



# The Self-Reg View on Series.

by Dr. Stuart Shanker

## The Self-Reg View on: Mindfulness (Part 3)

In the first blog in this three-part series we looked at how the classical view of “self-control” is the perfect example of what Ellen Langer had in mind when she wrote about mindlessness and cognitive blinders. Sadly, it’s an example that has done untold harm to an untold number of children; cognitive blinders can be a pretty serious matter.

I also mentioned how we are seeing a “mindlessness epidemic” in children and youth today. Yet it is difficult to see this phenomenon in the same cognitive terms, although, to be sure, there is evidence that even a young child can acquire cognitive blinders (we see this, for example, in the case of racial stereotypes). But something else seems to be at play here: something that takes us deep into Self-Reg territory.

Every culture—and for that matter, every parent—shape what sorts of things their children notice. My favourite example of this point comes from Lewis Liebenberg’s *The Art of Tracking*.

“A three-year-old Kalahari child is given a present: a little bow, made out of wood and twine, with some arrows made out of grass stems. Soon he is shooting at dung-beetles and grasshoppers, and as he grows a little older, lizards, mice and small birds. He begins studying the behavior of these small animals, building up a store of knowledge that he’ll come to use when he starts hunting larger animals. And he listens, ever so intently, to the stories the hunters tell around the campfire at

night as they relate the details of the day’s hunt.”

When I read this story I thought back to the things my own children learned to notice when they were growing up. My wife and I moved to the rather remote, rural community where we live now in a house on an island in a sprawling lake. At the time, our son was just a toddler and our daughter’s arrival was still a year away. Almost immediately I was struck by how much more cautious my neighbors were than me. These were people who had grown up on the lake, and I found it curious that I was more casual around the water than they seemed to be. Of course, the nearest hospital is a half-hour away, and the doctors don’t make house calls. So I understood that you want to avoid getting hurt in the first place. But it wasn’t just a matter of common sense.

A few months after we moved in, two of my neighbors took me out fishing at dusk at the mouth of a river ten minutes away. I loved the experience so much that the next night I decided to go to the same spot on my own. Shortly after I arrived it started to rain lightly, and, as I wasn’t dressed for it, I decided to head back. My boat wasn’t the best, and the motor sputtered along barely moving the boat forward as the waves grew choppy. Within minutes the drizzle turned into a downpour and the lake had turned into a stormy inferno. I was suddenly in a very dangerous situation with a boat that wasn’t responding. Yes I had a life-vest, but, as is pretty typical for city folk, I had carelessly tossed it somewhere under the deck. I managed to get back safely, but it

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took me a long time and the experience left me shaken.

The next morning one of my neighbors came over to check on me and told me that he had seen me leaving and was terribly worried as he'd suspected that I hadn't read the signs of the impending storm and didn't realize how quickly the lake could whip up. Signs? At the time I had wondered, as I set out, why there were no other boats on the lake. Now I knew why.

Now fast forward half a dozen years. My children have grown up on the island and scamper around the boat like midshipmen, oblivious to the rocking and swaying that my wife and I still find hard. One day two older friends from the City had come to visit and late in the afternoon began to pester our kids to go out for a boat ride. My daughter, who was only seven at the time, said, without even looking up: "No, not now: there's a storm coming." And sure enough, within the hour it was pouring buckets.

How did she know? I asked her if she'd heard the weather forecast on the radio: nope. Had she been watching the clouds? Nope. But here's the thing: she had in fact been doing just that, monitoring the sky, or maybe the barometric pressure, or the feel of the wind, or the smell of approaching storm, all without consciously realizing it. We all have these sensory capacities, but either we don't develop them or we ignore them, perhaps because they don't have any significance for us. But she was noticing all this; for as a country girl living on a remote island, her internal radar—her neuroceptive system—had been wired to monitor the weather for potential threats and, just as significant, signs of calm.

The implication here for the "mindlessness epidemic" is clear. The problem isn't so much that children and youth don't notice things today, it's that what they notice is shaped by the world they grow up in. If they spend the majority of their waking hours playing

electronic games, then that is what they will notice. They will pick up things about the "artificial world" they are playing in or constructing that their "digital dinosaur" parents will never see. But at a cost; for they won't notice others or the world around them, simply for lack of experience, and indeed interest, since you won't be interested in that which you don't notice. (Elizabeth Tova Bailey's *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating* is an incredible example of this point. Struck by a mysterious virus, the author was confined to bed. But a friend brought her a potted plant that had a snail in it, and when Bailey heard it munching on a leaf she became mesmerized and was soon devouring everything she could read about snails. She found through this experience, not just a fascinating world that she had never noticed before, but what is most remarkable, a state of utter calmness as she slowly recovered from her illness.)

But there is an even more worrying aspect of a predominantly "digital upbringing." When our kids were young we would go on family walks in the forested nature preserves in our area every weekend. In the beginning one of us would carry our child, starting with a kangaroo pouch when they were very young, and graduating to our shoulders as they got older. Like Kalahari kids, they were constantly exposed and got used to the swaying of being carried.

From a young age they both began clamoring to be put down so that they could run about on their own. After a while they would tire and the arms would go up, signaling that it was time for one of us to pick them up, invariably at the farthest point we had reached before it was time to turn around! But the amount of time they could walk on their own, or, before you knew it, run about in the woods, grew week-by-week. So now, in addition to strengthening their core muscles, their sensors for balance and movement were getting a real workout as they navigated their way over uneven terrain. Sure, they would trip all the

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time, but they learned how to get up on their own and how to keep an eye out for potholes or tree roots.

What really sticks out in my mind was a fairly steep hill with a path going to the top to service a hydro tower. From day one, this became a challenge for both kids to get to the top without any help from mom and dad. At first, they would gingerly put one hand and one leg forward, inching toward this daunting goal of standing at the summit and shouting down at their parents (they'd leave us at the bottom of the path), a look of utter triumph on their faces. But the real fun came with the snow. Now dad had to drag their saucers up to the top so that they could race down to the bottom. I tried it once and it made me nauseous, but on them the effect was one of sheer exhilaration.

What was happening here was a very gradual, step-by-step workout of their proprioceptive, kinesthetic, tactile, and vestibular systems: all the senses that we use to tell us what our body is doing at any given moment. In the beginning they were acutely aware of every single move they made, painstakingly balancing the different parts of their body so as not to fall. As their coordination improved, they could take on greater physical challenges without the same kind of intense body awareness. Their actions were becoming automatic, freeing up processing space to do things like watch the weather.

This happened because, like parents from time immemorial, we had helped them integrate their sensory and motor systems and the kinds of things they noticed, all under the guiding influence of positive emotions. This is the crux of the Interbrain view of development. In the first months of life, we are not only up-regulating and down-regulating our baby's arousal states, but we are also helping to pave the connections in her brain between emerging sensorimotor and attentional processes. A baby's field of awareness is consumed with

her caregivers and the things she is trying to do with her body. Watch her first learning how to reach for and grasp an object. Through the illuminating work of Alan Fogel, we now understand how, through fine-tuned co-regulated movements, the caregiver scaffolds the infant's reaching and grasping. We entice, tease, support, challenge. But as Fogel has shown, there is so much more going on here: every single aspect of the baby's development—motor, communicative, emotional, social, prosocial, and of course, attentional—is getting an intense workout, scaffolded by the Interbrain.

This is where mindfulness starts: with embodied self-awareness (see Fogel's most recent book, *Body Sense*, 2013). We don't need to do anything special, such as buy flash cards or educational apps designed for toddlers. What we need to do is what parents have always done: play peek-a-boo, this little piggy, oops-a-daisy, carry them on our shoulders, dig around in the dirt, play catch or hopscotch or jacks or charades. When we play these games we aren't just having fun together: we're laying the foundation for mindfulness in exactly the same way as did our Pleistocene ancestors.

The real lesson here is that "mindlessness" itself needs to be reframed. If we see a generation of children and youth that aren't aware of others, or the world around them, we have to ask ourselves what is impeding their "mindfulness-building" experiences. We have to recognize that children begin to develop mindfulness from day one. Or not.