

Hey everyone. Welcome back to another episode of the Peaceful Parenting Podcast. Today's guest is Hunter Clark Fields. She's a mindfulness teacher and parenting expert, host of the Mindful Mama Podcast, and author of the book *Raising Good Humans*. We focused our conversation today around taking care of difficult feelings—both yours and your child's.

So often, big feelings are the cause of parenting challenges and friction in our families. Hunter shared some great strategies for how to make these moments that happen every day more tolerable, and even how our lives get better when we learn to accept our own feelings and our child's feelings.

And don't worry if you're like me and you sort of shut down when someone starts telling you that you should have a mindfulness practice. You can use Hunter's suggestions even if you know that meditation isn't necessarily in your future.

Interestingly, one thing Hunter and I spoke about is that you can't stay calm or not yell in difficult situations just by willpower. It's not just a choice we make—how to react in difficult situations. If you're listening to this and recognizing yourself, especially that gap between knowing what you want to do and what actually happens when things get intense, I want you to know that you're not alone.

On Wednesday, I'm teaching a live workshop called *When You Know Better but Still Yell*. We'll focus on regulation and repair in real, everyday parenting moments—without shaming yourself or forcing calm. You can find the link in the show notes, or you can go to reimaginepeacefulparenting.com/workshop.

Okay, let's meet Hunter.

Sarah: Hi, Hunter. Welcome to the podcast.

Hunter: Thanks for having me, Sarah. I'm glad to be here.

Sarah: It's nice to connect. I loved your book, *Raising Good Humans*. I was going to hold up mine—yours is behind you there. There's some really valuable stuff in it around being the peaceful parent that we want to be. Can you tell us a little bit about who you are and what you do before we get started?

Hunter: Sure. I'm a mom of two daughters and a podcaster. I've been podcasting the Mindful Mama Podcast for a long time. I guess I like to talk, and I'm fascinated by people. I've been a student of mindfulness for many, many years, and a student of parenting because it was something I was very much struggling with.

So that's me in a nutshell. I'm also really passionate about Scottish country dance. We used to have paintings and galleries, and I was a passionate painter—so there are lots of different things happening.

Sarah: I love that. Are you Scottish?

Hunter: A little bit by heritage, yeah.

Sarah: Yeah.

Hunter: Hunter is actually a Scottish last name. My maternal grandfather's maternal grandfather's last name was Donald Hunter.

Sarah: Oh, that's cool. What came first—the mindfulness? Were you already a student of mindfulness when you became a parent, or did you turn to mindfulness when you found parenting to be challenging?

Hunter: Both. I was already a student of mindfulness. I started reading about mindfulness when I was a teenager, because I've always been a highly sensitive person. So I would have big ups and downs, and corresponding pits that I would fall into. I started reading about mindfulness, and I kept reading and reading, and it did help to read.

Then, maybe about ten years into my reading journey, I started an actual sitting meditation practice, and lo and behold, that helped a lot more than just reading about it. It really changed things for me. I used to fall into these pits of feeling like the world was overwhelming and feeling like I couldn't handle life. That stopped happening. I had difficult feelings, but I wasn't floored by them, grounded by them, or left incapacitated by them. That was a big change for me.

That happened maybe two years before I got pregnant with my first child. I remember being pregnant with Maggie and sitting in a meditation group with my big pregnant belly, patting myself on the back and thinking, "Oh, this is going to be great. This child is going to be so calm. Everything is going to be so awesome because we're doing this meditation practice." And it's like—ugh. Right. Life kind of slaps you in the face and says, "You think you know what's going to happen? That's right. No, you don't."

Sarah: And the best parents are always the ones who don't have kids, right? You always think, "This is how I'm going to do things when I'm a parent." I remember when I was in my twenties, I was a Montessori assistant, and I remember thinking, "Oh my God, these parents are so crazy and intense." I couldn't understand it. And then I had my first kid and I was like, "Oh, I suddenly get it." That love—and the triggering, too—that you probably never felt in any other ways.

Hunter: Yeah. And there are so many other factors as well. I remember taking Maggie to her Montessori preschool and dropping her off with a teacher I'd become friends with and got to know and love. I would get her in the door, turn around, and just cry out of relief to have three hours where I wasn't "on"—where I wasn't there to take the intensity of this child.

Sarah: For sure. So it sounds like at least your older daughter is on the more intense side of things.

Hunter: Yeah. She's a lot like me. She's very highly sensitive. She was always very intense from the beginning. Her birth was intense. Her babyhood was intense. Everything is intense about her—very sensitive.

And about a year and a half into her being born, I realized I needed something to help me weather this intensity: the anxiety, her emotional storms. I was getting myself to the YMCA, and I got her to tolerate—just barely—the YMCA childcare. But I was like, "I need more." I needed to really turn to my mindfulness and bring it back, because it was so triggering for me.

Sarah: Wow. I'm glad you found it, and that you're sharing it with everybody else. When you were talking before about big feelings being a challenge in your life—managing the feelings, I guess is a fair thing to say—that was actually one of my favorite chapters of your book: "Taking Care of Difficult Feelings."

I was hoping we could focus on that today, because I think so much of our parenting struggles come from difficult feelings—either our child's difficult feelings, or our own difficult feelings, or both. I love how you frame working with those feelings.

You talk about two common responses to difficult feelings that are the flip side of the same coin: blocking and becoming flooded. Can you talk about those two responses—what they are, what they look like, and how we might notice if those things are happening? And to be clear upfront: those are the things you want to move away from—either blocking or becoming flooded by difficult feelings. So maybe ground us in what those are first.

Hunter: Sure. I think blocking is something a lot of us are familiar with. That's the "Don't cry, go to your room," right? It's basically the instruction to not have those feelings. So we're blocking those feelings out in some way.

And like anything, it's not completely black and white. Sometimes there are times in life where it's helpful to block feelings temporarily. We know that. But in general, we try to avoid feeling our feelings, because difficult feelings are uncomfortable.

So we block them. Blocking can include: I remember the chocolate stash in my pantry was pretty robust when Maggie was little. It can include drinking. It definitely includes the phone and the scrolling as a way of blocking our feelings. Anything we're doing to distract ourselves or stuff down and not look at those feelings. Shopping. Doing things to distract ourselves.

Sarah: Or being too busy, too.

Hunter: Yeah. Over-busyness is certainly one—the endless to-do list. The sad thing about over-busyness is that we're rewarded for that so much in our society. We're rewarded for getting things done and productivity. And for women, it can be like being a good girl or being a strong independent woman is to get stuff done and to be busy.

And yet it has this insidious side where, especially with our feelings, we're pushing through. We're not feeling our feelings. We're training ourselves to not be present. We're training ourselves to always be in the future.

The sad side of that is: when we're always in this to-do list—"I'm gonna go, I'm gonna do, I'm gonna go, I'm gonna do"—then we think, "Oh, I'm gonna get to our beach vacation and I'm gonna be really present with my kids." And then you can't, because you've trained your brain and your heart to always go and do. It feels unbearably restless to stop when you finally try to stop.

So blocking can look like all of those things.

And then the flip side is: the blocking builds up. You block and block and block. It becomes overwhelming. You have no tools to deal with and process these feelings. You're just trying to push them away, and then suddenly they're overwhelming. You drown in them. You're completely flooded by them.

Flooding can look like completely drowning in sadness, misery, shame. It can also look like anger—your temper. There's a bunch of stuff coming out that you can't stop, because you're completely flooded by these feelings and you have no way to deal with them.

A metaphor I like is that the feelings are like a big hamburger—a big juicy hamburger with cheese, and it's gooey and disgusting. You're eating this big emotional hamburger, but you have no digestive system because you've tried to shove it away. And then when you can't, it becomes a big, disgusting mess. That's my disgusting metaphor for not having the tools to digest and process those feelings.

Sarah: Do you ever listen to Anderson Cooper's podcast? I can't remember the name of it now. I know who he is, but it's about grief. He has a podcast about

grief—it's called *All There Is*. It's a really wonderful podcast. He talks a lot about how he never processed the grief of his father dying, and then his brother dying. And then his mother died, and he realized he'd gone his whole life without processing any of this grief, and it had really robbed him of the ability to feel other things.

Like joy. He's a father with a couple of young kids, and it wasn't until he started to process his grief that he was able to access the other, more beautiful emotions. And I think that's—for people like me, where I admit I have a hard time feeling my feelings sometimes—I try to remind myself: you have to feel the hard things to also feel the good things.

Hunter: Yeah, it's true. There's the research by Brené Brown, and it comes out pretty unequivocally that you can't selectively numb. You're either numbing everything, or you're feeling your feelings. And if you're feeling your feelings, you've got to be able to process it.

For me, I was never unable to feel my feelings. I felt everything too much. I was never able to block out much. So I felt like I had no choice but to learn how to process these feelings. And when Maggie came along, the thing that was coming out for me was my temper.

I felt very ashamed of it. This is exactly how I decided not to parent. My brain, my choice, my willpower was that I would be this peaceful parent, gentle—and I was not. I was scaring her. I was aggressive. I was loud. I could see I scared her multiple times, and it was exactly what I didn't want.

So I could really see: this isn't like, "Pause and choose X, Y, Z instead." It's not that simple. I would say, "How do you pause?" It's a process of changing bit by bit over time, and making a different kind of habit—energy in your body—learning how to tolerate the difficult things. It's so much more than willpower.

It gave me a lot of compassion for myself and for other people who struggle, especially moms who couldn't even say they had any anger—who felt so ashamed of even having it. Because it isn't a choice. Nobody listening to this podcast or my podcast is thinking, "I think I'll wake up on Tuesday and scream at Joey." That's not happening.

It's much more than a choice. So I really had to understand it and understand how to be the parent that Maggie needed me to be. She clearly needed somebody steady—steadiness, a lot of steadiness, a lot of rhythm. She was not a go-with-the-flow kid, and I needed to become the parent she needed me to be.

Sarah: I'm lucky—for all the parents you've helped out there—that you had that experience. If you had a really easy kid, you might not ever have had to learn all of these lessons that you now share with other people. So it's a blessing for everyone else that you had to go through the hard time.

Hunter: Yeah. Sometimes I joke that I had just the right amount of trauma: enough that I was able to deal with it in a way that I could break it down, understand it, and deal with it.

But it is really helpful to understand: there's so much more than, "Here's how you respond to your kid." Those skillful ways to respond are wonderful to know, but they go completely out the window as soon as you're activated—when your stress response is triggered—because your brain is in limbic fight, flight, or freeze mode.

It's important to understand: this is a biological nervous system response. It's not your fault. There's not something wrong with you. This is innate—baked into every single human who is alive. There are tools to deal with it, but we have to stop shaming and blaming ourselves for it in order to take the necessary steps to study ourselves.

Sarah: One of the necessary steps you talk about is that instead of blocking or becoming flooded, we can learn mindful acceptance when we have difficult feelings. Can you talk a bit about what mindful acceptance is for those difficult feelings?

Hunter: Sure. This is really where a formal mindfulness practice shines. It gives us an incredible skill and tolerance, because as we sit—say we take up a sitting meditation practice—we sit there for five minutes or ten minutes. Our mind goes to other things. Our emotions happen. All this stuff happens. And we practice accepting it, observing it. We're not really doing anything about it except accepting it and observing it. We watch it come, and we watch it go, because nothing stays around forever.

This builds a muscle of non-reactivity. Normally, when we feel a feeling in our body—the tension in our throat, the tightness in our shoulders, the "I've gotta get outta here" feeling—we act from it. That's what our nervous system designed us to do. We're designed to act on a threat or anxiety. We're designed to move forward.

So it's a weird, anti-evolutionary, slightly unnatural thing to sit and feel the thing you're feeling. But paradoxically, as you sit with the "I've gotta get outta here" feeling, it lessens enormously and sometimes completely goes away.

Mindful acceptance is what happens when, for me, I'm practicing my meditation practice on a daily level in little bits—when I'm not quite so activated. There are little bits of: "I'm accepting this thought. I'm accepting these feelings. I'm noticing what's arising. I'm seeing there's some anxiety today." I'm accepting it, and I'm sitting with it.

That means I'm not trying to push it away. I'm opening myself up. I'm saying, "Okay, yes, you are here. Yes, it's okay that you're here," and I'm going to be curious about it.

Instead of saying, "What's wrong with me for having this feeling?" I'm going to say, "What does this feel like?" This feels like some tension right in the middle of my chest, underneath my collarbones. It feels like a tickly feeling and a little discomfort—maybe slight queasiness. I'm going to observe it with curiosity, as if I'm an alien beamed down into my body. Like, "What is this?" Just curious: "Okay, yes, this is here."

And as we say yes to this, we stop that instinctive blocking and pushing away.

In the Mindful Parenting Teacher Training program, when we work on this, I invite people to think of a difficult feeling and first try to say no to it—say in their heads, "No, no, no, no, no." You can watch their faces tighten and their bodies tense up. Then I invite them to say, "Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes." And you can see everyone relax. You can see the unclenching. It's paradoxical: as we accept, "Okay, this is here—this anger, this sadness, this anxiety, whatever it is," it lessens enormously just with that acceptance, and often can go away completely.

It loosens the grip to say yes—to open our arms wide and say yes to the difficult feelings, as much as we don't want to.

Sarah: I love that. And I just want to point out: if you're listening and you're like, "I've made it to this age and I've always intended to have a mindfulness practice, but I don't"—like me, raising his hand—I think you can still use everything you just said, even if you're not going to start a daily mindfulness practice. In the moment, accepting the feelings you're having, and everything you were saying, sounds so helpful to say about your child's feelings too.

Hunter: Exactly. When we practice accepting our own feelings, then we can accept our child's feelings. We want to accept their difficult feelings—maybe not the behavior, but the feelings. We may say the words out loud, but our bodies might tell a different story: that we're not really accepting those feelings. Like, "Yes, it's okay. I need to be mad at your brother." And kids have incredible BS meters. They can see right through that.

So for us to really accept them, we have to first accept ourselves. We have to be able to accept our own feelings in order to truly accept our kids' feelings. Because if we're secretly judging our own humanity—shaming ourselves for our difficulty—if we're harsh and mean to ourselves, that's eventually going to come out. It won't stay hidden. Those parts of ourselves come out. We live with our kids for at least eighteen years, and it will come out. You can't fake it. Kids will see the faking it, if we're trying to—

Sarah: One thing you talk about—I understood it as one of the practices you can put in place to move toward mindful acceptance—is that reflective listening piece with our children. That reflective listening is a tool to help you with more acceptance of feelings. Is that how you look at it, or how do you see those as related?

Hunter: Yeah, they're totally related. When we practice reflective listening—like, “I see you look really frustrated”—say our kid comes to us and they're mad at their brother. Instead of saying, “You shouldn't be hitting your brother,” or being defensive, or trying to make the problem go away, we say, “Oh, wow. You are really upset right now. I can see this was really important to you.” Then they say, “Yeah, because he did this,” and blah, blah, blah. “Oh my gosh. Okay. Wow. This was really upsetting for you. Hold on. I'm going to listen to your brother too.”

As soon as we acknowledge those feelings in our kids, it takes the temperature down. It takes stress hormone levels down in the body—that's what the research shows.

It's similar for us. As soon as we're acknowledging—this is what Dr. Dan Siegel calls “name it to tame it”—when we name something, it's like magic happens. The left brain and right brain come together. The verbal part of the brain helps take down the temperature in the emotional part of the brain just by recognizing out loud the feelings.

In the same way we're naming it with our children, we're naming it with ourselves. That may be out loud with our children, or it may not be out loud within ourselves, but either way it provides release to name it.

Sarah: In my coaching, I've heard lots of parents say, “When I do that, it makes my child more upset,” or “It makes them aggressive.” If I say, “I can see you're really upset right now,” or “really mad at your brother,” do you think that's because they're not really acknowledging their child's feelings and they're just saying a script? Or is there something about having feelings acknowledged that makes a child go further into the feelings? Or neither, or both? What's your experience with that?

Hunter: It's interesting, and it's really hard to tell when we're not there in the moment and we're hearing from one parent's point of view. I have heard that. And I think being acknowledged is helpful—but it depends on the form the acknowledgement takes.

Maybe it's, "Oh honey," with your arms open—communicating acceptance: "I see you and I hear you," with your body and your mind.

Sometimes we can practice a tool like reflective listening with a script, but without congruence of mind and body—where inside we're panicked: "The ship is going down and I've got to do something. I'm going to do that tool that Sarah and Hunter said to do." We're saying the words, but behind it is the panic of, "Oh my God, my kid's out of control," and our own nervous system is starting to freak out, like it's an emergency.

That's an incongruent message between your mind and your body. It has to be honest and real, otherwise it can't really work.

That's why foundation is so important. It can't just be scripts on the outside. It has to be the foundation of some kind of practices, some kind of intention, that helps you steady and calm your nervous system on a daily basis—so you can access it in a moment like that.

I was with my daughter Maggie not that long ago. She must have been sixteen. She was really mad at me and my husband for something. I think it had to do with swimming scheduling. I forget what it was. She was really mad at us, and she was saying this to us near our living room entryway area.

At first I was listening, and I could feel the agitation in my body. So I got a broom and started to sweep the entryway while she was mad and upset with us. And I was like, "Oh, look at what I'm doing." I could see myself. So I put it down. I sat down on the ottoman and practiced feeling what I was feeling—feeling the discomfort—without trying to say anything. I didn't say anything. I was just there, practicing being present in myself with my sensations and my feelings, with what was going on, with this kind of verbal assault that was happening.

Within about thirty seconds of me sitting down and practicing this, she also sat down right next to me on the ottoman and slumped her body against mine. She started to wind down. Nothing special or miraculous was said. It was just the practice of being present—being steady—listening to her, taking in what she was saying, feeling the feelings.

Kids can feel that. We can feel when someone is congruent with what they're feeling and doing and saying, and when someone isn't.

So I often encourage parents: reflective listening is an incredible tool and it really can help a lot. But with some kids it doesn't mean you're going to say a lot of words. It means you're going to practice the number one thing about reflective listening: mindfully being present. "I am present in my body. I am seeing and hearing you." And then offering empathy—whether it's even just a sound that isn't a word. It doesn't have to be a ton of words.

Sarah: I love that. The anecdote you shared with your daughter was a perfect example of co-regulation.

Hunter: Yeah.

Sarah: And being that nervous system anchor—you focused on your own nervous system, and it helped her too.

Hunter: Exactly. I wish I could have figured that out when she was two, but at least I figured it out when she was sixteen.

Sarah: So true. Was there anything you think would be helpful to add about taking care of difficult feelings that I haven't asked you about? There's so much great stuff in your book, but just for the sake of keeping the focus on what we've been talking about today.

Hunter: It's important to remember that we have a lot of resistance to doing the practices of taking care of difficult feelings. I offer the RAIN practice and different things for looking at our difficult feelings. We have a lot of resistance to that, and that's very natural.

But it really does help our kids. Just like in that anecdote I shared with Maggie, for us to model how to do that as a human. For every skill you want your kid to have in life, you have to do it first. You have to model it first. Kids are terrible at doing what we say, but they're great at doing what we do. They're great at imitating our behavior and seeing the way we live our lives as a model for how to live life.

So regardless of how old your kid is, it's an incredible practice for you to do. And it's a two-for-one: you help yourself, and you help your kid. It makes things less scary. I have less negative anticipation of things because I practice being present most of the time—and because I know that when I get into the present moment of something, I'll survive it.

I've survived a lot of difficult feelings. I've felt a lot of difficult feelings, and I'll be okay. I can tolerate a lot of different difficult things. And it makes me more present for the positive things. It makes me more able to fully feel joy and excitement, and to join in their joy and excitement. So it has a lot of benefits.

Sarah: I love that. You were just talking about resilience—knowing that you can handle difficult feelings. A lot of parents mistake resilience for not getting upset, but I always tell parents: no, it's not that you don't get upset, it's that you get upset and you recover. And the path to that is always going through the upset first.

I love when you talk about reflective listening and the empathy piece. In peaceful parenting we always talk about welcoming feelings, and I think that's the key to taking care of difficult feelings: welcoming them, and knowing that every time you survive it, you become a little bit more resilient.

Hunter: Absolutely. There are a couple different ways to welcome them. One thing I want to point out—because I think it's so beautiful—is that I studied mindfulness for many years, and my main teacher was the Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, who has since passed.

What he used to say about difficult feelings is that we want to imagine ourselves holding them in our arms like a baby: “Oh, hello, my anger. I'm going to take care of you. It's okay that you're here. My anxiety, I'm going to take care of you. I'm here for you.”

That's such a beautiful image of how to accept and take care of our feelings. We've got to take care of these feelings. They're kind of like toddlers tugging at our legs, and they're not going to go away until they are seen and heard.

So you've got to get some kind of process.

Sarah: I love that. Thank you so much. There's a question I ask all my podcast guests: if you could go back in time to your younger parent self, what would you tell yourself?

Hunter: I would tell myself to slow down. I don't have to get it all done. I can give myself time to figure out this experience, and not rush forward.

Sarah: Love that. Where's the best place for folks to go and find out more about you and what you do?

Hunter: You can find *Raising Good Humans* anywhere books are sold, and the Mindful Mama Podcast wherever you listen to podcasts. I'm at mindfulmamamentor.com, and there are lots of freebies there, and podcasts and articles, et cetera.

Sarah: Great. We'll link to all those in the show notes. Thank you so much for joining us.

Hunter: Thank you, Sarah. It's been really fun.

Sarah: If this episode brought up that familiar feeling of “I know what to do—why is it still so hard?” I want to pause and say that this struggle is incredibly common, and it doesn’t mean you’re failing. On Wednesday, I’m hosting a live workshop called *When You Know Better, but Still Yell*, where we focus on understanding what happens in those moments and how to interrupt yelling and repair without shame. If that sounds supportive to you, you can find more information in the show notes or go to reimaginepeacefulparenting.com/workshop.