Recently I was helping some cousins with preparations at a family wedding in the countryside. One of them was a mom who had three young kids, including a newborn. We began to talk about parenting. “So, how am I doing?” Emma asked me point-blank, looking anxious.

“I’m the last person to judge,” I reassured her. As one child pulled on her leg, demanding attention, I paraphrased a line from one of my favorite essays by the writer Tillie Olsen: “To be a mother is to be constantly interruptible.”

She laughed and said, “And, to be constantly correctable. And constantly criticized. I never feel like I’m doing it right. Sometimes when my kids are rambunctious, people stare at me like I’m raising juvenile delinquents. I refuse to put them in straitjackets with muzzles or keep them on a tight leash like trained dogs. When I was a kid, I felt free to run and climb and yell and be wild. Now it seems that it’s not okay for kids to make noise and have fun.

“It’s like they should be constantly quiet and contained,” she confided. “It’s impossible.”

Emma’s words stayed with me and troubled me. She articulated something I hear from almost all the parents I know. Parenting is hard for everyone. We never feel good enough. Things rarely go the way we imagine. And when they don’t, we blame ourselves, criticize our kids, push harder, and try to exert more control. We become anxious and depressed. Our kids become anxious and depressed. We look over our shoulders, comparing ourselves with our friends, families, and neighbors. We lose sleep. What are we doing wrong? Is there some way off this interminable and joyless merry-go-round?

Stop. Breathe. Listen. Stop beating yourself up. Cut yourself some slack. Stop fighting with your kid, yourself, your partner. Freud was on to something, as was Emma—parenting is an impossible job. And trying to dominate or muzzle our kids is a losing battle. The experts tell us that ultimately very little can be predicted or controlled.

By Susan M. Pollack, Ed.D.
We are all exhausted, anxious, and worried. And we are not alone. One historian of American culture noted that “in no other country has there been so pervasive a cultural anxiety about the rearing of children.” We wonder if someone, someplace does it better. Do French parents have the magic recipe? Do “tiger mothers” get a better return on their investment? Anthropologists tell us that Japanese babies sleep and Mexican siblings don’t fight—should we relocate?

Make a U-Turn

There’s no need to pack up and move. Start where you are. The seeds for happier and less combative parenting are within us, not on another continent. We don’t have to feel angry or helpless and drive our children and ourselves to exhaustion. There is another way. Instead of the constant struggle to fix or change your kids, try a U-turn. Extend some kindness and compassion to yourself. Begin to nurture yourself so your kids can thrive. Huh? You shake your head. You roll your eyes. You are busy, you don’t have time for this. It sounds too selfish, and silly. Most parents tell me this.

As a Harvard-trained psychologist with two grown children and more than 30 years of clinical experience, I’ve worked with a lot of parents and children. And I’ve read a lot of books on how to parent. The predominant focus is often on how to fix our kids, how to make them behave, how to get them to sleep, and how to get them into a good college and guarantee success. In short, how to make them into what we want them to be. But rarely do we achieve the results we want.

What happened to joy? Happiness? Exuberance? We don’t need to be so hard on our children, or ourselves. The current research says that we can motivate more with compassion than criticism. Really. We can shift the focus from constant doing to simply being. We can stop running, turning ourselves into frantic, raging parents racing to get the kids to soccer, Little League, and ballet in rush-hour traffic while they are biting and punching each other in the car. No judgment here; I’ve been there. I was the frantic mother in the car, spread too thin, running on empty, trying to do way too much—and losing it. It was not sustainable for anyone. I tried to find a way back to balance and sanity.

The most important thing to remember, as one of my mindfulness teachers told me years ago, is that there is no way to do this wrong. “Come on, really?” you say. Yup, really. I’d spent a lifetime castigating myself for the most minor mistakes. “There’s no way to fail,” she would tell us. Was this teacher an alien from another universe? What substance was she on? (And would she share it?)

Basking in the presence of her compassion, humor, and wisdom, I thought of that unforgettable line from When Harry Met Sally—I decided that I wanted to “have what she’s having.” The good news is that mindfulness and compassion are available to all of us—and we can share them with those around us. These are skills you can develop. The practices aren’t for already serene people who have everything together. You don’t have to be good at sitting still. You don’t have to be vegan, sugar-free, and decaffeinated. You can be as you are—overworked, anxious, neurotic, sleep-deprived, and barely keeping it together. It’s fine to be a mess. I certainly was. If you can breathe (and don’t look now, but you’re already doing it), you can do this.

So what is mindfulness? There are many definitions, but the one that has guided me as a parent and psychologist is a very simple no-fuss, no-frills definition: “awareness
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The Parenting Pause

Set a timer for three to five minutes.
Start by sitting comfortably and taking a few calming breaths.
If you and your partner have been fighting, it is fine to go to separate rooms.
Let yourself stop. Just sit and give yourself a break.
Don't try to fix anything right now.
If you find yourself ruminating and your thoughts are spinning, or you are fuming, just acknowledge that.
Just be with it, whatever you are feeling, even if it is difficult.
You might say to yourself, This is hard; this hurts.
Pause. No need to act right now. No need to fight right now.
Feel your feet on the ground and notice any sensations in the body.
Know that whatever you are feeling, it will pass.
Try to bring a little kindness to yourself.
Take a few more grounding and centering breaths.
Before you return to your day, see if you can tune in to what you need right now.
As you go through your day, take a pause whenever you need to anchor and get perspective.

of the present moment, with kindness and acceptance.” With the constant stresses and strains of being a parent—whether it’s a night without sleep, a child’s tantrum, sibling rivalry, difficult in-laws, or a critical partner—we need a warm and compassionate response to our experience.

Mindfulness doesn’t have to be something you do alone in silence in a meditation hall on a remote mountaintop. It’s something that can become part of your crazy, busy life as a frantic parent trying to juggle way too much. Which is, in fact, when you need it the most.

One of the most accessible practices is the Parenting Pause, adapted from psychologist and meditation teacher Tara Brach. Brach teaches that a simple pause of just a moment or two has the power to shift the tone and direction of an interaction—an invaluable skill to have as a parent (as well as other relationships, especially intimate ones).

Brach writes, “When we pause, we don’t know what will happen next. By disrupting our habitual behaviors, we open to the possibility of new and creative ways of responding to our wants and fears.” While this practice is effective with couples, it is also helpful for tensions between a parent and child. Elsewhere on this page are simple instructions for the Parenting Pause. Give it a try; you’ll be surprised how well it works.

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