

THESIS

MINDFUL PARENTING: ASSOCIATIONS WITH PARENTAL DEPRESSION AND  
WELL-BEING

Submitted by

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## ABSTRACT

### MINDFUL PARENTING: ASSOCIATIONS WITH PARENTAL DEPRESSION AND WELL-BEING

This study investigated the association between mindful parenting and both parent depression, and parent well-being. Current research has found that many individuals experience stress in parenting, which impacts their overall well-being, possibly leading to depressive symptoms. Mindfulness has been found to counteract negative effects of stress. However, much of the research has neglected to focus on the effects of mindful parenting, as opposed to only trait mindfulness skills, as well as general stress as opposed to parenting stress specifically. Mindfulness also appears to differ by gender. In a sample of four hundred and thirty-two families, this study tested the association between mindful parenting and both parent depression and parent well-being, after controlling for trait mindfulness practices as well as SES and parenting stress. Results indicated that mindful parenting was associated with parent depression and parent well-being independently and uniquely after controlling for trait mindfulness, income, and parenting stress. Parent gender was not significantly associated with depression or well-being outcomes. Conclusions of this study indicate a need for incorporating mindful parenting into parenting interactions as a way to combat the negative effects of parenting stress.

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## INTRODUCTION

Stress felt by parents can influence their overall well-being, lead to depression, and influence parenting practices and child behavior problems (Ludmer, Salsbury, Suarez, & Andrade, 2017, Masarik & Conger, 2017). Previous findings suggest parents' internalizing symptomology inhibits effectiveness in parenting, regardless of socioeconomic status or severity of problems with their children (Ludmer et al., 2017). Therefore, there is a need to help parents manage their stress and reduce the likelihood of experiencing depression as one way of helping to improve youth behavior outcomes. One way reducing depressive symptoms might be attained is by helping parents implement mindfulness techniques into daily parenting tasks. Mindfulness programs and activities, such as meditation or yoga, are becoming increasingly popular for individuals of all ages (Li, Black, & Garland, 2016) and their direct application to parents is gaining empirical acceptance (Bogels & Restifo, 2013; Coatsworth, Timpe, Nix, Duncan, & Greenberg, 2018). In this study, I investigated the associations mindful parenting has with parental well-being and depression beyond stress, trait mindfulness, and income.

### **General Stress**

Stressful events and hassles are a common part of everyday life and can result from a variety of sources, including illness, work, or relationships (Van den Berg, Maas, Verheij, & Groenewegen, 2010). Stress has been conceptualized in a variety of ways, including a non-specific reaction of the body to any need for change (Mohino-Herranz, Gil-Pita, Ferreira, Rosa-Zurera, & Seoane, 2015), severe demands requiring severe responses in order to maintain normalcy (Lovallo, 2015), and heightened autonomic activity from life events (Stone, Bachrach, Jobe, Kurtzman, & Cain, 1999). External life stressors (argument with a loved one, being fired, etc.), the internal biological effects of those external stressors, and the duration and impact of the

demands of a stressor all contribute to a person's sense of feeling stressed. Whether a stressor is acute or chronic also impacts the intensity of the biological effect of the stressor on a person (Slavich, 2016). In addition, stress's effects on people's health and well-being include problems with physical health (e.g., heart disease, diabetes, etc...) and mental health (e.g., depression and anxiety) (Maslach, 2001; Slavich, 2016). Therefore, people often seek treatment or ways to decrease the impact of daily life stressors on their health and well-being.

Life stressors have been shown to be an especially important predictor of depression in adults (Kuruvilla & Jacob, 2007; Slavich, 2016). Individuals experiencing high to moderate levels of stress are more likely to also experience depression (Kuruvilla & Jacob, 2007). Often these two life experiences are so highly related that it is hard to tease them apart. People experiencing high levels of stress are more likely to report depressive symptoms, and people experiencing depression are more likely to report high levels of stress (Kuruvilla & Jacob, 2007). Encountering general stressors in daily life has the potential to increase an individual's likelihood of experiencing more depressive symptoms or a decrease in well-being.

### **Parenting Stress**

One type of general stress is parenting stress. Poverty, social contexts, temperament and personality, and children with special needs all contribute to stress parents may experience while trying to manage their daily parenting duties. Parenting stress has different impacts depending on parents' perception of the event, as well as goals or aspirations (Deater-Deckard & Panneton, 2017). When parents feel the demands of childrearing are greater than the resources available to them, the feelings of anxiety the parent experiences are labeled parenting stress (BeLue, Halgunseth, Abiero, & Bediako, 2015). One specific form of parenting stress that may influence parents' well-being are the daily "hassles" that they experience while interacting with their

children (Crnic & Booth, 1991). Although previous research has focused on the stress induced by major life events, many parents report few major life stresses. However, the daily stresses or hassles a parent experiences influences their physical and psychological well-being. Numerous situations throughout a day of parenting could be perceived as a minor irritation or annoyance and may not initially be thought of as a stressor. However, daily parenting hassles have been found to be influential in determining parent well-being (Crnic & Booth, 1991).

Stress in the family has been found to be a significant risk factor for both parent and child well-being. Effects of daily stressors have been associated with poor mental health and lower functioning as a family unit. Interestingly, daily life stressors have been found to predict mental health outcomes in families more than various major life events (Ohr, Vidair, Gunlicks-Stoessel, Grove, & La Lima, 2010). However, in some instances, stress promotes plasticity and resilience. Unfortunately, when a person is exposed to stressors routinely or longer-term, this can lead to disease or psychological risk (Deater-Deckard & Panneton, 2017).

**Gender differences in parenting stress.** Mothers are more likely to report less happiness and more stress in spending time with their children than fathers (Musick, Meier, & Flood, 2016). Nonetheless, differences in activities in which mothers and fathers engage in with their children may impact the differences in parenting stress between mothers and fathers. Many mothers also experience parenting stress as a result of feeling conflicted between taking care of family and a career, whereas fathers are less likely to experience stress from balancing home life and a career (Musick et al., 2016). Even though differences in parenting stress exist for mothers and fathers, both parents' overall well-being is impacted by being a parent.



## **Parenting Stress and Depression**

Parenting stress has an unfavorable impact on parent well-being and on adolescent behavior (Ponnet et al., 2013). Many parents consider themselves feeling stressed in their parenting role at various times in their parenting journey. While the reasons for feeling stressed may vary from parent to parent, parenting stress consists of parents perceiving the strains of parenting as greater than resources available to the parent to help with those strains (Ponnet et al., 2013).

When parents feel burdened by their responsibilities, depressive symptoms may also increase. While mothers are typically studied more than fathers in regard to depression, both mothers and fathers experience depression in parenting. It has been found when one partner is experiencing depressive symptoms, there is less open communication between their partner and child (Ponnet et al., 2013). This decrease in open communication contributes to less positive feelings of well-being in a parent.

## **Parent Depression and Child Outcomes**

Depression can influence parenting and child behaviors across the life course. When a new mother is feeling depressed, her ability to effectively interact with her child may decrease, which may influence the formation of a secure attachment relationship. Depression can influence an adult's ability to function and create a secure attachment with their child (Potharst, Aktar, Rexwinkel, Rigterink, & Bogels, 2017). The focus of the mother is changed, and she may be less responsive to her environment and to her child (Schmidt et al., 2017). Her feelings of inadequacy or worthlessness may overcome her thoughts and inhibit her from realizing changes have happened in the environment. As a result, the child then fails to learn that when it needs

something, the mother will be there to attend to the child's needs, widening the gap in a secure attachment script. This gap in attachment can influence the techniques a parent uses.

Depression can have a detrimental effect on parenting techniques at other times in life as well (Westbrook & Harden, 2010). Disciplining can become inconsistent when parents experience depressive symptoms (Ludmer et al., 2017). Lack of discipline can lead to delinquency in childhood and adolescence, impacting the rest of their adult development (Potharst et al., 2017). Depression can lead to overactive parenting, as well as more self-focused behaviors (Westbrook & Harden, 2010). Parents with depressive symptoms potentially contribute to negative emotional and behavioral outcomes in their children.

Researchers have found children who have depressed mothers are at a much higher risk for developing depression themselves (Yeh, Huang, & Liu, 2016). Children may mimic what they see and experience. By observing a parent with depressive symptoms, children begin to mirror those same patterns and behaviors. Parents with depression tend to have compromised parenting behaviors (Westbrook & Harden, 2010). Parenting behaviors impact an adolescent's outcome. Many adolescents with parents who have depressive symptoms show an increase in anger, caused by more restrictive parenting (Westbrook & Harden, 2010). Depression negatively impacts a child's development by contributing to higher levels of depression themselves, increased defiance, and increased anger. These behaviors may lead to dissatisfaction in parenting and feelings of failure.

### **Parenting Stress and Well-being**

Parental well-being can be impacted when families are experiencing stressful situations, such as financial hardship (McConnell, Breitzkreuz, & Savage, 2010). Parents may feel discouraged with themselves for not being able to provide financially for their family, which

may then impact the way they are parenting. This in turn leads to more conflict-prone relationships between parent and child, influencing poor child outcomes. These poor outcomes may become a cause, as well as a result of, stress in parenting (McConnell, et al., 2010).

However, as noted earlier, the way mothers and fathers experience parenting stress is different and this may lead to different personal outcomes (e.g., less or more depressive symptoms/well-being) and youth outcomes (e.g., internalizing and externalizing).

**Well-being in mothers.** Raising children, despite the stress it may bring, is also considered to be one of the most gratifying responsibilities a person can experience (Nelson, Kushlev, & Lyubomirsky, 2014). When mothers are with their children, they experience more positive emotions when they have a positive experience than when they are not with their children and have a positive experience (Nelson et al., 2014). However, mothers have been found to experience less positive well-being outcomes in parenting than fathers. Compared to other activities, mothers report less happiness in parenting (Nelson-Coffey, Killingsworth, Layous, Cole, & Lyubomirsky, 2019). For parents of children with intellectual disabilities, mothers report more stress than fathers do. This parental stress has been found to increase over time, impacting their overall well-being (Gerstein, Crnic, Blacher, & Baker, 2009). How mothers manage their life and parenting stress will influence the degree of well-being they experience while parenting.

**Well-being in fathers.** Fathers experience more positive emotions when they have children in their home, compared to men who are not fathers (Nelson, et al, 2014). Having children has the ability to increase a man's sense of well-being. When a father has a negative experience at work, he is less likely to feel distress if he has a positive relationship with his children (Nelson, et al., 2014). Parenting for men can enhance their well-being and help them to have a more positive outlook on life, but this may also be affected by life and parenting stress.

## **Mindfulness and Stress**

Mindfulness practices have been shown to combat outcomes of general life stresses (Hugh-Jones, Rose, Koutsopoulou, & Simms-Ellis, 2018), and may reduce parenting stress (Coatsworth et al., 2014). Mindfulness has the ability to impact potential stressors in an individual's life, for example, with individuals managing the stress of chronic illness (Boyle, Stanton, Ganz, Crespi, & Bower, 2017), those in challenging employment circumstances (Janssen, Heerkens, Kuijer, van der Heijden, & Engels, 2018), and partners dealing with difficult romantic relationships (Khaddouma, Gordon, & Strand, 2017). Mindfulness has also been associated with psychological well-being (Schumer, Lindsay, & Creswell, 2018) perhaps in part by combatting the effects of psychological distress (Keng, Smoski, & Robins, 2011). Stress also impacts a person's sense of well-being and depressive symptoms. As a result, many individuals search for a way to increase their well-being or decrease their depressive symptoms. Mindfulness has the ability to influence depressive symptoms in an individual, as well as their well-being.

## **Mindfulness and Depression**

Brief mindfulness interventions have become increasingly popular with the ability to download an app or stream a video on the internet. Researchers have found that participating in mindfulness-based activities reduces negative affectivity (Schumer, Lindsay, & Creswell, 2018). For many people, finding a way to decrease negative affectivity is something appealing. Those who are experiencing depression may be searching for tools to help manage their symptoms. Including mindful activities into daily life may be associated with lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress (Schumer, et al., 2018). Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) is an intervention for depression which has been found to significantly reduce the relapse of major depressive episodes (Coffey, Hartman, & Frederickson, 2010). Therefore, those who experience

depressive thoughts or symptoms may benefit from implementing mindfulness into their daily schedule.

Rumination is an emotion regulatory process which predicts depression and can lead to a maintaining of depressive symptoms (Boyle, et al., 2017). However, mindful activities contain practices which assist individuals in not allowing themselves to become absorbed by distressing thoughts. This decrease in distressing thoughts in turn leads to a decrease in rumination, which plays a part in sustaining depressive thoughts (Boyle, et al., 2017). By being mindful to the present moment, an individual is better able to control their attention and be less likely to focus on ruminative thoughts (Coffey, et al., 2010). Overall, there is an increase in positivity and satisfaction.

### **Mindfulness and Well-being**

Previous findings suggest mindfulness can improve physical and psychological health in an individual (Parent et al., 2016). Mindful practices encourage individuals to foster kindness toward themselves (Boyle et al., 2017). Previous research has found well-being was improved after listening to mindfulness meditations. Positive affect, or a positive mood, has also been found to increase (Bostock, Crosswell, Prather, & Steptoe, 2018). When one is being mindful, there is an improvement in being able to regulate negative emotions, which decreases a need to rely on external factors for one's happiness (Coffey, et al., 2010). Implementing mindful-based practices into one's daily life provides an opportunity for one to have improved well-being and overall life satisfaction, which could translate into parenting as well.

### **Parental Mindfulness**

Bringing mindfulness to the tasks of parenting may also have an effect on life stress and parenting stress specifically. Mindfulness has been named an essential skill to utilize while

parenting (Coatsworth, Duncan, Greenberg, & Nix, 2010). Mindful parenting has been defined as parents intentionally bringing awareness to their relationship with their children (Duncan, Coatsworth, & Greenberg, 2009). These authors described five dimensions of mindful parenting which pertain to the relationship between parent and child: attentive listening, acceptance of self and child with no judgment, emotional awareness of self and child, self-regulation in parenting, and compassion for child and self. As a parent is able to listen more attentively to their child, they are better able to correctly perceive their child's behavioral cues. Being non-judgmental as a parent increases parenting self-efficacy and a parent's appreciation for their child's traits. Emotional awareness as a parent is important in order to best respond to a child's emotions and needs. When a parent is able to self-regulate, they are less overreactive and are less likely to discipline "automatically". The parent-child relationship is strengthened when parents are more forgiving of their own shortcomings as a parent and have more positive affection for their child (Duncan et al., 2009).

Conceptually, mindfulness in parenting is related to trait mindfulness but it is also distinct. Empirically it is also correlated, but it has been shown to be empirically distinct showing moderate level associations (Duncan et al., 2009). Further research is still needed, as mindfulness in the family context is still in its infancy. Past research has found positive effects on the parent-child relationship, lower levels of parenting stress, and improved parenting (Parent et al., 2016). By participating in mindful activities, parents are able to learn tools to use while communicating with their children and being more aware of what really needs to happen in any given situation. Both intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects of parenting are impacted by engaging in mindful parenting. Implementing these mindful parenting techniques has been found to have the potential to improve parent satisfaction, parenting, and family functioning which is

also predicted to influence youth behavior outcomes (Coatsworth et al., 2010; Duncan et al., 2009).

### **Parental Mindfulness and Stress**

Researchers have found mindfulness is related to decreased stress levels for parents (Campbell, Thoburn, & Leonard, 2017). When one is being mindful there is an increase in attunement, where a parent is better able to focus on their child. By focusing more on their children, parents are able to strengthen their relationship and increase positive communication. As stress is decreased, parents are better able to implement mindful parenting (Campbell, et al., 2017). Through mindful parenting, parents may be able to increase positive relationships between themselves and their children, which may lead to a better sense of well-being.

Some evidence suggests mindful parenting may differ between mothers and fathers (Gouveia, Carona, Canavarro, & Moreira, 2016; Medeiros, Gouveia, Canavarro, & Moreira, 2016) and that fathers may respond differently to mindful interventions (Coatsworth et al., 2015; Gouveia et al., 2016). Mothers and fathers differ in their levels of mindfulness in parenting, as well as their change patterns in mindful parenting (Coatsworth et al., 2015). With these previous findings, it suggests parent gender may moderate the association between mindful parenting and parental depression and well-being. Fathers were found to increase involvement with children and be aware of long-term parenting effects after participating in a mindfulness intervention (Coatsworth et al., 2015). Based on these previous findings, it suggests there will be a stronger association for fathers between mindfulness in parenting and depression and well-being than for mothers.

## **Mindful Parenting Interventions**

One way to study the predicted associations between mindful parenting, parenting behaviors, parenting stress, and depression is through interventions designed to change mindful parenting. Although this study does not investigate intervention effects, the findings from intervention studies can highlight the associations mindful parenting have with intrapersonal parenting processes, interpersonal parenting processes, and youth behavioral outcomes.

Mindfulness interventions generally provide a way for individuals to be attentive and aware of their surroundings. When one is being mindful, attention is focused on the minimal registering of what is being observed. While being mindful, one is interacting with stimuli without an overlay of discriminative or habitual thoughts. Mindfulness allows for psychological and behavioral responses that are more objective and flexible (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007). Flexibility is crucial to develop as a parent. Children can be unpredictable and constantly requiring new and different things as they mature. Mindfulness interventions may be important for parents to participate in because these interventions will allow parents to respond to stressful situations with more objective and flexible thinking. Instead of responding in the same manner repeatedly, while being mindful, a parent may be able to treat a child differently and as a result avoid confrontation and exhibit positive parenting skills. As parents become more positive, their children will then be able to create secure attachments, be responsible, and become successful individuals throughout their lives.

Implementation of mindfulness in parenting interventions leads to positive results in the parenting experience. Parents are more likely to listen carefully to their children and their needs (Parent et al., 2016). This active listening has the capability to contribute to an increase in patience and more consistency in parenting. Mindful parenting has the goal to interrupt the



instinctual response most parents have while disciplining their children. Trust and emotional sharing between parent and child are also believed to increase as a result of mindful parenting (McCaffrey, Reitman, & Black, 2017). By participating in mindful activities, parents have the potential to increase the bond between themselves and their children. Strengthening the bond between parent and child is vital to creating an environment where a child can learn to thrive and therefore, become a more successful adult.

Mothers report better self-regulation during parenting interactions with their children, as well as emotional awareness, after participating in the Mindfulness-enhanced Strengthening Families Program (MSFP) (Coatsworth et al., 2015). According to research, there is a significant positive correlation between mindfulness and mindful parenting (Corthorn & Milicic, 2016). As parents participate in mindful activities more frequently, the better able they are to implement those mindfulness techniques into their parenting strategies. Fathers who participate in mindful parenting are more likely to show greater involvement and nurturing with their children. Fathers were also more likely to notice long-term parenting effects in themselves (Coatsworth et al., 2015). Stress in parenting may be decreased as parents experience these positive parenting effects in their families.

### **Conclusions and Proposed Study**

Adults experience stress in multiple aspects of their lives each day. For those adults who are parents, stress can influence parenting style and techniques, as well as impact the relationship with their child. Current literature offers partial answers regarding the associations between mindfulness in parenting, parenting behaviors, parenting stress, and youth behavioral outcomes. Yet, most studies have not studied the associations of mindful parenting with other internal and external experiences after controlling for trait mindfulness. The conceptual and empirical

associations between mindfulness and mindful parenting could mean that any relationship between mindful parenting and other outcomes could be due to trait mindfulness. The goal of this study is to determine whether mindfulness in parenting is associated with depression and well-being in parents beyond the association with trait mindfulness. These findings have the potential to inform interventions that could decrease stress in parenting, decrease parent depression, and foster a more positive sense of well-being.

## THE CURRENT STUDY

This study was guided by two broad research questions. The first question was; Does mindfulness in parenting predict parent depression and parent well-being beyond stress, SES and trait mindfulness? Although mindful parenting and trait mindfulness show a strong empirical and conceptual association, they are sufficiently distinct so that I hypothesized that mindful parenting would be significantly associated with parent depression and parent well-being beyond stress, SES and trait mindfulness. The second research question was; Does parent gender (mother v. father) moderate the association between mindful parenting and parental depression and well-being? Given the differences in mindfulness in parenting (Coatsworth et al., 2015) and different associations between levels of stress and parent experiences (Gerstein et al., 2009), I hypothesized that the association between mindful parenting and depression and well-being will be stronger for fathers than mothers.

## METHODS

### **Participants**

Participants in the current study were originally enrolled in the Mindfulness-Enhanced Strengthening Families Program (Coatsworth et al., 2014; MSFP), and were recruited in various ways. Families became aware of the program through advertisements, presentations in the community, but mainly participants were recruited through school presentations and outreach (Coatsworth, 2014). Over four years, in four school districts, parents of all 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> graders were sent recruitment letters and information about the project. Members of the project team also went to school events in an attempt to meet with potential participants. The students were given registration forms to have their parents sign, indicating whether they wanted to participate, did not want to participate, or if they were wanting more details about the project. If students

returned the signed forms, there were individual and classroom incentives given (Coatsworth, 2014).

There were four hundred and thirty-two families that participated in the original study (Coatsworth et al., 2015). In the current study, we included three hundred and eighteen mothers and one hundred and eighty-five fathers with complete data. About 82% of participants identified as European American while the rest identified as African American (7%), Hispanic/Latino (3%), Asian (4%), or other (4%). Of the families who participated, 66% had two parents, with 90% of the fathers participating in the study either by providing data or participating in the intervention. The average age of adolescents participating in the program was 12.2, with 54% of the youths being female.

## **Procedures**

In the original study, families were randomized into one of three conditions: 1) MSFP; 2) the original SFP 10-14 intervention; or 3) a home study condition. Families participated in both intervention conditions by attending seven weekly sessions that were two hours long (Coatsworth et al., 2015). Sessions were delivered in groups, consisting of both parents and children. During the first hour, parents and youth would meet separately and then rejoin during the second hour. Both the SFP 10-14 and MSFP 10-14 programs were conducted during the same evening, but in different locations. Sessions were attended weekly for seven weeks (Coatsworth et al., 2015).

Three assessments were conducted throughout the study (Coatsworth, 2014). These assessments occurred at baseline (pre-intervention), post-intervention, as well as one-year after participation. Each participant was mailed a paper and pencil measure. Participants also completed an in-home assessment on the computer and completed family interaction tasks which

were recorded. For each assessment a family participated in, they received incentives of \$75, \$100, and \$125 respectively (Coatsworth, 2014). Parents self-reported their own functioning and youths reported on their parents' behaviors. Specifically, participants were reporting mindfulness in parenting, the parent-child relationship, the youth's ability to manage behavior, and parent well-being (Coatsworth et al., 2015). All data in this cross-sectional study are from the baseline assessment.

## Measures

***Trait mindfulness.*** Parents completed an adapted version of the Five Factor Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ;) that included four of the original five subscales, each comprising four items rated on a five-point likert scale. *Describe* included items indicating the ability to express one's experiences in words. *Act with Awareness* represented attention given to one's present moment activity. *Non-judgement* reflected accepting and non-valuing one's thoughts and emotions. *Non-reactive* indicated one's capacity to allow thoughts and emotions to come and go without getting carried away by them. A total score combined all 16 items ( $\alpha = .70$  and  $.81$  for Fathers and Mothers respectively) and was used to represent trait mindfulness (Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006).

***Mindfulness in parenting.*** Mindfulness in parenting was measured using the Interpersonal Mindfulness in Parenting (IM-P) questionnaire. Items on the scale are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with participants responses ranging from 1 (never true) to 5 (always true). Sample items include: *When I'm upset with my child, I notice how I am feeling before I take action; I often react too quickly to what my child says or does; I notice how changes in my child's mood affect my mood.* There are 31 items on the scale which describe different ways parents may interact with their children from day to day. Participants are encouraged to answer

in a way that shows how these experiences truly happen between parent and child, as opposed to answering how a parent perceives they should be responding to their child (Coatsworth, 2014). Research has found correlations between the IM-P questionnaire, parenting style, and mindfulness practice. These findings give support for validity, both convergent and discriminant (McCaffrey et al., 2017). Previous research suggests the IM-P questionnaire is an appropriate scale to use to measure mindfulness for this study. Internal consistency reliability for this scale within this sample was good;  $\alpha = .87$  and  $.88$  for fathers and mothers respectively.

**Hassles.** Parenting hassles were measured using the Parenting Daily Hassles (PDH) Scale (Crnic & Greenberg, 1990). Sample items include: *My child(ren)'s schedules interfere with me getting my own things done (work or house needs); Having to change my plans because of my child(ren)'s needs; I need to keep a constant eye on where they are and what they are doing.* Participants responded to two questions with each statement. First, how often does it happen and second, the intensity of the hassle. Response options for how often the statement happened range from 0 (does not apply) to 4 (constantly). Intensity of hassle items were scored either 1 (no hassle) or 5 (big hassle). These two dimensions were strongly associated ( $r=.87$ ), so were combined into a single scale. Internal reliability for this scale in this sample was good;  $\alpha = .90$  and  $.86$  for fathers and mothers respectively.

**Stress.** Stress was measured by the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983). Sample items include: *In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and "stressed"; In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do; In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them.* The scale includes 14 items to which participants answered how they felt over the past month by choosing responses from 0 (never) to 4 (very

often). Internal consistency reliability for this scale in this sample was adequate;  $\alpha = .76$  and  $.85$  for fathers and mothers respectively.

**Parent Well-being.** Parent well-being was measured using two scales. The first was the Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (SPANE), with items being rated on a 5-point Likert scale and responses ranging from 1 (very rarely or never) to 5 (very often or always). The questionnaire contains 12 items which assess positive and negative feelings in participants (Diener et al., 2010). Previous research has found the SPANE to be a valid measure. SPANE has high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alphas from  $.81$  to  $.90$  (Li, Bai, & Wang, 2013). These findings suggest the SPANE is a valid scale to use to measure parent well-being. Internal consistency reliability for this measure in this sample was excellent;  $\alpha = .93$  for both fathers and mothers.

The second scale was the Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2010). This scale includes 8 items reflecting parents' perceptions of how well their life is going. Sample items include: "*I am optimistic about my future*"; "*I lead a purposeful and meaningful life*". Previous research has found this measure shows high internal consistency  $\alpha = .87$  (Li, Bai, & Wang, 2013). In this study, reliability was also good;  $\alpha = .86$ .

The two scales of well-being were strongly correlated ( $r = .64$ ) and were standardized and averaged to create a composite score of well-being.

**Depression.** This study used The Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D Scale) to measure depression. Items on the CES-D scale were rated on 4-point Likert scales. Sample items include: *How often did you feel depressed*; *How often did you feel that everything was an effort*; *How often did you have trouble keeping your mind on what you were doing*. Participants responded from 0 (rarely) to 3 (almost all the time) while answering

questions about how often the participant has felt a certain way over the past week. Internal consistence reliability in this sample was strong;  $\alpha = .88$  and  $.92$  for fathers and mothers respectively.

## RESULTS

Distributions of all variables, as well as bivariate correlations across variables, were examined in preliminary analyses. Approximately normal distributions were shown in all variables. Values of skewness/standard error of skewness in the distributions were lower than the critical value, which is 1.96. The correlation between parent stress and parental depression ( $r=.69$ ) was stronger than the correlation between parental stress and hassles ( $r=.34$ ). Therefore, I computed a composite depression scale that included standardized and averaged scores of depression and stress. Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations for all variables are presented in Table 1.

Among the variables, correlations were largely in the moderate to strong range. Trait mindfulness had a strong negative association with parent depression. Both trait mindfulness and mindfulness in parenting had a moderate positive association with parent well-being. The strongest association was noted between parent depression and parent well-being. After parent depression, the strongest association associated with parent well-being was mindfulness in parenting. A strong association was noticed between trait mindfulness and mindfulness in parenting. Parenting hassles were moderately associated with parent depression, trait mindfulness, and mindfulness in parenting.



Table 1:  
*Correlations, means, and standard deviations for study variables*

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Parent Depression	1					
2. Parent Well-being	-.66***	1				
3. SES – Income	-.27***	.32***	1			
4. Trait Mindfulness	-.56***	.38***	.17***	1		
5. Mindfulness in Parenting	-.48***	.39***	.10*	.56***	1	
6. Parenting Hassles	.34***	-.20***	.02	-.30***	-.33***	1
<i>M</i>	.04	.00	69155.05	9.79	2.49	.04
<i>SD</i>	1.86	.90	46368.67	2.28	.41	1.00

†  $p < .10$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

### Testing for the Association Between Mindful Parenting and the Outcomes of Parent Depression and Parental Well-being

I tested the first hypothesis, whether mindful parenting is associated with parent depression and parent well-being beyond stress, SES, and trait mindfulness, using stepwise multiple regression analyses. Separate analyses were performed for the dependent variables (parent depression and parent well-being). Income, parenting stress, and trait mindfulness were the control variables included in step 1 and then, in step 2 mindful parenting was entered.

Results are presented in Table 2. As can be seen, mindful parenting is significantly associated with parent depression after controlling for income, parenting stress, and trait mindfulness. The control variables in step 1 accounted for a significant amount of variance in parent depression with  $R^2$  of .38, and the addition of mindfulness in parenting in step 2 accounted for an additional 3 percent. Mindful parenting is also significantly associated with parent well-being after controlling for income, parenting stress, and trait mindfulness. The amount of variance accounted for by the control variables in this analysis of parent well-being,  $R^2 = .26$ , was lower than the amount accounted for in parent depression. Mindful parenting

accounted for a significant amount of variance in well-being (4%) after these control variables were entered into the equation. Overall, these regression analyses indicated these variables were more strongly associated with parent depression than parent well-being.

Table 2:  
*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analyses-Predicting Parent Depression and Parent Well-being*

Variable	Parent Depression					Parent Well-being				
	Bivariate R	$\Delta R^2$	B	SE B	$\beta$	Bivariate R	$\Delta R^2$	B	SE B	$\beta$
Step 1		.38***					.22***			
Income	-.27***		.00	.00	-.19***	.32***		.00	.00	.27***
Parenting Stress	.34***		.38	.07	.20***	-.20***		-.11	.04	-.12**
Trait Mindfulness	-.56***		-.38	.03	-.47***	.38***		.12	.02	.30***
Step 2 – Mindful Parenting	-.48***	.03***	-.38	.08	-.20***	.39***	.04***	.21	.04	.24***
Total R <sup>2</sup>			.41					.26		
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>			.40					.25		

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

### Testing Whether the Association Between Mindful Parenting and Parent Depression and Well-Being is Different for Mothers and Fathers

I tested the second hypothesis, whether the association between mindful parenting and depression and well-being will be stronger for fathers than mothers, using multiple regression similar to those used to test the first hypothesis. In these analyses, however, an interaction between parent gender and parental mindfulness was entered in a final step to test whether the association between parent mindfulness and parent outcomes for were different for mothers and fathers. Results are presented in Table 3. As depicted, the parent gender by mindfulness in parenting interaction was not significantly associated with parent depression or parent well-being. This indicates the association between mindful parenting and depression and between mindful parenting and parent well-being are not statistically different for fathers and mothers.

Table 3:  
*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analyses-Predicting Parent Depression and Parent Well-being Including Interaction of Mindful Parenting and Parent Gender*

Variable	Parent Depression					Parent Well-being				
	Bivariate R	$\Delta R^2$	B	SE B	$\beta$	Bivariate R	$\Delta R^2$	B	SE B	$\beta$
Step 1		.38***					.23			
Income	-.27***		.00	.00	-.20***	.32***		.00	.00	.28***
Parent	-.03		.06	.07	.03	-.03		-.09	.04	-.10*
Parenting Stress	.34***		.39	.07	.21***	-.20***		-.12	.04	-.13**
Trait Mindfulness	-.56***		-.38	.03	-.47***	.38***		.12	.02	.30***
Step 2 – Mindful Parenting	-.48***	.03	-.38	.08	-.20***	.39***	.04	.21	.04	.23***
Step 3 – Mindful parenting X parent gender	.17***	.00	.03	.07	.02	-.13**	.00	-.01	.04	-.01
Total R <sup>2</sup>			.41					.27		
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>			.40					.26		

<sup>1</sup> $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

## DISCUSSION

This study tested whether mindful parenting was associated with parent depression and with parent well-being after controlling for stress, SES, and trait mindfulness, and whether these associations differed for mothers and fathers. Three primary findings surfaced from this study: there is a significant negative association between mindful parenting and parent depression, there is a significant positive association between mindful parenting and parent well-being, and there is no significant difference between mothers and fathers in effects of mindful parenting on depression and well-being.

### **Mindful parenting and depression**

Results supported the hypothesis that mindful parenting would be significantly associated with parent depression. Results of bivariate correlations show that mindful parenting was associated with depression independently, while regression analyses revealed that it was uniquely associated with depression after controlling for demographics and dispositional mindfulness. This is consistent with findings from other studies (Schumer, et al., 2018), but it is important to note that those studies did not account for trait mindfulness. One advantage of this study is that the analyses accounted for trait mindfulness before examining the association of mindful parenting and depression. Mindful parenting and mindfulness are moderately associated, so without including trait mindfulness in the analyses, an association between mindful parenting and depression could be due to depression's association with dispositional mindfulness and not mindful parenting.

Mindfulness interventions have been shown to be effective in increasing dispositional or state mindfulness, reducing stress, and influencing depression (Schumer, et al., 2018). For parents, mindful parenting can translate to positively managing daily tasks or hassles. For those

who struggle with the daily tasks of parenting, mindful parenting increases a parent's ability to view parenting in a positive way. When mothers and fathers implement mindful parenting in their daily life, their overall well-being will likely increase, and symptoms of depression will likely decrease.

### **Mindful parenting and well-being**

Similarly, results from this study indicated mindful parenting was independently and uniquely associated with well-being. Although depression and well-being are strongly associated, as theoretically they should be, they are conceptually distinct and show slightly different magnitudes of effect. Building a strong sense of well-being is associated with reductions in depression (Kuruvilla & Jacob, 2007) and so these relations between mindfulness in parenting, depression, and well-being may illustrate interactions among these aspects of functioning and should be explored in future studies.

While parenting in a way that is mindful, parents are more fully present and attuned to their child's needs and experiences. This attunement is more likely to allow the parent to experience positive emotions while parenting. Positive emotions are strongly associated with indicators of psychological and physical well-being (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). Mindful parenting also leads to less conflict between parent and child, inducing a greater sense of parental well-being. Mindfulness in parenting also shifts the parent's perceptions about the child's behaviors. Even while a child's behavior may not change or improve, the internalization and parent's perception of the behavior changes, improving the relationship between parent and child, leading to more positive well-being.

## **Effects for mothers and fathers**

I hypothesized that the associations between mindful parenting and depression or well-being would be different for mothers and fathers. Prior research has shown that mothers experience less positive well-being outcomes in parenting than fathers (Nelson-Coffey et al., 2019) and that mothers and fathers may show different levels of mindfulness in parenting (Coatsworth et al., 2015). Therefore, the association between parental mindfulness and depression and parental mindfulness and well-being was predicted to be stronger for fathers. However, results revealed that there were no differences in associations for mothers and fathers. Mothers and fathers might have different levels of mindfulness in parenting and might also have different levels of depression and well-being. However, based on the results, how mindfulness in parenting may be involved in protecting against depression and promoting in well-being may not be different for mothers and fathers. Knowing this suggests teaching mindfulness in parenting to either mothers or fathers might be effective in reducing depression or increasing well-being. Although it is unclear whether intervening mechanisms differ for mothers and fathers, this establishes a first step in more fully understanding these associations.

## **Intervention implications**

These results coincide with previous studies conducted on mindful parenting. Previous research discovered when mothers joined a mindfulness-based intervention there were improvements in well-being. Mindfulness-enhanced Strengthening Families Program (MSFP) participation increased interaction quality between mothers and their children (Coatsworth et al., 2015). This increase in interaction quality can be attributed to better self-regulation while parenting. Mothers were able to process their emotions better after participation in MSFP, contributing to an increased sense of positive well-being. Mothers also found themselves to be

more emotionally aware of their children, strengthening the bond between mothers and their children (Coatsworth et al., 2015). Mothers strengthened their parenting techniques by participating in the MSFP, which allowed for greater well-being.

For fathers, after participating in the MSFP, they reported greater satisfaction in their role as a parent (Coatsworth et al., 2015). Various factors contribute to this greater sense of satisfaction as a parent. After participating in MSFP, fathers reported an increase in emotional awareness of their children (Coatsworth et al., 2015). By better noticing their children's emotions, fathers may also have felt more satisfied in their role as a parent. Compassion and acceptance in parenting were also increased as a result of participating in MSFP. This increase in compassion may also have led to more positive interactions between fathers and their children (Coatsworth et al., 2015).

I also hypothesized the association between mindful parenting and depression and well-being would be stronger for fathers than mothers. Results from our study did not support this hypothesis. Interestingly, there was no significant association between mindful parenting and parent depression or parent well-being. This insignificant association may be attributed to the idea of fathers' roles in caretaking have been changing over the recent years.

In the United States, mothers are still considered primarily responsible for parenting, including being emotionally invested in the caretaking of their children (Pedersen, 2011). However, as women have increasingly been entering the work force, men have been expected to actively engage more with their children. Not only are fathers expected to financially provide for their children but are not also expected to be involved in routine caretaking skills which previously have been considered to be the mother's responsibility. In households where both parents work, mothers and fathers report feeling equally engaged in parenting and holding shared

parenting values (Pedersen, 2011). As parents begin to share parenting responsibilities more and more, effects from parenting interventions may become equally effective for mothers and fathers. Whereas perhaps in the past when fathers played a smaller role in daily caretaking for children, the effects of a mindful parenting intervention may have been greater.

### **Study Limitations**

The current study offered important insights into the associations between mindful parenting and parent depression and parent well-being. Nevertheless, there are several limitations of the study which need to be considered. First, the data were collected at a single time point. Causal implications cannot be drawn because the design of the study was not longitudinal or experimental. A second limitation of the study was relying exclusively on self-report data. Self-reported answers may have biases, including participants' reluctance to reveal true details about their lives. Participants may also predict the hypothesis of the study and provide answers which confirm the predicted hypothesis for the study. Another limitation of self-report includes the inability to combat the effects of the participant's mood. If a participant feels a strong emotion, positive or negative, their answers may be skewed as to how they respond to the questions.

A third limitation of the study is needing to recognize it is not entirely clear if effects are a result of trait mindfulness or mindfulness in parenting specifically. Because there is a strong, positive association between trait mindfulness and mindfulness in parenting it is difficult to completely separate the impact the two variables have on one another. A fourth limitation is we haven't taken into account the nested nature of mothers and fathers within the same family. Mothers and fathers in same family are more alike than mothers and fathers from different families. This dependency might have contributed to stronger associations than if we accounted for the nesting.



## **Future Directions**

In the future, researchers should investigate the potential differences between mothers and fathers in mindful parenting. Interactions are difficult to detect in statistical analyses and our data are not entirely consistent with data from other studies that show differences in mindful parenting. As fathers become more involved in the parenting process, it is important to ensure parenting interventions are catering to the needs of both mothers and fathers. Future studies might also consider finding a different way to account for the skewed results of mothers and fathers being in the same family as a way to assess differences in effects of mindful parenting. Future studies may also investigate the child outcomes of parents who implement mindful parenting and how those child outcomes further impact the depressive symptoms and well-being of parents.

Despite the discussed limitations, the findings from the current study contribute to the literature on mindful parenting. First, the results highlight the ability of mindful parenting to be associated with parent depression and parent well-being. As previously stated, when parents feel burdened with parenting stress and responsibilities, symptoms of depression may increase. Both mothers and fathers experience depression in parenting (Ponnet et al., 2013) and by understanding the positive effects mindful parenting could have on those depressive symptoms is important to understand. Well-being has the potential to increase for parents as they implement mindful parenting, which leads to an improvement in being able to regulate negative emotions (Coffey, et al., 2010). Second, the results show there is still a need to continue learning more about parenting differences between mothers and fathers and whether those differences are beginning to shrink as men become more involved in the parenting process. By furthering

education on possible differences between fathers and mothers we can better provide parenting tools for both men and women to benefit from.

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