**ACT for Parents Manual**

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**Manual Overview**

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**Objective 4: Creating a Touchstone: Turning Back to Values/Committed Action**

**Home Practice: Keeping it Going & Making Time for You**

**General Guidelines**

1. **Importance of Modeling: *Remember to actively model the ACT components you teach, in your language, in your presence, in your willingness to acknowledge your own mistakes and limitations, in your willingness to show and accept your own difficult emotions.***
2. **One Size Does Not Fit All – adapt as you wish, keeping the objectives in mind: *This manual was written to give you a clear structure on which to base your ACT parent trainings, AND to give you the freedom to use your own favorite exercises and ACT tools within this structure. So while it is important to accomplish the \*goals\* of each session, \*how\* you do that is up to you, so long as you do these in a way that is adherent to the manual structure.***
3. **Don’t be afraid to throw out the manual or change the order in which you present things– attend to what’s going on in the group: *To date, there have been no studies on sequencing ACT components, thus, you can feel free to move things around as you wish. Again, just make sure you maintain the structure (do all the components addressed) in the manual.***
4. **Listen to your Heart – what are you, as the workshop leader, working on? *Notice where you are, in your own head and heart, as you deliver the material in this manual. What is the value that you would like your work to represent?***
5. **Lean in, and make space, if things are rough: *If things are challenging during your groups, or if you yourself are having a tough day, or feeling your own fears about how things are going, lean in. Keep them present. They will guide you as you work with the parents.***
6. **Shape as you Go: use ACT-consistent language from the get-go. Share your feelings when useful. Notice and reflect the process of what is going on in the room as it happens: *It is so important to notice and comment on processes as you deliver these workshops. Do you notice a change in the room after experiential exercises? Do people feel more or less connected? Are you feeling connected yourself? Is there tension? Notice these, and bring awareness and attention to them – yours, and the participants.***
7. **Humor can be helpful, or avoidance – use it to keep parents engaged, to lighten things up when you choose, to vary the tone of your workshop to keep it from becoming boring: *Pretty self-explanatory. Do notice, however, when laughter serves an avoidant function.***
8. **To Slide or Not to Slide? *Sometimes slides, with very few words and lots of compelling images, are helpful. Sometimes they are distracting, and a crutch that takes the focus away from what’s going on in the group. It is entirely up to you if you choose to use them or not.***

**Session 1: Mindfulness: Finding Stillness**

**Objective 1: Creating Connections/Centering Exercise**

**Objective 2: Listening to Parenting Obstacles**

**Objective 3: Noticing and normalizing parenting stress**

**Objective 4: Introducing Present Moment Awareness**

 **Home Practice: Mindfulness in daily life**

 **\*Materials Needed:** White board and markers, pen/paper, Mindfulness in Daily Life

handout/worksheet, and if you are doing a mindfulness of taste exercise, something to use as a stimulus (mints, chocolates, etc.)

**Introduction to the group and presenters (5 minutes).** Group co-leaders introduce themselves, and give the group a brief description of the activities and expectations. The following script can be paraphrased for participants:

*“This is a 5 session workshop, and it’s important to come to all sessions, as we’ll be working on different skills in each session. In this workshop, we will be talking about parenting, the thoughts and feelings that arise for you in tough moments with your child, and what to do about them. There will be opportunities for you to share these with the group, although you do not have to share anything at all if you do not wish to. This workshop will be a mix of the two of us speaking with you, and experiential exercises. This means that we will also ask you to try some things, in order to more effectively demonstrate the skills we are trying to teach. For example, if you wanted to learn how to ride a bicycle, you could read about it, or we could tell you about it. But really, the best way would be for you to try it, and to keep trying it, and practicing, until you can do it. The skills we’ll teach are sort of like that, so it’s important that we give you chances to try them here in group, and at home. Starting next week, we’ll give you some brief forms to fill out to help us see how things are going for you. Again, participation in these is voluntary, and we will ask your permission to try these things each time. Finally, it’s important to mention that we agree that what we discuss in this group is private, and we keep what we share within the group. Is that ok with everyone? Does anyone have any questions or comments?”*

**Objective 1: Creating Connections/Centering Exercise (5 minutes)**

The goal here is to give participants an experiential opportunity to connect with each other, and to contact both that this can be a little bit challenging, as well as rewarding. Below is an exercise that can be quite useful to start things off.

**Connection Exercise (suggested)**

*“If you are willing, please take a moment to stand up where you are. If you like, move to a place where you have some room around you. Take a moment to take a gentle stretch, or whatever feels right for you. (group leader can direct this, or let participants do what they choose). Now take a moment to connect with your breathing. Notice your body taking in air, filling your lungs and nourishing every cell of your body, from your head to your toes. And exhale, noticing that as you breathe, you are part of the world around you. Each inbreath: an opening, a taking in of nourishment. Each outbreath: a complete letting go. Just take a moment to connect with your breath, with your body being a part of this world, and with yourself in this moment, right here, right now, just as you are, in this room, with this group.*

*(pause). Take a moment to notice the people around you. If you are willing, see if you can notice each one, \*really\* notice them, even briefly, and make eye contact as you do. Notice that everyone here has laughed so hard that their sides have hurt, or it was hard to catch their breath. (pause) Notice that everyone here has worked really hard for something. (pause) Notice that everyone here has experienced disappointment. (pause) Notice that everyone here has had a day or days when it was hard to get up in the morning. (pause) Notice that everyone here has experienced joy. (pause) Notice that everyone here has felt disappointed by something or someone they love. (pause) Notice that everyone here has experienced giving, or receiving love. (pause) Notice that everyone here has experienced doubt, or fear, or sadness. (Notice that everyone here has experienced loss. (pause) Notice that everyone here has longed for something, perhaps comfort, or peace (pause). As you notice each other, see if you can give some small gift of acknowledgement, or connection, or awareness that you see them. (pause) See if you can notice what it is like to allow yourself to be seen. (pause)*

*Gently letting go of this part of the exercise, take a gentle stretch, or whatever feels right to you, and find your seats.”*

**Helpful Hint:** It may be useful to provide a brief opportunity to invite participants to process this exercise, or you may choose to simply move on. Some options for processing this include asking participants an open question about what the experience was like (this is very challenging, given that this is a first session), or to ask if the room feels different now – or if they feel different in the room/group than they did when they first walked it (easier), or to model for them by sharing what the experience was like for you as a group leader (easiest).

**Other Exercise Ideas:**

**Objective 2: Listening to Parenting Obstacles (Life is what goes on when you are planning other things) (15 minutes)**

The purpose here is twofold: first, to get parents in contact with what brought them here, and what they hope to get out of the workshop, and second, to provide some psychoeducation the stresses that arise as a natural consequence of raising a child. (If appropriate to the group of parents, group leaders should also touch upon the particular stresses that arise when parenting a child with emotional and behavioral special needs, or specific to ASD). Workshop leaders should work towards making a space in which parents feel safe sharing their difficult moments, in a “connected” way – in other words, connecting with their experience as they share it. Group leaders should also be mindful in the language they use in reflecting participant responses: specifically, this is an opportunity to shape defusion skills by using phrases like, “So your mind is telling you,” and “So there is story about…” Finally, group leaders should notice their own connection to what participants say: in other words, it is important for group leaders to “show up” also, and share what you notice in listening to your participants. Are you moved? Are you noticing how participants look, or how they choose to look away as they speak? Does their posture change? Do you notice other participants nodding and listening in? Noticing, and perhaps sharing some of these observations can be helpful in facilitating the group process. Below is a script that group leaders can use or paraphrase to introduce this section of the group, as well as some options that group leaders can use or paraphrase in order to further facilitate this component of the session.

 **Psychoeducation about Parenting Stress:**

Group leaders may ask, “*Why do people become parents?”* After obtaining a few responses, say *“Did you know that although we have a cultural myth that having children/a family makes us happier, research suggests that most parents*

* *experience lower emotional well-being*
	+ *less frequent positive emotions*
	+ *more frequent negative emotions*
	+ *lower marital satisfaction*
	+ *and greater levels of depression*

*…than nonparents do.”*

 **Other Exercise Ideas:**

-Ask parents to go around the room (or even better, pair up), tell the name of your child, one thing you appreciate about them, and one challenge, encouraging participants to really listen to each other and notice what it is like to hear these things.

-Use a “difficult parenting story” that you might read or describe to participants, and asking them to listen to what resonates most for them

-Show one of the optional cartoons or images to elicit discussion, if you choose to use slides – for example



**Helpful Hints:** Beware disconnected “stories.” If these show up, they will have a

“familiar” or “well-worn” feel to them. If you notice this, you might ask participants if they experience this when they are telling the story, get them to slow down, and really listen to the words. In addition, you may notice a “cost” to the difficulties and challenges that parents are reporting – see if you can get in touch with that – put yourself in their shoes. Reflect it back to them. See if they can contact the “cost” of their struggles also.”

**Objective 3: Noticing and normalizing parenting stress (15 minutes)**

The goal of this objective is to help parents to become aware of and begin discussing the **thoughts and feelings** that arise in the context of parenting stress, and to normalize them. Below are some options for introducing this section of the workshop.

**Normalizing Parenting Stress Discussion/Exercise:**

Ask, “*Have you ever had the thought that you don’t know how to handle a particular behavior in your child? Or that you don’t know what to do? Have you ever had the feeling that it’s sometimes hard to be around your child, especially if it’s been a tough day for you? If you are experiencing a stressful moment, what does your body feel like? Where do you physically carry stress?”*  Invite participants to notice whether they have ever experienced these types of thoughts, feelings, and sensations. Have them notice that they are not alone, and that these are commonly experienced by most parents, at one time or another. Refer back to the data on parenting presented earlier. You may also choose to present this data, from an APA report on stress:

“*While parents report similar sources of stress as the rest of the population (80 percent cite money, 72 percent cite work and 72 percent cite the economy as stressors), many also report that family responsibilities are a significant source of stress (73 percent). Results from the survey suggest*

*that parents feel that they are under a great deal of stress (nearly one-third report feeling this way) and understand the importance of managing it (69 percent say managing stress is important). However, only one-third (32 percent) believe they are doing an excellent or very good job of managing their stress.”*

Also, *“While the majority of parents don’t think their children are strongly affected by their stress, children report otherwise. Nearly three-quarters (69 percent) of parents say that their stress has only a slight or no impact on their children, yet 91 percent of children report they know their parent is*

*stressed because they observe a multitude of behaviors, such as yelling, arguing and complaining. When their parents are stressed or worried, nearly half of tweens (47 percent) and one-third of teens (33 percent) say that they feel sad; one-third of tweens (36 percent) and 43 percent of teens say that they feel worried; and one-quarter (25 percent) of tweens and 38 percent of teens feel frustrated*

*when their parents are stressed. Children who say their parents are always stressed are more likely to report having a great deal of stress themselves than those who say their parents are never stressed (17 percent vs. 2 percent).”* Excerpted from APA Stress in America findings, November, 2010; <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2010/national-report.pdf>

**Objective 4: Introducing Present Moment Awareness (20 minutes)**

The goal of this component is to provide parents with the practice of present moment awareness, and to give a rationale for that in their daily lives. Group leaders may use any ACT present moment scripts or exercises here, although we encourage to start simply, with brief practice that parents can easily integrate into daily life, or into positive/neutral interactions with their children. Below is a sample script to introduce the session.

**Introduction to Present Moment Awareness:**

Say, “What sometimes happens when people get caught up in difficult thoughts, feelings, and sensations associated with parenting stress, is that they lose contact with the present moment. For example, have you ever been preoccupied with something, put down your car keys somewhere, and then had no idea where you put them? Or daydreaming or worrying about something, and not hearing someone in your family call for you? Those are examples of being stuck in your mind rather than being in the present moment. Fortunately, you can learn to drop into the present any time you wish, if you learn and practice the skills over time. Very simply, the skills involve paying purposeful attention to what you are experiencing in the present moment, with curiosity, and without defense. If you are willing, we’ll try an exercise so you can see what we mean.” Conduct present moment awareness exercise, such as mindfulness of breath, of sound, of taste, of physical sensations in the body. Have participants notice when passing thoughts pull them out of the present moment, and encourage them to come back. Keep the exercise brief, perhaps 5 minutes. Debrief participants, and normalize distractions, difficulty, or ease – ensure that they understand that a range of reactions is absolutely ok.

**Home Practice: Mindfulness in daily life**

Assignment: To practice mindfulness at least once daily, either while engaged in daily tasks or activities (doing dishes, eating, driving, packing a lunch) and more importantly, during neutral or positive interactions with your child or spouse. Make sure you troubleshoot with them when they might be able to do this, help them work out how to remember (give them the home practice handout), and commit to at least once per day. Remind them that we’ll go over these first things in session 2.

**Session 2: Defusion: Weathering Thoughts & Feelings**

**Objective 1: Listening to Difficult Parenting Thoughts & Feelings**

**Objective 2: Home practice check in: Mindfulness in daily life**

**Objective 3: Creating Connections/Centering Exercise**

**Objective 4: Introducing How the Mind Works, Fusion/Experiential Avoidance, & Defusion**

 **Home Practice: Defusion/Weathering Parent-Child Interaction**

**\*Materials Needed:** White board and markers, pen/paper, homework check-in sheets, Mindfulness handout

**Objective 1: Listening to Difficult Parenting Thoughts and Feelings**

Allow parents to meet and chat together, and in a gently guided way, help elicit their struggles and triumphs from the week. Listen carefully for problematic thoughts or beliefs, and when you hear them, begin shaping defusion right from the beginning of the group by using reflection stems such as “So your mind is telling you…” or “So you are having the thought that…”In addition, you might call attention to commonalities across these thoughts amongst the group of parents, as well as highlighting uniquenesses of their experience. It will also be important to help parents to notice how “sticky” or compelling or powerful these thoughts are as they speak about them. You can do this by modeling yourself, for example, “When I have the thought that I am irritated and can’t tolerate that, I have a hard time noticing anything else but that.” Or you might say, “I notice that I struggle more with thoughts when they show up with strong emotion.” Finally, write down some thoughts on a whiteboard or elsewhere to use later in the session as examples, to keep the session as tightly tailored to your parents as possible.

**Objective 2: Home practice check in: Mindfulness in daily life**

**\*\*\*MAKE SURE YOU GIVE PARENTS THE HOMEWORK CHECK SHEET AND HAVE THEM COMPLETE IT.** Elicit from parents how they did on the homework, and in particular, any obstacles to doing it, and what they noticed when they did do it. If they need help planning when to be mindful due to limited time or lots of stress etc. help them do that. If they are evaluating whether the “effects” of mindfulness are positive or negative, simply accept their experiences, and reiterate that the goal is not to have a positive or negative experience, but to simply bring curiosity and openness to their lives, and to practice present moment awareness. Encourage continued practice, and emphasize that difficulties in paying mindful attention are quite common. Over time, however, the practice gets easier, just like any other skill that is frequently and consistently practiced. Finally, encourage them to keep checking in with their own experience, and noticing what present moment awareness is like.

**Objective 3:** Conduct a brief 5-minute centering exercise of your choice to help parents get centered in the present moment, and ready to engage in a more mindful and curious way with the group content and each other.

**Objective 4: Introducing How the Mind Works, Fusion, and Defusion**

1. **How the Mind (Verbal/Symbolic Processes) Works**

Say, *“Sometimes when we struggle with our thoughts, we have less energy and bandwidth to pay attention to being effective parents in those moments.” I would like to show you how, and why, this can happen. Are you willing to do some exercises with me?* (Make eye contact with each participant and elicit a nod or other form of agreement.)

There are numerous exercises to help participants experience what is meant by “fusion.” Some favorites are:

 **1.The “Max the Dog” Story**

A couple leave for work and leave Max outside all day in the cold wind and rain, with no food or shelter. When they return home late in the evening, how does Max respond (elicit responses)? How might \*you\* respond (elicit responses)? Note to participants that humans respond differently than dogs because we have language that allows us to imagine the future, and remember the past, and react to them like they are in the present. And that those functions can be more powerful than the immediate functions of food, warmth, and comfort (which are the ones the dog notices, not having language).

**2. Meeting Your Mind Exercise**

*“I am going to put three unfinished sentences up on the (projector, whiteboard, etc.) I simply would like for you to notice each, and notice and write down what thought pops into your head. Would that be ok?”* Present these three sentence fragments:

* Good parents (are – verb is optional)…(pause)
* Bad parents (are)…(pause)
* I am a…(pause)

Ask, *“What did you notice? Which ones popped into your head more quickly? What about that last sentence? Did anything else pop into your head – images, or memories? Did you happen to notice how your body felt when you had that (or those ) thought(s)? Does that remind you of anything? Are any of these things that other parents are saying familiar to you? Have you ever had those thoughts?”* Make sure you write down the thoughts on a board for parents to see. You will refer to them later on in the workshop.

**3. The Parenting Crystal Ball Exercise**

This is an exercise in which parents are asked to imagine their child in detail, and to write down 3 things that \*must\* happen for their child in life. You may choose to give an example to get them started, such as “I wish for my child to be loved and cherished and safe.” Have parents write these down in order of importance, numbering them 1, 2 and 3. Then tell parents that you have a crystal ball, and that that crystal ball tells the future for your child. Have them look at and read #3, and say, “The crystal ball tells me that this is not going to happen – your child will not have this in their life. Cross it off the paper.” Encourage them to observe their thoughts, feelings and physical reactions as they do this. Repeat for numbers 2, and 1. Ask for reactions. Say, “*Notice how powerful a simple thought exercise like this can be, and how these thoughts – which are not real – elicited emotions, behaviors, and physical responses from you. This is an example of how we can get “Fused” with or “hooked” by our thoughts. We respond to them, regardless of how realistic or not, as real, literal truths at an emotional level, even if we reassure ourselves that they are in fact not real.*

1. **Introducing the Unworkability of Experiential Avoidance**

Say, *“Sometimes we try to deal with unwanted thoughts and emotions by avoiding or suppressing them. This is called experiential avoidance. For example,* (provide an example or two). *Can you think of some ways that people commonly use to avoid thinking about or feeling unpleasant or unwanted things?* Give parents time to generate some of these. Write them down. Ask, “*So what do you notice about how these work? How effective are they?”* Simply note what parents say about this, and reflect this in a mindful way back to them.

Then say, “*Seems like you are noticing that these strategies sometimes work, perhaps in the short term, but that the thoughts and feelings still remain afterward. Sometimes they even seem to get stronger, and take up more mental space! Interesting. Are you willing to try some exercises so we can focus in on how experiential avoidance strategies might work?* (make eye contact and elicit consent from participants).

There are numerous exercises to show the futility, or unworkability of experiential avoidance. Some favorites are

1. **What Are the Numbers?:** This is an exercise in which participants are asked to work as hard as they can to remember three numbers: 1, 2, 3. Once they have done so, they are asked to try as hard as they can to *forget* those numbers. Individuals report that they cannot, and find that humorous, typically. This is a lighthearted illustration that attempts to avoid or dismiss thoughts are often ineffective or “unworkable.”
2. **Don’t think about Chocolate Cake**
3. **Milk vs. Milk Milk Milk**
4. **Defusion Strategies: Strategies for Handling Thoughts and Feelings (20-30 minutes).** We will go through a number of different ways of addressing these types of thoughts and feelings. Generally speaking, we will go over two strategies: 1)using *experiential avoidance,* or attempts to control, minimize or avoid these types of thoughts and feelings, which has been found in numerous studies to be unhelpful, and at times to paradoxically increase the frequency or intensity of these types of thoughts and feelings, and 2) *mindfulness & acceptance,* or awareness and willingness to experience one’s thoughts and feelings as they are in the present moment, without defense or attempts to change them. We will use experiential exercises to demonstrate each of these constructs. The following are some examples of commonly used “experiential exercises:”
5. **Having the Thought Exercise:** We might ask a parent to volunteer a difficult thought, which we would then write on a piece of paper. We would ask for a volunteer from the audience (and if no one volunteers, we would conduct this between the group co-leaders). The volunteer would be asked to put the “thought” in his or her hand, and it would be held there by the co-leader. The volunteer would then be asked to push, as hard as they could, against the “thought” and the co-leaders hand. This is often humorous to volunteers. We then ask the volunteer to notice how effortful the experience was (their response is typically that it is quite effortful). Next, we ask the participant to simply let the “thought” rest in their hand, and ask them to note how effortful *that* is (“not at all” or “much easier” is the typical response). We describe the first experience as similar to experiential avoidance, and the second to acceptance.
6. **Leaves on a Stream**. This is another commonly done experiential exercise in ACT. It involves individuals closing their eyes, taking a few moments to notice their breath, and simply noticing their thoughts as they arise and pass. They are encouraged to imagine these thoughts printed on leaves that fall into a stream and are carried away. The goal of this type of exercise is to teach participants the skill of mindful awareness of internal events (cognitions), without any attempt to change those events.
7. **Todd Kashdan’s TEDX talk from Utrecht.** This is a great, brief introduction to defusion strategies from a positive psychology perspective. If you have time, you might show it – it is about 15 minutes long, and gives a great example of the “I’m having the thought” exercise.
8. **Thoughts as Mental Weather.** Introduce parents to the notion that thoughts are like mental weather, sometimes mild and sometimes strong, and always changing. Have them do a brief experiential exercise in which they notice their changing thoughts and links with emotions and physical sensations in the moment.

**Home Practice: Defusion/Weathering Parent-Child Interaction**

Say, *“It’s not uncommon that difficult thoughts and feelings show up in your interactions with your children, as you described to me in the beginning of the group* (highlight the challenging thoughts participants described at the beginning of the group). *Being with your child is a great opportunity to practice your defusion skills. First, it helps to mindfully notice what thoughts and feelings you are having at the moment* (You can have them practice simple mindfulness of thought either as your centering exercise in the beginning, or now. You may ask participants to practice mindful awareness with a pleasant and a challenging parenting moment of their choice, privately during the workshop, for about 10 minutes. Following that component, parents will be given an opportunity to share their experience with the group, if they wish.). *Next, whatever thoughts you notice, practice using this stem: “I notice I am having the thought that” and practice noticing your thought, and holding it very lightly.*

Assignment: To practice mindfulness & defusion at least once daily, either while engaged in interactions with one’s child (positive or negative, purposeful or unplanned). Make sure you troubleshoot with them when they might be able to do this, help them work out how to remember (give them the home practice handout), and commit to at least once per day. Remind them that we’ll go over these first things in session 3.

**Session 3: The Matrix: Moving Towards vs. Moving Away**

 **Objective 1: Listening to Challenging Interactions with your Child**

**Objective 2: Creating Connections/Centering Exercise**

**Objective 3: Home practice check-in: Defusion/Noticing What Happens in Parent-Child**

**Interaction**

**Objective 4: Introducing Concept of Workability/Acceptance via the Matrix (of what is**

**out of your control) in Parent-Child Interaction**

**Home Practice: Tracking Towards & Away Moves**

**Materials Needed:**  Whiteboard/markers, homework check-in sheets, Matrix handouts, a digital voice recorder

**Objective 1: Listening to Difficult Parenting Thoughts and Feelings**

Allow parents to meet and chat together, and in a gently guided way, help elicit their struggles and triumphs from the week. Listen carefully for problematic thoughts or beliefs, and when you hear them, continue shaping defusion right from the beginning of the group by using reflection stems such as “So your mind is telling you…” or “So you are having the thought that…”In addition, you might call attention to commonalities across these thoughts amongst the group of parents, as well as highlighting uniquenesses of their experience. It will also be important to help parents to notice how “sticky” or compelling or powerful these thoughts are as they speak about them. You can do this by modeling yourself, for example, “When I have the thought that I am irritated and can’t tolerate that, I have a hard time noticing anything else but that.” Or you might say, “I notice that I struggle more with thoughts when they show up with strong emotion.” Finally, keep the session as tightly tailored to your parents as possible – some of these thoughts/feelings will show up again when you go over the Matrix.

**Objective 2:** Conduct a brief 5-minute centering exercise of your choice to help parents get centered in the present moment, and ready to engage in a more mindful and curious way with the group content and each other.

**Objective 3: Home practice check in: Defusion/Weathering Difficult Parent-Child Interactions**

**\*\*\*MAKE SURE YOU GIVE PARENTS THE HOMEWORK CHECK SHEET AND HAVE THEM COMPLETE IT. Here is last week’s homework assignment:**

Assignment: *To practice mindfulness & defusion at least once daily, either while engaged in interactions with one’s child (positive or negative, purposeful or unplanned). Make sure you troubleshoot with them when they might be able to do this, help them work out how to remember (give them the home practice handout), and commit to at least once per day.*

Elicit from parents how they did on the homework, and in particular, any obstacles to doing it, and what they noticed when they did do it. If they need help planning when to be mindful due to limited time or lots of stress etc. help them do that. See what showed up for them in challenging child interactions – did they get hooked; if so, what happened next? Did they notice getting “hooked,” and were they able to bring themselves back to a more mindful and defused state? If so, what happened? If you notice that they are beating themselves up for not doing the home practice correctly, see if you can work *those* thoughts into a defusion activity as you go over the homework (ie, just have them notice that they are having thoughts). You can also encourage them to reinforce each other (ie, one can tell the other members “So you are having the thought that…”).

**Objective 4: Introducing Concept of Workability/Acceptance via the Matrix (of what is**

**out of your control) in Parent-Child Interaction**

In this segment, you should go over the Matrix just as Kevin Polk has taught. Use the whiteboard and markers so that parents can have a clear visual of the Matrix and how it works.

Say, *“Tonight I want to speak from the perspective of psychological flexibility – or doing more of the things that are important to you, your child, and your family. Would you be willing for me to describe to you this perspective?* (Make eye contact with each group member, and get a nod from each.) *You’ll notice on my board here at the top that I have written “Five Senses Experiencing.” What are our 5 senses?* (Have group participants describe sight, smell, touch, taste, and hearing). *Now I’d like you to pick up your pen. Notice what it looks like (pause, and model this whole exercise for them). Now notice if it makes a sound (pause, tap pen on table, etc). Now notice how it feels (Pause, feel pen). Now see if it has a smell (pause, you do the same). Finally, you can taste it if you want (pause). Ok? So that’s pretty clear (do this with some humor). Now, I would like for all of you to put the pen down in front of you so that you are no longer touching it, and to close your eyes. (pause). Now, please call to mind the pen – how it looked, felt, sounded, smelled, and yes, you can even now imagine how it tastes (pause). Now you can open your eyes. Notice the difference between experiencing your pen with your 5 senses, and in your mind. Ok? That’s the first tool involved in psychological flexibility – noticing the difference between when you are experiencing the world from your 5 senses, and when you are experiencing it through your thoughts.*

 *Now, you’ll notice that over here on this side of the Matrix, I have written the word “Towards.” All of us have things in our lives or our families that we would like to move towards. For example, I might put “xx” for me (give a real example, such as a better relationship with one’s child, or more connection with a spouse, etc etc). What about you? What are some things that you’d like to move towards in your life? \*\**Do not judge parent responses – simply write them down – UNLESS – they say something that indicates that they would like to move AWAY from that thing – like “Less fighting” etc. If they do give you something like this, then either write it into the quadrant of the Matrix for thoughts and feelings we’d like to move away from. Obtain 5-6 responses from parents. *Now, when you are moving towards these things (point to the items on the board), things sometimes show up inside us that we’d rather move away from. For example, when I am moving towards “xx,” sometimes “yy” shows up (eg, anxiety, anger, fear, thoughts like “I don’t have time” etc etc). What are some things that show up for you that you’d rather move away from?* Have parents name thoughts or feelings. Make sure you put “quotation marks” around the thoughts. Say, *“We write all these things in the lower left quadrant, because they are things that show up inside us. Just like the things that we think about that we’d like to move towards. Now, when these things show up that you would like to move away from, what are some things that you do to make them go away? For example, I “xx” (eg, drink, yell, avoid, watch TV, ignore the kids, etc etc). Note that these are all things that you do- they are behaviors that folks can see, so they go above the line. So what are some things we do to move away?* List what the parents say. Once you have a list of things folks use to move away, talk them through how each of these strategies works. Draw a line from the avoided content (bottom quadrant, thoughts and feelings) and the matching strategy – if the parent says that the strategy works in the short term and not in the long term or if they say it doesn’t work at all (or makes things worse), then draw an arrow back down to the content. You should eventually get a bunch of circles that looks a little bit like a hurricane. Ask the parents to notice what they see regarding how these strategies work. You may ask what the drawing looks like – they may say, a whirlpool, or storm. Ask if the strategies are useful in moving towards things – the answer should be an obvious no. Finally, ask parents to let the left half of the Matrix sit for a bit, and then have them list things that help them move towards. Again, provide an example. Participants may list actions that are “a little bit towards, and a little bit away.” If this is the case, see if they can describe a percent (percent towards, percent away). Once they have generated a list of 5-6 or more, have them notice what they see – ask if they need to manage any of the content in the lower left quadrant in order to move towards things that are important. Ask if they think, based on the drawing, whether it might be helpful to manage that content (in the lower left quadrant) in order to move towards the things that they care about. The drawing should suggest that it is not.

Highlight for parents that it is important to notice two things – whether they are experiencing with their 5 senses in the present moment – and whether they are moving towards or away from the things that matter, or whether they are engaged in counterproductive attempts to manage internal content – which doesn’t really work well to manage that content, OR to move towards stuff they care about. Give everyone a Matrix handout or two.

Discuss what goes on in difficult parent-child interactions – and that parents can notice whether they are in their heads or in the moment, and whether their behavior is moving towards something, or moving away from something. Parents can use the Matrix to help them track their moves, and see how they work

**Objective 5: Home Practice – Tracking Towards and Away Moves Using the Matrix**.

Have parents work on tracking whether they are engaged in towards or away moves, and how those moves “work” for them. Have them write down a towards or away move, especially in their relationships or interactions with their children, and see how they work, once per day. Give them the homework sheet. Remind them that you will discuss these next week, especially looking at how these moves work.

**Session 4: Valuing/Committed Action: Doing What Matters**

 **Objective 1: a. Creating Connections/b. Centering Exercise**

**Objective 2: Home practice check-in: Tracking Towards & Away Moves**

**Objective 3: Listening to Core Parenting Values**

**Objective 4: Introducing Valuing/Committed Action in Parenting Consistency**

**Home Practice: Practicing Parenting Commitment**

**Materials Needed: Whiteboard/large flip chart and markers; homework sheets, Matrix handouts, Home Practice Assignments, pens and blank sheets of paper for parents (for the Non-Dominant Hand Exercise), and if you choose to use it, the Values Assessment.**

**Objective 1a: Listening to Difficult Parenting Thoughts and Feelings**

Allow parents to meet and chat together, and in a gently guided way, help elicit their struggles and triumphs from the week. Listen carefully for problematic thoughts or beliefs, and when you hear them, continue shaping defusion right from the beginning of the group by using reflection stems such as “So your mind is telling you…” or “So you are having the thought that…”In addition, you might call attention to commonalities across these thoughts amongst the group of parents, as well as highlighting uniquenesses of their experience. It will also be important to help parents to notice how “sticky” or compelling or powerful these thoughts are as they speak about them. You can do this by modeling yourself, for example, “When I have the thought that I am irritated and can’t tolerate that, I have a hard time noticing anything else but that.” Or you might say, “I notice that I struggle more with thoughts when they show up with strong emotion.” Finally, keep the session as tightly tailored to your parents as possible – some of these thoughts/feelings will show up again when you review the Matrix.

**Objective 1b: Brief Centering Exercise around Acceptance**

Conduct a brief 5-minute centering exercise of your choice around acceptance to help parents get centered in the present moment, and ready to engage in a more mindful and curious way with the group content and each other. You may guide them to present moment awareness, and invite them to “allow” their feelings, or to imagine “that your feelings land lightly in them.” Another way to encourage acceptance is to have them physicalize their emotions or thoughts – imagine holding each gently in the palm of their hands. This will help with placing difficult thoughts and feelings in a hierarchical frame (I = not just my thoughts and emotions; I hold my thoughts and emotions).

**Objective 2: Home practice check-in: Tracking Towards & Away Moves**

**\*\*\*MAKE SURE YOU GIVE PARENTS THE HOMEWORK CHECK SHEET AND HAVE THEM COMPLETE IT. Here is last week’s homework assignment:**

Have parents work on tracking whether they are engaged in towards or away moves, and how those moves “work” for them. Have them write down a towards or away move, especially in their relationships or interactions with their children, and see how they work, once per day. Give them the homework sheet. Remind them that you will discuss these next week, especially looking at how these moves work.

You may notice at this point that some are getting stuck on “acceptance” because on the way to making towards moves, difficult feelings and thoughts get in the way. When this happens, make sure you redirect them to back to the Matrix so that they can contact the function of their choices in the moment: i.e., how does working on managing thoughts and emotions *work*? Draw their attention to when they are getting stuck.

It may also be useful at this point to introduce an ACT metaphor about acceptance, such as Joe the Bum (or “the Uninvited Party Guest”); the quicksand metaphor; Mule in the Well; or the Two Monks Zen koan:

**The Monk’s Heavy Load**

*One fine, warm, spring day, two monks – one young and one old – were traveling to a village far from their monastery to do some trading. In the high mountains where they lived, there were only small trails between villages, no roads, and few bridges. The spring had been especially warm. Winter’s dense snow was melting quickly and many streams had become too swollen and dangerous to cross.*

 *After walking a distance on a rugged, steep trail, the two monks came upon a fast moving stream were a young woman stood timidly on the bank, afraid to cross. The young monk reminded himself that as part of his religious training, he had vowed never to touch anyone of the opposite sex. He nodded to the young woman as he passed her by, lifted his monk’s robe up slightly and carefully began to negotiate the stream. But to his amazement, the elder monk sped right past him while carrying the young woman in his harms! When the old monk put her down in the far shore, she bowed respectfully to him in thanks. Not saying a word in reply, he gave her a bright, broad smile and went on his way with a quick step.*

 *The young monk saw that the elder had continued on without him. With some effort he finally managed to catch up. But as they walked on, he considered and considered and reconsidered the old monk’s action back at the stream. With each passing mile his thoughts grew angrier and angrier until hours later, he stopped in his tracks, flushed with rage. He shouted and sputtered at the old monk,” You broke your sacred vows! You were never to touch a woman! How can you forgive yourself? You should not be allowed back to our monastery!”*

 *Surprised at this outburst, the old monk turned to face him. “I dropped that woman hours ago,” he said. “Have you been carrying her all this time?”*

 Try the following exercise to see what you, as a parent, have been carrying all this time.

Ask parents, *“What Can You Choose to Put Down?”*  Take about five minutes now to think about this statement: In order for me to have a free mind, an open heart, and an unyielding approach to parenting well, I need to let go of… . Allow discussion.

**Objective 3: Listening to Core Parenting Values**

Say, *“When things get difficult, it’s probably hard for you to remember the last time you sat back and considered the things that are truly important to you. If you’re like most parents, your values have likely gotten lost in the tasks of daily living. If you’re like most parents, when parenting becomes difficult, you may feel like you are just going through the motions. How does this manifest on a physical level? You may feel exhausted and overwhelmed, or experience a sort of heaviness. Or you may feel numb and checked out, or perhaps you have a sense of urgency and feel trapped. Consider these feelings:*

*1. See if you can remember a time when you have felt stretched too thin.*

 *2. What happened when you struggled to manage your child’s misbehavior?*

 *3. What feelings showed up – did your feelings color the entire interaction?*

*4. If you could describe those moments as “spaces,” would they feel roomy*

*and expansive, or rather, small and cramped, areas in which you must fight to get out?*

 *Quite likely, you experience a sort of tunnel vision when you get into situations like these, such that your only goal is to do whatever is necessary to stop your child’s problem behavior. The world may narrow to this one interaction, which, you may feel, is the barometer by which you measure your success or failure as a parent.*

*Here’s a different idea: what if there was a way you could choose how to respond to your child, instead of simply reacting to situations? What if you could choose your direction, even when you are reacting to whatever is happening in the moment? Values are chosen directions or ways of being. You might think of your values as your chosen purpose. They are not destinations, but rather, points on a compass that guide us through our lives. Sometimes, when we talk to our clients we use the word values instead of valuing, which is really what we mean. To help you begin to understand what is meant by valuing, let’s try an exercise.*

At this point, you may lead them through your choice of Values exercises. Some favorites are “Eighty-Year Old You” (meaningful and brief, if time is short); “The Non-Dominant Hand Exercise” (longer, and also quite powerful); or you may choose to go through the Values Assessment with them.

**Eighty-Year Old You**

First connect in with your feet against the ground, and your breath, and your body as a whole. Bring your attention to your shoulders, noticing if they are carrying any tension or strain…gently bringing them up to your ears, and then letting them drop…and just noticing your breathing. Noticing how the inbreath allows for a new beginning…and the outbreath allows for complete letting go. (pause) Noticing if your mind is busy or stuck on other things…and making room for that with kindness and compassion. Where you are is exactly where you need to be….and then just coming back to your breath and your breathing. And when you’re ready, I’m going to invite you to imagine that your 80-year old you, this older, wiser 80-year old you – who’s been through all that you have been through, and much much more…has come to an ACT workshop and applied at least some of what they’ve learned. And by all means they’re not perfect…they’ve gone off course many, many, many times … yet they’ve recognized when they’ve gone off course and learned from it….they’ve even changed direction sometimes. And this older, wiser 80-year old you his coming to give you just three bits of advice. The first bit of advice is “You spend far too much time…” What might your older, wiser you tell you spend far too much time doing? So far, a favorite has been worrying… 90 percent of people say far too much time worrying – might be different for you. The next one is “You spend far too little time…” What might this older, wiser 80-year old you tell you that you spend far too little time doing? And last but not least, the older, wiser 80-year old you will recommend that you make just one change in your life from this day forward. “So if you could make just one change in your life, from this day forward, this is what I’d recommend.” (pause) and gently listen, and breathe. And just noticing the ripple effect that might incur in your life if you made this one change? What difference would that make in your relationship with yourself, and with others?

*The exercise is now coming to an end. In a little while, I will ask you to open your eyes and when you feel ready, I want you to take a few minutes to write down in your work materials what 80-year old you has told you.*  After 2-3 minutes, allow participants to share their answers, noting similarities in responses across group members.

**The Non-Dominant Hand Exercise**

Make sure parents have a sheet of paper and a pen. Prepare them to write with their non-dominant hand. Do a very brief centering exercise, and ask them to complete the following sentences. When you are finished, ask parents to complete these sentences:

* **I feel**
* **I need**
* **I long for**
* **I’m scared**
* **I’m struggling with**
* **I dream of**
* **I pretend that**
* **It’s hard for me to talk about/it’s hard for me to tell you**
* **If I had the money, I would**
* **If I had the courage, I would**

If you have time, you may choose to go through the Values Assessment instrument with parents instead of or additional to these exercises.

**Objective 4: Introducing Valuing/Committed Action in Parenting Consistency**

Say, “*As Fred Rogers says it in The World According to Mr. Rogers, (p. 32), “You rarely have time for everything you want in this life, so you have to make choices. And hopefully your choices can come from a deep sense of who you are.” But as you noticed this week and last week, lots of things show up when we think about values – thoughts that “These are not possible;” “I’m too tired;” “I don’t have time to think about these things – I am barely making it.”* Feel free to refer to thoughts and feelings that the parents in the group have described. Note that to follow one’s values is naturally to feel vulnerable.

Say, “*I would like for you to do a thought exercise with me. Imagine someone that you care deeply about – a child, a friend, a partner. Imagine that you are asleep in the house, and you hear an intruder come in, heading down to the room of your loved one. What would be the most important thing to you in that moment? What would you do? (parents typically say they would want their cared about person to be safe, and would do something to ensure that).* Ask, “*what if you were scared?” “What if you were tired?” “What if you had the thought that you could get hurt yourself?” “Would these things change what was important to you?” “Would you let anything get in the way of keeping your loved one safe the best you could?” That is a metaphor for what we mean by “commitment” in ACT – doing what matters most, no matter what.*

Allow some time for discussion, and how this may be useful in parenting situations.

**Home Practice: Practicing Parenting Commitment**

Have parents complete this worksheet, and track their values moves on a daily basis.

Assignment: This week, we encourage you to practice taking committed action towards your values. Please complete the following exercise, writing down your responses. Next, track your committed actions each day, until the next session. We’ll go over these next time we meet.

* **State your value**
* **What gets in the way/what you have been doing instead**
* **One small thing that you commit to changing, from this day forward**
* **That you are will make mistakes, and when you notice…**
* **You will acknowledge this and turn back in your chosen direction**

**Session 5: Self-Care: There’s Only One You**

 **Objective 1: Creating Connections/Centering Exercise**

**Objective 2: Home Practice Check-In: Practicing Parenting Commitment**

**Objective 3: Listening with Compassion/Self-as-Context (Defusing “Failure”)**

**Objective 4: Creating a Touchstone: Turning Back to Values/Committed Action**

**Home Practice: Keeping it Going & Making Time for You\*\*\*Materials needed: Home Practice Tracking Sheet, Home Practice Assignment for Week 5, Parenting Manifesto Handout, Post-Treatment Measures + SASE**

**Objective 1: Creating Connections/Centering Exercise**

Begin this centering exercises with brief discussion about the past week, and any struggles that the parents may be having. After an opportunity for the parents to connect with each other around these difficulties, invite them to try this exercise.

Say, *“Settle into your chair, and get into a position of relaxed alertness, close your eyes, and draw your attention to your breath...you do not need to change your breathing, just notice your breathing...you can pay attention to the air going in and out of your nose or the rise and fall of your stomach...(several seconds)...now shift your focus to your body and notice if there is any tension in your body...again, no need to do anything to change this, just notice...and now shift your focus again to any emotions you might be feeling, notice the quality of the emotion (strong, faint, painful, comfortable, sharp, dull...) and where that might be observable in your body. (something like that, you could alter to your needs, even shorten and just keep the focus on the breath)*

*I'd like you now to try an imagery practice...consider the image of a being that to you conveys compassion...this could be a person in your life now or in the past, a spiritual figure, or an imagined being that you have not yet met or heard about...a being that has qualities such as kindness, wisdom, strength, flexibility, courage, and an endless capacity to love...take a moment to bring this being to mind...consider what this being looks like in as many details as you can bring to mind...*

*Now imagine this being sitting next to you, you as you are now, with the emotions that you have now, the thoughts and experiences you are having at this moment...imagine this being, this being with so much kindness, wisdom, strength, flexibility, courage and love, but his/her hand on your shoulder and with this gesture showing to you so much compassion, caring, complete acceptance...of you, just as you are...allow those feelings to be with you now...*

(and then something to come back to the present...like, allow these feelings of compassion to stay with you as you expand your awareness back to your breath...and now to the room around you...when you're ready, opening your eyes...)

**Objective 2: Home Practice Check-In: Practicing Parenting Commitment**

**\*\*\*MAKE SURE YOU GIVE PARENTS THE HOME PRACTICE CHECK SHEET AND HAVE THEM COMPLETE IT. Here is last week’s home practice assignment:**

Have parents complete this worksheet, and track their values moves on a daily basis.

Assignment: This week, we encourage you to practice taking committed action towards your values. Please complete the following exercise, writing down your responses. Next, track your committed actions each day, until the next session. We’ll go over these next time we meet.

* State your value
* What gets in the way/what you have been doing instead
* One small thing that you commit to changing, from this day forward
* That you are will make mistakes, and when you notice…
* You will acknowledge this and turn back in your chosen direction

In discussion, listen closely for parents “beating themselves up,” or negatively evaluating their actions, feelings, or general competence in parenting or as people. Make a space for those things to be heard in the group, and model willingness and acceptance to sit with them. If you are willing to share a personal story to contribute, that modeling may also be helpful.

**Objective 3: Listening with Compassion/Self-as-Context (Defusing & Accepting “Failure”)**

The goal of this component of the intervention is to help parents voice their worries and thoughts of their own perceived shortcomings, and to sit with those with compassion. A key part of this involves helping parents contact how struggling with these types of self-evaluative thoughts “works.” To this end, you may want to

\*Draw upon the Matrix again, if you feel that parents resonate well with that.

\*Engage parents in defusion/acceptance exercises in which they notice and step back from these types of thoughts, such as the following…

**Acceptance and willingness as an alternative Exercise**

**Aim:** To give a direct experience of acceptance.

**Acceptance – An exercise of mindfulness**

*In this experiential exercise of mindfulness you will get the chance to observe and experience what happens to you when painful, sad, or stressful thoughts come into your mind. Sit comfortably in the chair. Sit forward in the chair, so that both feet are flat on the ground and so that you don’t lean against the back of the chair. Let your body rest in itself. Sit comfortably with your back straight, yet relaxed.*

*Become aware of where you are right now. Take a look around the room for a short while. Close your eyes gently. Become aware of the sensation of your feet touching the ground, your body touching*

*the chair. I would like to start by inviting you to make contact with your natural breathing. That*

*way of breathing that feels natural for you. You don’t need to strain yourself or influence your breathing, just allow your body to take care of you and you only need to be present with your natural breathing movement.* (Pause 1 minute)

*In this next phase I want to invite you get into the position of the observer of your breathing while at the same time be with your natural breathing. So with one eye, stay with your natural breathing and with the other eye see if you can take a step outside so that you are able to observe what this natural breathing looks like. What the rhythm looks like, how deep or how shallow, where in your body you feel this movement and even how it feels in your whole body when you breathe in this way. Try not*

*to judge your breathing, in one way or another. Simply observe it, as it is.* (Pause 1 minute)

*In this phase, I want to invite you to reach out and pull in a thought that is very irritating, unacceptable, stressful or painful for you about your child, or parenting, or relationship with your family today. When you have found this thought, bring it in. As you bring this unacceptable thought into your breathing, I want you to just observe what happens to your breathing and your body. Remember, no need to judge, just observe what happens to your breathing and your body.* (Pause 1 minute)

*Please return now to your natural breathing again, your stable rhythm of breath that your body provides for you.* (Pause 1 minute)

*In this final phase of this exercise I invite you to once again reach out and pull in the same unacceptable thought into your breathing, but this time, I invite you to conscientiously maintain your natural breathing while you pull this thought in. You are with your breathing and stay there while you at the same time with a long arm pull this unacceptable thought in. Watch what happens with this unacceptable, irritating or painful thought as it lands in your natural mindful breathing.* (Pause 1 minute)

*Let us end this exercise with a few words. You may repeat the statements quietly to yourself.*

*I allow all my experiences that come to me to land peacefully in me. All sensations, memories from the past, preoccupations, impulses to avoid or to cling, or worries for the future, are allowed to land in my peace. I choose not to generate so much more unnecessary pain for myself or others. I am aware of how easily I get caught in the trap of reacting to impulses aimed at short term avoidance of unpleasant feelings, or clinging to feel good. I now choose my steps of action for myself based on what is healthy for me. I choose to act with dignity and respect for myself. Become aware of the sensation of your body touching the chair, your feet touching the ground. Feel that you are completely present in your body.*

*When you feel ready, you may gently open your eyes and, if you want, you may stretch a little.*

*This is the end of the exercise.*

\* Help parents notice that it is hard to show compassion for the self in moments like this and address that with self-compassion exercises, such as the following options…

**Say:** *All parents make mistakes. When you do, you may beat yourself up. For instance, you might tell yourself that you never parent well or that you should just give up because you just can’t get it right. When you notice your mind starting up with this sort of talk, remind yourself that you’re human. Your*

*mind may tell you that you are your mistakes. Notice thoughts like these for what they are: simply thoughts. And what if you were your mistakes? You might stop trying to do things differently, or you might grow so angry or frustrated with yourself that you might give up. If this is consistent with your*

*experience, try the following exercise.*

**Self-Compassion Exercise Option 1: The Wild Geese**

Ask parents to close their eyes and get centered, and to simply listen and allow whatever thoughts and feelings show up. Allow time to discuss afterward.

Read, “***The Wild Geese by Mary Oliver***

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.”

**Self-Compassion Exercise Option 2: Self-Compassion/Acceptance**

*(Rest with breath). Think of someone important to you (or your child). Imagine them fully –the good things, and the irritating things… Send them goodwill and kindness. May you be safe. May you be peaceful. May you be healthy. May you be kind to yourself. May you accept yourself as you are (repeat). And if this person is going through a hard time, add “as possible” at the end of each praise – getting in touch with feelings of care, concern, and kindness…*

*Now imagine yourself in this person’s presence. May we be safe. May we be peaceful. May we be kind to ourselves. May we accept ourselves as we ar.e*

*Noticing how safe you feel with this person, how much you care for them – how much they care for you.*

*Now focus your attention on yourself. You deserve caring , kindness, love. As you consider these things, allow yourself to bring to mind some aspect of yourself, some mistake you’ve made, that’s been bothering you. Something perhaps you criticize yourself for, or that makes you feel inadequate in some way. Try to get in touch with your feelings about it – sad, frightened, isolated, inadequate – have how you felt when you you’ve thought about this? Where do you feel this in your body? Tightness in throat? Heaviness in heart? Tension in shoulders? See if you can allow them to be there, as natural feelings that arise when we judge ourselves. Get in touch with how much suffering is caused by our self-judgments or feelings that we aren’t good enough. Sometimes our greatest suffering is caused at our own hands, by struggling with beliefs that we must be perfect.*

*See if you can get in touch with the person feeling these difficult things. May I be safe. May I be peaceful. May I be kind to yourself. May I accept myself as I am. If hard to do, try putting your hand gently on your heart, and feeling the warmth there. (repeat) If you find yourself distracted, that’s fine – make space for that – and when you are ready, come back to the phrases, and the underlying wish for goodwill, and the intention behind the words.*

*Remember that everyone is in the same boat. Everyone feels inadequate in some way, or that they have failed. This is the human condition.*

\*Some parents may have difficulty having compassion for their child rather than themselves. If this is relevant, you may try the following exercise:

**Child Compassion Exercise: Remember When**

Find a few minutes for quiet reflection. Read through the exercise once or twice so you don’t have to refer back to the book during the meditation. Sit in a comfortable chair and close your eyes. Bring your mind back to your earliest memories of your child as a newborn. Bring yourself back into the skin of the person you were in that moment. Notice the small size and weight of your child, how he smelled, the delicate softness of his skin. Bring yourself back into that moment and notice how you felt—perhaps joyful, peaceful, or in awe of this completely new, amazing little being, and the terror of your new responsibility. Notice that this small, vulnerable, incredibly strong little child, for whom the whole world would open up in limitless possibility, is the same person today as he was then. See if you can see his face now that he has grown. See if you can see traces of that newborn in his face now. He still carries now the same vulnerability and strength you felt then. See if you can make a space for that vulnerability and strength in a compassionate way as you come back to the present.

**Ask:** *What was it like for you to participate in the previous meditation? What if you could gently hold that rich, full experience of your child in your awareness regardless of what your child is doing in the moment?*

**Say:** *Part of mindful awareness is noticing the continuity of your experience: when your child*

*struggles and when you as a parent struggle, you’re the same beings in your worst moments as you are in your best moments. One way to help hold that understanding in your awareness is to expect, with compassion, your child to do the next right thing. Very often parents expect the worst, especially intimes of great stress. You don’t have to believe this of your child—indeed, if you argue with your mind about whether she will or won’t, you’ll slip out of the moment into the hypothetical future. You can choose, however, to simply act with that awareness of your thoughts while holding this thought: My child can do the next right thing. If your mind wanders into the negative, such as unpleasant memories or worries about the future, simply acknowledge that and gently lead your mind back to the moment.*

**Objective 4: Creating a Touchstone: Turning Back to Values/Committed Action**

**Creating a Touchstone Writing Exercise**

Conduct a brief centering exercise, to help parents focus, and then invite them to do a writing exercise in which they put down the following, which will remain private, although you should invite them to share one piece with the group, if they are willing

* 1.Tell your child your hopes for your relationship and what you most wantfor her or him.
* 2. Write about your fears and your vulnerabilities. Tell him what you are worried might stand in the way of your hopes and dreams for him or her.
* 3. Finally, tell your child how committed you are to stand for him or her or to do the right thing for him—no matter how hard it gets.

Say, “*Put this letter in a safe place. One day, perhaps when your child attains a particular milestone or achieves something special, come back to it. You’ll know the right moment when it presents itself. Read this letter to yourself and, if you choose, share it with your child.”*

**Home Practice: Keeping it Going & Making Time for You**

Homework: Ask parents to commit to taking one small step in the direction of self-care, even if this is taking a 5 minute walk, having a small snack, closing the bedroom door to have peace for a few minutes, TV, exercise, meditation, reading – whatever they choose. Make sure they choose something that is feasible and sustainable, and have them make that commitment to the group.

**SHARE THIS AS AN ENDING CEREMONY, or hand out at end of session**

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