



Brain Hacks To Reset Your Nervous System with Meditation and Mindfulness Practices

Hunter Clarke-Fields

Interviewed by Dr. Laura Markham

Dr Laura Markham ([00:04](#)):

This summit is brought to you with love by Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids. Welcome. Hi, there. I'm Dr. Laura Markham, founder of Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids and organizer of this summit, Nurturing Hearts, Nurturing Minds: The Neuroscience of Peaceful Parenting. I'm delighted to introduce you to my guest today, mindfulness expert Hunter Clarke-Fields. We are here today with Hunter Clarke-Fields, the host of the very popular Mindful Parenting podcast and bestselling author of Raising Good Humans. Hunter has 20 years of experience in meditation and yoga practices. She's taught mindfulness to thousands of people and teaches mindful parenting to parents, but also to teachers, so I knew she would be the perfect person to talk to today about how parents can reset their nervous systems using mindfulness practices. Hunter, I'm so glad to see you again.

Hunter Clarke-Fields ([01:06](#)):

Thank you. I'm so happy to see you again, it's lovely.

Dr Laura Markham ([01:11](#)):

So let's just start with how mindfulness can help parents in specific.

Hunter Clarke-Fields ([01:17](#)):

Sure, yeah. We think of it as a sort of woo-woo thing, and we all have an idea of what it is, but I think it's really helpful to think of it as a brain hack that helps us to be less reactive. Mindfulness does a lot of things for people. It helps us to have more awareness, it helps us to be calmer, it helps us to have perspective on our thoughts and our feelings and recover faster from difficult things. But for parents, what's incredibly important, why I needed it so desperately, is that it can help us to come back when we're starting to get stressed out and reactive. It can help us to recover from that and then also to start to not go down that path quite so easily, so it's incredibly helpful for that.

Dr Laura Markham ([02:09](#)):

Yes, beautiful. So it actually changes the nervous system. At that moment when I as a parent am about to lose it and I'm in fight or flight, what can mindfulness do at that moment?

Hunter Clarke-Fields ([02:24](#)):

Well, so there's two ways it helps. So it can help in the moment, but it also really, really helps overall. One of the things that happens for us as parents is that in order to... I struggled enormously because when my daughter was two years old and my temper was coming up, I was yelling and reactive, and I would listen to incredible great teachers and learn about how to respond to my kid, and then it would all just fly out. It would be gone when I was in a difficult moment. I'd be like, what was that thing I was supposed to say? Ah. So that was very frustrating, and what I found out is that that's not just me, that's not my fault, it's none of that. What's happening is that in that moment we're starting to get stressed. Our nervous system, that fight, flight, or freeze stress response, is actually cutting off access to the slower parts of the brain so that you can respond more quickly.

([03:24](#)):

So when you have a stress response, when your temper is rising, it's not your fault. It's not something you're choosing. It's your nervous system's ingrained, evolutionary, biological reaction, and what's happening is it's bypassing the prefrontal cortex. So this is the area behind the forehead, it's that later evolved part of the brain, and it's responsible for impulse control, verbal ability, problem solving, and creativity. So think about that. Impulse control, verbal ability, problem solving, these are all the things we want to be able to have when we're dealing with crazy toddlers and we're in a moment, but then that's what kind of goes right out the window.

([04:10](#)):

So I realized as I started to dive into this, I realized, A, it's not my fault that this temper is rising. It's part of how I was brought up, the luck of the draw. It's part of just how we're all wired to be reactive, that's just how we are, I wasn't choosing to be reactive. But then B, there were some things from this mindfulness that I had been studying and learning about since I was a teenager that could really come into play here and I really had to dive back into it. That's one of the key pieces about a mindfulness practice, is that it can help us calm our reactivity overall, just lower the reactivity level overall, but also can help us in the moment. So I'm happy to share how that works.

(05:03):

Overall, it's pretty amazing. They've done MRI brain scans of meditators, and done it before they started a practice and then eight weeks later, and what they discover is that the amygdala, which is kind of the seat of the fight, flight, or freeze stress response in the brainstem, it actually shrinks those. It makes them smaller and it makes the connectivity between the amygdala and the rest of the nervous system shrink as well. Then the brain scans also show that the prefrontal cortex area, which is that impulse control, verbal ability, and problem solving, it actually grows thicker in gray matter. So you're actually growing, you're making that connectivity stronger, you're really changing and growing your brain. So as you practice calming, not reacting, that ability to not blurt out some terrible thing that your parents might have said to you becomes stronger. You are more able to use that brain. I'm just going to pause here a lot. This is how it builds that lowering reactivity overall, but we can also use it to help in the moment.

Dr Laura Markham (06:23):

I love this. When you say it's not your fault that you can't think clearly at that moment, actually, if it were a bear chasing, you wouldn't want the prefrontal cortex involved. You'd want to get out of there. So it makes perfect sense that we're wired this way, but when it's your two-year-old or your twelve-year-old, it really is not helpful. So what you're saying is it changes, first of all, the alarm system gets, not disabled, it's still there if a bear comes along, it's less powerful is what you're saying. It calms the brain down so it's less reactive and it strengthens our ability to think well in that moment. So that's more likely to be able to override, to be able to say, well, is this really an emergency? No, it's my twelve-year-old. I love it.

Hunter Clarke-Fields (07:14):

Yes, yes, exactly. The cool thing about when we start to understand what the research has come out with the brain in recent years is that, I mean, they used to think the brain was you didn't grow and change, but we now know that there's this

neuroplasticity and what you practice grows stronger. So it's literally when you practice not reacting, when you practice pausing, this is a mindfulness practice that's so easy to do, when you practice pausing even before you respond to your kid, even in a calm moment, you're making yourself more likely to be able to go down that path later. The brain is like you're kind of bushwhacking through the forest at first, and then as you practice, there's a path. Eventually it's a highway. So we want to make the highway towards yelling and maybe the unskillful things we were saying go back to the bushwhacking path, and we want to make the skillful things more like a super highway.

(08:16):

So what I always recommend to parents, because we want to have tools for in that incredibly frustrating moment too, is that you write down some mind body tools and you practice them. You take a couple weeks and maybe put them up on post-it notes and put them around so that you can practice in calm moments, but then you take a couple weeks and you say, this is what I'm going to practice. So when we understand that it's this nervous system stress response that's making us act a little crazy and aggressive maybe with our kids, then we can start to say, okay, the number one thing we have to do in that moment, and the number one thing I have to do in this moment for me to be able to think at all and be a good parent, is to take care of myself and to calm my stress response.

(09:05):

That becomes the number one thing because, as you teach so beautifully, we know that kids co-regulate their feelings with us. So if our kids are going to have a chance to calm down, we have to be calm. We have to be able to offer them some of that calm. So our own regulation becomes the number one thing, and so how do we do that? So if we know that the brain is reactive, we can biohack, which is really beautiful. So we know that with the breath, each inhale is a mini fight, flight, or free stress response, and each exhale is a mini opposite rest and relax response in the nervous system. So when we say to use the breath to calm down, it's so cliché, but it's so cliché because it works.

(09:54):

So if you take an inhale, like say you take a breath in for four, let's try it now, take a breath in, and then you breathe out for longer, for six say, let's do two for good measure, inhale and exhale for longer, you can probably already feel that, how it calms the body. Just so simple, in two breaths. So if you're in a moment and you say, okay, longer exhales, you write that down in your sticky note, on your five sticky notes

that you play strategically around the house and you practice that. Okay, longer exhales are going to help me to retain more of my thinking brain.

(10:44):

Other things we can do, using the power of touch. Okay, I'm safe here. You might tell yourself, this is not an emergency. This is not an emergency, I'm helping my child. Then we're going through the mind to help the body and to remind our nervous system that it's fine. Then the most powerful thing is the simplest, and that is mindfulness is all about acknowledging what is here, being really in the present moment with whatever is here, whatever feelings are here, whatever sensations are here, and accepting that.

(11:26):

So when we're in a moment and we acknowledge what's happening out loud verbally, this is what Dr. Dan Siegel calls Name it to Tame it. We say, I'm starting to feel so frustrated, I'm feeling like I'm going to blow my top. That becomes this bell of mindfulness and this pattern interrupter. That's what that acknowledgement does, it interrupts the already maybe established pattern of, oh, I'm trying not to feel this way, I'm trying not to feel this way, and then boom, I'm exploding. Instead, when we say I'm starting to feel frustrated, I'm starting to feel tight muscles, all that thing, then we can say, oh, ding, ding, ding. This is when I look for these sticky notes. Oh yeah, breath. Oh yeah, this is not an emergency. Oh yeah, hand to the heart. Then we take those actions. Just that simple interrupter can really be very, very powerful.

Dr Laura Markham (12:25):

I love this because it gives parents the sticky notes and the specific ways that they can work with what comes up for them in any given moment. I want to ask you to add something about acceptance, because I sometimes hear from parents, "Well, if I accept that he just clobbered his brother, then I'm not doing anything about it." Could you address it?

Hunter Clarke-Fields (12:51):

Yeah, I could see how one would worry about that. I mean, the thing about acceptance, I know it's a hard thing for us to wrap ourselves around. The thing that happens is that whatever is here, whether it's a sibling clobbering a brother, or if it's a difficult feeling or thought inside yourself or your kid's difficult feelings, they're here. It's happened. It's already here in the present moment, so to fight against reality doesn't make any sense. We have to acknowledge what's happening, and in fact, that's a mindfulness tool in of itself to acknowledge, oh my goodness, I'm looking in

here, I'm seeing you're yelling, I'm seeing he's upset. I'm feeling upset because everybody's upset. To acknowledge all of these things verbally is just to accept that this is reality, and they've done studies that show that lowers the emotional temperature.

(13:50):

It's like if somebody's upset around you, if somebody's anxious or upset and they say, "No, I'm fine. I'm fine," and you can see that that person is upset, you start to just absorb those feelings and then there's nothing you can do about it because they're denying that it even is happening. If when we say to the people around us, "Yeah, I'm feeling a little jittery or whatever," everybody's like, "Oh, yeah. Yeah, that's real, that's true," we can all feel the power of acceptance letting us take that exhale of, yeah, that's here, and now we can do something about it.

Dr Laura Markham (14:37):

Actually moving into that present moment instead of fighting with it. It sounds to me, from what you're saying, we have more power in that moment to actually change whatever we want to change.

Hunter Clarke-Fields (14:47):

Yes, exactly. It's interesting because one of the things I help parents with a lot is being able to take care of our difficult feelings, whether they're anxiety or anger or whatever, sadness, whatever these feelings are, because a lot of us weren't taught how to take care of them. Then we are now a lot more emotionally intelligent and we know that with our kids, we want to help our kids work through their difficult feelings, but it wasn't something we were taught. So we may be saying to our child, "Here, you do this thing," and then we're not really doing it ourselves. Our kids can kind of feel that disconnect there, that hypocrisy, if we're not walking the talk.

(15:31):

So one of the things that I think is so important for us to do as parents is to practice, to take care of our own difficult feelings. It's like, because we weren't taught how to do that, we were taught just don't have these feelings or stop crying or go to your room, it's something we have to learn. So it might be very uncomfortable for us, and it's uncomfortable to say, oh, I'm feeling anxious right now, or, oh, I'm feeling like I just wish I could get away and not be a parent today, or, oh, I'm feeling upset right now. It's hard for us to acknowledge the feelings because we want to just deny it, or even if we're upset with our kids, we want to say, oh, I'm fine. Mommy's calm. I'm calm, I'm calm.

(16:26):

But the thing is, we as human beings, we feel each other's feelings. We co-regulate even as adults. We co-regulate with our pets, we co-regulate with the people in our houses. We can feel each other's feelings. When we are so afraid of acknowledging our feelings to our kids that we deny our feelings, our kids start to see. It becomes a lack of trust because they can feel one thing and then the parent or the caregiver is saying another thing. So it may feel counterintuitive, but it's actually much more skillful to accept, yeah, I'm upset right now. This is a hard moment. Then it's like a river gets unblocked and it's like the cloud can then move along. It's like something happens with the universe as we start to accept it, is that then we can move along.

(17:25):

I mean, I'm getting a little woo-woo here, but it literally is what happens from the research, but it's also what happens that we have to accept these things for that blockage to move through. It's how we digest our feelings, is by acknowledging them. We have to digest them, and if we try to pretend they're not there, it's like we've got some big emotional hamburger that we're eating and we have no digestive system, it's going to make a big mess. We have to acknowledge it and digest those feelings, and that's how we show our kids how to do that, by doing it ourselves.

Dr Laura Markham (17:58):

When you say we're getting woo-woo, it's true that before the last couple of decades of brain research, it was woo-woo because we didn't know how to explain what was happening in the brain and nervous system. But actually, we now know that when we are feeling upset about something, when we have big feelings and we can't deal with them, we're shutting them out, our nervous system gets mobilized against a threat. It can't tell the difference between a threat from that bear or a threat from inside us. It's a threat, so we're mobilized, and of course we're reacting differently than if our nervous system was in a state of relaxation and able to connect with our child. Of course it feels different to them. I mean, we can think of it as woo-woo, or we can actually say the evidence is mounting that, actually, this just makes sense neurologically. As you've been saying throughout our entire conversation, our nervous system is geared for protection when necessary, but through repeated experience to our brains, we can change how we're showing up and that's so much better for our kids.

Hunter Clarke-Fields (19:11):

Yes, and I love a mindfulness practice. For me, it was life-changing. I'm highly sensitive. I need all the things. I need to have my exercise, I need to have some time

for myself, but I'm such a better parent with a mindfulness practice. It really transformed me over time, bit-by-bit, from being a really reactive, tense, stressed parent to someone who could be more present. Not to say I've never yelled at my kids and I don't make mistakes, because that would be a complete lie. I do and I have, of course. But it can be so simple and we have time, it doesn't have to take that long.

(20:01):

We have five minutes that we spend on social media, we can take a few minutes each day to practice, to regulate our nervous system just by taking three minutes a day to sit still and to breathe and to rest with whatever is arising. Then that translates over time, bit-by-bit, into an ability to rest and accept the things that are happening with our kids. That is an incredible gift because then we can be present rather than trying to solve their problem or fix it or make it go away. We can actually just be there with them.

(20:46):

There's a teacher that I've followed for many, many years and been practicing in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh, and what he said is really motivating for me. He said, "When you love someone, the best thing you can offer is your presence. How can you love if you are not there? How can you love if you are not there?" So yeah, it really is powerful to practice a little bit, a little bit every day, to be a little present even with the tough stuff.

Dr Laura Markham (21:19):

So let me ask you to support all of us right now by taking us into a very short meditation that the parents who are with us right now can use and reuse and reuse if they're trying to retrain their brain. So something that if I'm a little worked up or a little anxious, that I could just turn this on and settle myself. Would you take us through?

Hunter Clarke-Fields (21:48):

Yes. Yes, absolutely, let's do it. So we'll do something like a three-minute practice. That's so short and so small. Don't flip to your next podcast, your next thing, just take a moment, be brave and sit with us. So I invite you to sit in a comfortable position, sit so you're sitting up nice and tall, so your body is alert like a queen or king, but you're relaxing a little bit. Then rest your hands as you feel comfortable and soften or close your eyes. Let's start by just taking a deep breath into our bellies and then a big sigh out. We'll just do another one like that. Deep breath in, big sigh.

(22:45):

Then let your body do the breathing for you and let your belly be soft. Let the space around your forehead become smooth, your cheeks and your jaw softening and relaxing, even feeling your tongue relax. Then imagine a sensation like someone pouring warm water over your shoulders, and then just inviting them to soften a little here. If they're tense, just letting that tension be. Letting the hands soften. Again, belly soft. Feeling even the feet touching the earth or anywhere your body is touching a surface, just feeling that steadiness.

(24:25):

As we get quiet, our brain, which likes to be distracted, kind of revolts a little, and that's okay. We lead it like we are training a puppy to walk on a leash back to the present moment. So we gently pull our attention to the present moment, and in this case, let's bring our attention to the feeling of breathing at our belly, feeling the belly expand and soften. There's nothing to do except just rest here and notice there's nothing to achieve. Then keeping that attention on the belly just for the last few moments and for the last few seconds of this meditation, just giving up all effort, letting go. Then as you're ready, just taking a deep breath in and a long, slow exhale. When you feel ready, wiggling your toes and blinking open your eyes and just noticing how you feel just from a few minutes of rest.

Dr Laura Markham (26:51):

Amazing how even a few minutes centers us, right?

Hunter Clarke-Fields (26:58):

Yeah, and it can be hard. Those could be hard a few minutes for some people, or it may be very calming and relaxing for others, but either way, you're training your attention as you bring your attention back to the present moment, and to this case to the breath, to come back and to be present. It might be more bushwhacking through the forest or it might be a smooth path, but either way, it'll help you to be more present with your kids.

Dr Laura Markham (27:29):

So if it's hard, if someone just did this meditation and it felt really hard, it could have felt hard because I felt like crying or it could have felt hard because I felt like my mind was racing, what would you tell me, us?

Hunter Clarke-Fields (27:44):

I'd say, if your mind is racing, welcome to the club, because that's all of us. The mind wanders five bazillion times during a meditation, and that's just what the mind does.

The mind thinks just like the ears hear and I see. Our practice is not to stop our thoughts. Our practice is just to, when we notice we're off in a thought, we come back. That's all. Just like, oh, I was thinking, and then I come back. So we're not trying to stop our thoughts. We're just trying to be able to build the ability to be present when we want to, to have that ability.

(28:23):

For a lot of restlessness, I would encourage people to just stay there and die of restlessness, and it will eventually go away and you'll discover that you won't die of restlessness. When you sit with the feeling of restlessness and just like, fine, I'm restless and I'm going to die of restlessness, that feeling, it's the power of acceptance. The feelings is, oh, it's unblocked and it moves on through. For other people, something like a walking meditation is very helpful, slowing down. Maybe you could sit with this recording in your car for three minutes before pickup, or maybe before pickup you walk very slowly to the school rather than rushing and thinking about all the things you do, you walk very slowly and feel each footstep on the pathway and breathe and let your body calm. So all of these little moments of practice can really add up throughout the day.

Dr Laura Markham (29:28):

What if big feelings come up?

Hunter Clarke-Fields (29:33):

Well, when big feelings come up, we have a practice for that. There's a wonderful acronym, it's called RAIN; recognize, accept, investigate, nurture with self-compassion. That's a practice where it may be that in some moments, if big feelings come up, it's skillful to take a break and to, I don't know, watch Gilmore girls. That's legit sometimes. That's a fine practice sometimes. If something's too big or you need to talk to somebody, or you need a therapist or you need some support, that's totally fine.

(30:10):

Sometimes as difficult feelings come up and big feelings come up, we can stay with that. We can say, oh, hello. Hello, sadness. Hello, grief. Hello, anxiety. I see you there. We practice to rest our body through that. So we practice the slower breathing, we practice feeling our belly expand. We practice to rest through that, and just like restlessness, they start to dissipate as we stay and they can then get shorter in duration. That's I think the power of mindfulness, is not that it makes any difficult feelings go away, but it helps us to recover more quickly instead of sending us into a

spiral. We're like, oh, I can feel that, I can digest it, I can be with it. It's not going to kill me. I'm going to be okay because I've been here before.

(31:05):

Then the beauty of that, actually, if we have a difficult feeling in a meditation session, is that then when our kid comes to us with difficult feelings... I remember my daughter, she was upset with me and my husband for something, and she was telling us and she was getting upset. At first I got the broom and I was sweeping around her as she talked, and then I just said, oh, I can feel that restless energy. I said, oh, what I need here is just to sit and listen, just to be with her. There's nothing to fix, there's nothing to solve, I just have to be there. I sat with her difficult feelings, and that was a gift. That was the gift of my practice that I was able to do that, and that's what sitting with your feelings can do for you as you build up capacity.

Dr Laura Markham (31:54):

I love that, and I noticed the compassion with which you, "Oh, hi, difficult feeling." I know there's a lot of research on how self-compassion helps us recover faster, because in addition to the difficult feeling, we often feel the overlay of self-judgment, and we're bad and wrong for having the feeling, and we'll never get past it, so we add an overlay of fear. Whereas the self-compassion just says, you're okay. Everyone has felt this way, we're going to get through this. I'm right here for you.

Hunter Clarke-Fields (32:29):

Yes. Yes, the N in the RAIN practice is to nurture with self-compassion. I think compassion can arise naturally as we practice mindfulness because we become more aware of our humanity and how it's hard to be human. It's really hard to be a human being alive and conscious no matter what is happening in your life. So we start to see that and become aware of that and that compassion arises, but yeah, we can practice that too. Even that, even if it's uncomfortable, we can say, this is a hard moment. We can put the hand to the heart, have that compassionate touch. We can remind ourselves that we're not alone, that Dr. Laura has felt these feelings, Hunter feels his feelings. We all feel these things and it's hard to be human. Then we can say something kind to ourselves rather than judgmental.

Dr Laura Markham (33:23):

Even the hand to the heart, there's research showing it's not, again, just some woo-woo thing. It's actually makes a difference in our regulation when we have our hand on our heart. That's great.

Hunter Clarke-Fields (33:36):

Yes, yes. Gentle, nurturing, touch, we can give it to ourselves, yeah, research has shown that.

Dr Laura Markham (33:45):

To wrap up here, you listed longer exhales, gentle, nurturing, touch and acknowledging, accepting, which interrupts the pattern. We've also talked about the RAIN practice, if someone wants to go more into working with difficult feelings that arise. Is there anything else that you would suggest for parents just on a daily basis that they can put on their stickies to practice with?

Hunter Clarke-Fields (34:12):

Yeah, I would practice to just invite... So one thing I love, this is going to be a chock-full of practices conversation, but one thing I love also from the Thich Nhat Hanh Plum Village tradition is a little saying. As you breathe in, you breathe in calm, breathe out peace, breathe in smile, breathe out release.

Dr Laura Markham (34:44):

Beautiful.

Hunter Clarke-Fields (34:45):

Calm, peace, smile, release. We can practice that a few times a day and that really, really helps to say, oh, okay, that's where I want to be.

Dr Laura Markham (34:56):

Yeah, and it's amazing how it just shifts you there, just those words. We don't have to plan it or think about it or analyze it, it's just the words. Peace, calm, smile, release, these words actually signal something inside us.

Hunter Clarke-Fields (35:11):

Yeah, it waters the seeds that are already inside of us.

Dr Laura Markham (35:17):

Well, we do need to wrap up, but I want to ask you, we'll have on this page where your interview is the link to the free gift that you're offering, which is about discipline without punishment, but I specifically wanted to ask you about something. I know you have scripts in it, and scripts are so helpful to parents, but also you say neuroscience-based tips for connection to help your child connect to you. Since

we're talking about neuroscience, can you give us any sense of what kinds of tips you're talking about?

Hunter Clarke-Fields ([35:57](#)):

Well, as you can tell, I love to talk about regulation because I think it's so important. So everything in there is about helping us to regulate and then connect to help our kids regulate.

Dr Laura Markham ([36:10](#)):

Yeah, beautiful. When we regulate, then as you've explained to us, we're present, and that's the only place real connection can come from.

Hunter Clarke-Fields ([36:21](#)):

How can you love if you are not there?

Dr Laura Markham ([36:23](#)):

Oh, I'm going to be saying that. I'm going to put that on my sticky for today. I love that.

Hunter Clarke-Fields ([36:27](#)):

I love that.

Dr Laura Markham ([36:29](#)):

Hunter, thank you so much for being with me today. This was such a pleasure. And I know parents are going to be using these stickies and replaying your little three-minute reset. Thank you so much.

Hunter Clarke-Fields ([36:42](#)):

Well, thank you, and thank you for everything you've done. You've been a great teacher in my life and had such an impact on me and my life and my family and everything I do, so I really appreciate everything you do as well, Laura.

Dr Laura Markham ([36:55](#)):

Thank you.