breath, breathe in, smelling, blow out, cooling off. And again, someone told me I'm the fastest talking mindfulness person. I'm aware of time. I don't usually talk this fast either, but these are some ways to make it a bit more fun. My kids love visualizations. I am starting to think they like a visualization before bed so that they don't have to go to sleep. But they do really love, "Dad, can you do a longer visualization about being at the ocean and our breath is like the waves or we're flying on a unicorn," or whatever? And visualizations don't click for everybody, but my kids really love them.

(16:33):

I think also they can really teach us how to embody certain characteristics. I know Thich Nhat Hanh, who was where I first started practicing, just that, "Breathing in, I see myself as a mountain and breathing out I feel solid." What a beautiful way to cultivate confidence and feeling solid. "Breathing in I see myself as a flower, and breathing out I feel fresh." Just these little pieces of imagery I think can be beautiful, or doing a longer feel like a mountain or feel your breath like waves of the ocean washing away worries like sandcastles on the beach. Although, my kids got very sad about the sandcastles washing away. But these kinds of things I think... [inaudible 00:17:22] adapt it for them. But these kinds of things I think are really nice when kids can resonate with a visualization.

(17:29):

And to me, also, one thing that I find really inspiring is my son really loves writing and creating, and so he makes up his own. I'm going to tell a story that I've told before, but I had this funny experience a few years ago. I was exhausted or not quite in the mood to do a meditation one night. And I walked by the kid's room and my son was guiding his little sister in a meditation and I was like, "I'm the most mindful dad in the world. This is amazing. This is the best." And it was because he was making it up. But

also, part of the story I tell is, the next day my son picked up a book that my wife and I wrote together about mindfulness and whacked his sister over the head with it. Your mileage is going to vary. But to me, I think when they're young, if they have a positive experience... I say this about therapy too. I want therapy to be either fun or helpful or both. And if it's neither, let's just stop. Let's do something else, unless there's a safety risk or something.

(18:38):

But really, I work with adults who are 40. "I went to therapy when I was a kid. I got a donut afterwards. I played Uno. It seemed like a waste of time. And now I'm divorced and I've got a drinking problem and I never went back because it was not a good use of time or didn't feel like it." And when I think about teaching kids mindfulness, I just want it to be something they look back on in treasure, not like a, "That was a chore. My parents made me breathe for five minutes every day. It was so stupid." I want it to be like, "Oh, we had this nice family moment," or, "We took this beautiful walk in the woods and noticed the sounds." Or, "I watched clouds in the sky with my dad for five minutes until they disappeared." That's how I want the seeds to be planted when I think about this. I know I'm talking a lot and talking fast.

Laura Markham (19:31):

No, this is really great. And I want to ask about buy-in because a lot of parents are like, "Well, how do I teach my kid? How do I get my kid to do it?" I find there's two reasons that they ask this question. One is when they have a kid who has some emotional regulation challenges, like who's six or seven or eight, and the other time is in the teen years when kids get so stressed, as you know. In both cases, when that kid's upset, or when a kid is stressed out, a teenager is stressed out, it's pretty hard to say, "Oh, let's do some breathing." What do you recommend?

Dr. Christopher Willard (20:11):

I really believe don't teach it in those moments. The bad news that parents don't want to hear, it's like, "Yeah, practice when everyone's in a good mood when they actually will be more likely to." And I think also for parents, it doesn't have to be you. I'm not going to teach my kids calculus. No way. And I'll teach them a little bit of mindfulness now. But ideally, my son will be rolling his eyes in a couple of years, but maybe it's his soccer coach. Maybe it'll be his music teacher, maybe it'll be his therapist. Whatever adult in their life they're making contact with who they have that nice relationship with outside of the family, that's a really useful buy-in right there for parents to remember. And maybe you got a chance to plant the seed, which is great,

but maybe it is someone else who helps them a little bit more, especially in the teen years.

(21:06):

I think with buy-in too, kids have to feel like they know what's in it for them. I had this interesting experience where I was in a school in California and I did two talks for the high school. They were the same talk, but the first talk I did mindfulness and stress, and the kids were pretty engaged. And the second talk I did mindfulness. And instead of talking about stress, I just changed the vocabulary to mental health. And I was actually really surprised because those kids really paid attention in a different way and they asked different questions. And I think kids feel like sadly, they're supposed to be stressed out, and if they get rid of their stress, then they lose a part of their identity or they're not working hard enough or there's something wrong. But kids are really open about mental health these days and they really tuned in and asked really thoughtful questions when I framed it around, "This is helpful with anxiety, this is helpful with depression, this is helpful with impulsivity." And that was actually really a powerful lesson for me. So we might think they want to hear about stress, but they might actually want to hear about mental health, or we might think this will help them in school, but they actually care more about, "Will this help me on the soccer field?" Like Leo Messi practicing mindfulness these days. Or, "Will this help me feel a little bit more confident at a party? Because pretty nervous about going to this party." Or up on the for my bar mitzvah or doing the solo in the school play. These are their little moments that they all have. So we have to really make it fit for them, I think is part of it too. And the more we can know the kid... Ideally, we know our own kids, but if we're working with a therapist or a coach or someone else who's bringing this in, I think that helps too. And practicing together for families-

Laura Markham (23:04):

How would a parent introduce that? Somebody who's relatively new to mindfulness, but maybe they're working on getting a practice started, but how would you recommend they say something to their kids about practicing together?

Dr. Christopher Willard (23:17):

And I think this is something that people in the mindfulness world and therapists, I think we stumble with. It's awkward. It's like, "Never going to do this thing." It's like, what? With my own kids, we do it before bed, so they're open, and it's like, call it a relaxation, call it a meditation, call a visualization, whatever. When I'm playing games with my kids, we're playing Uno and I'm like, "Oh, this game's getting really heated. I've got to just take a minute and take a few breaths." And kids are gullible. My son's

intensely playing backgammon with music. "I've got to take a breath and look at the board." I'm like, fooled him. Finding these ways to do that. My son, with soccer, he gets a little nervous. I'm like, "This breathing thing that Messi does, this might really help you when you're playing goalie to focus." Or my daughter having difficult moments. It's like, "Let's really feel your feet on the ground before the ballet recital. You're looking at the crowd. Don't look at the crowd. Just take a breath in, press your feet into the ground. Are they warm or cool? Are your feet dry or damp? Is the floor hard or soft? Okay. Now let's start the recital."

(25:01):

I think nature has a lot of lessons. We can say to kids, "We're going to go for a mindful walk." Or we can go for a walk and say, "Hey, how many different birds can you hear right now? Hey, how many color shades of the color green can we see in the woods?" It's just a little bit more of an informal prompting to be mindful than, "Let's do this thing." I think also when we model it, like if we do sit in the living room floor and do five minutes of meditation, the kids will say, "What are you doing?" You can say, "You can join me." There's that too. So I think these are ways to integrate it in a little bit. Because the older the kids are, the more awkward it feels. It's challenging.

(26:04):

I think also if they get a nice introduction from a therapist, from a coach, from a music teacher or drama teacher, I think that also is a nice... And we can invite them, "Hey, the newsletter home at school said you're doing mindfulness. Can you show me what that you did? Can you lead me in a practice, do you think?" Again, easier when they're younger than when they're older. But I think those are some ways to start to build that family practice, especially as they get older and you're not starting from age zero where it's a little bit more just in the air that they breathe. But yeah.

Laura Markham (26:41):

Well, I want to wrap up by going to the brain for a minute because I'm thinking about... There's the kid who's about to have the ballet recital and is anxious or wants to know, "When I'm goalie, how can I be less nervous?" And those are great opportunities to talk to kids. And then there's also still the mom with the seven-year-old who loses his temper more than his peers do, let's say. And so we have two different things here. You're not in the moment, you're not [inaudible 00:27:14] intervention with that seven-year-old, but you're doing prep work that's changing the brain, in a sense, if there's regular mindfulness in the home. And then with the ballet recital or the goalie, they might be working, practicing a tool so it comes more easily to them in the moment when they want to access it, or before that test in the

classroom or their presentation. So in one case, we're changing the brain, but really in the other case, we are too, right? Repeated practice. So tell us about that back to emotional regulation as a result of mindfulness because of changes in the brain.

Dr. Christopher Willard (27:51):

Absolutely. And I think it really is the both/and, as everything in this complicated world is. For my own kids, I talk about, it's like soccer. "Lionel Messi doesn't practice just before the World Cup. He practices year round." But there is that, "Let's practice this regularly so that it's accessible to you in the moment that's a bit more challenging too," so that it lowers your overall anger level, reactivity level, anxiety level so that you're less likely to have a panic attack, less likely to have an anger issue meltdown. But also then when you're in that moment, it's smaller. And when you're in that moment, you can remember the skill at the same time. Because what it does is, the research has found... Colleagues of mine, like Sarah Lazar and a bunch of other folks at MIT and stuff like that are looking at brains of adults and kids and seeing they're growing new gray matter in the prefrontal cortex where we self-regulate, manage our emotions, our attention, they're growing new gray matter in the insular cortices where we have our social reasoning, social intelligence, theory of mind. And the amygdala, which is... It's like the fear, fight or flight center, but it's really the big emotion part of the brain, the brain's alarm system, we can say, that's getting a little bit smaller and less active.

(29:18):

We need an amygdala. We need to know when things are dangerous or scary, but what happens with mindfulness is, it's like an alarm that goes off at the right times. We've all had that apartment where it's like you burn the toast and suddenly every smoke alarm goes off. You want the alarm that like, "Oh, there's a fire." That's when I want the alarm to go up. That's what actually mindfulness does as far as changing the brain. And that's incredibly valuable that a kid can say, "Oh, test. I'm nervous, but I know I can do it." That's the both/and we want. You want to be nervous for that test because it lets you study, it gives you some energy, but you don't want your brain to shut down. You want to get frustrated that your sister got a treat and you didn't, but you don't want to punch them in the face. You want to have that anger tells us that there's an injustice happening and that's important, but what do we do with that anger, that emotion? And I think that to me is what we see the brain science allowing us to do is to feel the feeling, but also think it through, the wise mind that's between the rational mind and emotion mind, for the therapists of course, who may be listening to.

Laura Markham (30:28):

Right. Thank you. I love the image of the gray matter growing when we're practicing mindfulness. So important, because this is one of the things parents are always saying, "How do I help my kid to start to get a little more emotional regulation to think through decisions, to be a little less impulsive?" Well, there's a way to do that.

Dr. Christopher Willard (30:53):

I had this kid who once was like, "Dr. Christopher Willard, my mind wanders off. I bring it back. I think I can feel my prefrontal cortex growing a little bit." I was like, "Dude..." I love it, though. I love it. The kid's [inaudible 00:31:05] science too. It's really, really a kick for them.

Laura Markham (31:08):

What are you up to now? What's your next thing?

Dr. Christopher Willard (31:11):

I've got opposite sides of the developmental spectrum in a couple of months. I have two books coming out. One is Mental Health in College Students, which no one's really written about, but it's like a book for parents and kids, how to care for your mental health and care for your friends. We interviewed hundreds of students and it was very cool to do that. And then I've got a book that a friend and I wrote during the pandemic. We wrote it over text message five years ago. It's finally coming out. It's called Feelings Are Like Farts. They can linger, but they never last. They can be silent, but they're never deadly. Just a fun way of teaching about emotions are impermanent. And so it's been five years since we signed the contract and it's finally going to be on the page. So those are different ends of the childhood spectrum, but hopefully relatable.

Laura Markham (32:05):

I love how you're always teaching about emotions, not just mindfulness, but about emotions and accepting emotions. They arise and they pass away [inaudible 00:32:16] in emotions. And the college book, I'm very excited about it. I think it's much needed. So that's [inaudible 00:32:23].

Dr. Christopher Willard (32:22):

Yeah. I'm excited for that. It's based on my own bumpy college time is how that... Now a long time ago, but I've always wanted to write that book. So I feel really grateful that I got a chance to.

Laura Markham (32:34):

Well, thank you so much for sharing your wisdom with us today. Really appreciate [inaudible 00:32:39].

Dr. Christopher Willard (32:38):

Thank you so much. This has been great.