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Introduction

Facilitating *Early Connections*

What Is *Early Connections*?

Early Connections: A Parent Café Curriculum From ZERO TO THREE (Early Connections) consists of 10 sessions (each 90 minutes) to be facilitated in community-based settings such as Early Head Start and Head Start parenting groups, early childhood programs, parenting and family resource centers, home visiting programs, pediatric primary care or behavioral health settings, and others. There are opportunities in each session for participants to explore their own parenting journeys—for example, discussing the influence of their own childhoods on their parenting—as well as to learn and practice ZERO TO THREE’s research-informed positive parenting strategies.

The 10 units in *Early Connections* cover the following topics:

1. Becoming a parent
2. Temperament
3. Social–emotional development
4. Nurturing the development of self-regulation
5. Practicing parental self-regulation
6. Understanding the meaning of challenging behaviors
7. Responding to challenging behaviors
8. Reducing challenging behaviors
9. Play and learning
10. Building strong families

Early Connections has been designed to promote parents’ capacity for self-regulation and co-regulation with children; support parents’ understanding and use of age-appropriate limit-setting strategies; and expand parents’ use of responsive caregiving approaches.

Throughout the curriculum, there are six central messages that parents return to again and again:

1. Parents have the power to choose which parenting practices to bring forward from their childhood and which to leave behind.
2. A big part of parenting is learning strategies to manage our emotional reactions to child behaviors.
3. We can make good guesses about the cause of our child’s behavior by considering their age and stage, temperament, and life experiences.
4. Setting limits is an everyday part of parenting, and age-appropriate approaches can be used to help.
5. We can build a stronger family by partnering with the other important adults in the child’s life.
6. Asking for help is a sign of strength.

These messages are directly aligned to ZERO TO THREE’s definition of positive parenting (see p. xi) and reflect the child-rearing challenges and dilemmas that parents experience most frequently (ZERO TO THREE, 2016).

Structure of *Early Connections*

Each unit in *Early Connections* follows the same structure. Each session includes the following activities:

1. **Opening Reflection**—this brief discussion encourages parents to describe how they have used and applied the previous week’s ideas and strategies to their caregiving and family contexts.
2. **Warm-Up**—this activity is designed to transition parents to the meeting’s topic in a conversational manner.
3. **Opening Mindfulness Practice**—the opening mindfulness offers parents an opportunity to leave the stresses of the day behind and begin the parent café feeling regulated and peaceful.
4. **Café Discussions/Activities**—this segment includes the reflective and discussion-based experiences designed to support learning in each session.
5. **Closing Mindfulness Practice**—the closing mindfulness is designed to help parents make the transition back to their daily lives with a sense of calm regulation and positive connection to their children.
6. **Closing Reflection**—the final activity in each session is a set of two prompts that guide parents to consider how they might apply the learning from the unit to their own families.
7. **Between-Session Prompts**—these optional prompts may be used by facilitators to encourage parents to reflect on and apply strategies raised in the unit to their daily lives. The prompts can be shared in a variety of ways: sent via text to parents, emailed to parents, or posted on a private social media group comprised of parent participants to generate discussion.

Evaluation

When *Early Connections* was evaluated in 14 sites across the United States and Canada in 2020–2021, results showed that parents who participated reported significantly greater overall mindfulness (on the basis of responses to ZERO TO THREE’s Mindful Parenting Questionnaire), as well as enhanced emotional regulation and self-compassion (two subscales of the Mindful Parenting Questionnaire), compared with parents in the treatment-as-usual group. In addition, parents who participated in *Early Connections* showed significant improvement in positive parenting practices, specifically parental responsiveness and parental use of age-appropriate limit setting and co-regulation behaviors (on the basis of responses to ZERO TO THREE’s Positive Parenting Questionnaire). Parents who participated in *Early Connections* also reported an increase in their children’s social–emotional competence (measured by the Ages and Stages Questionnaire: Social–Emotional tool) compared with children of parents in the treatment-as-usual group. For more information on the *Early Connections* evaluation, see the Appendix.

Guidance for Virtual Delivery

Early Connections has been designed for either virtual or in-person delivery. The 2020–2021 evaluation design of the curriculum included a virtual implementation of the content during the COVID-19 pandemic. At each pilot site, parents and facilitators met weekly via an online meeting platform.

Specific instructions for adapting group meetings for virtual delivery are noted in each unit. However, because much of the curriculum is experienced through facilitated café discussions, most units require little modification.

Some lessons learned and best practices for virtual delivery from our pilot sites include the following:

- Set expectations from the outset by explaining that the curriculum involves parent participation and discussion. *Early Connections* is *not* a lecture-based program!

- Encourage (but don't require) parents to participate with cameras turned on. Explain that this program is a way to connect with peers and to build relationships—even remotely. Balance this request with sensitivity to parent privacy concerns, technology constraints, or other issues as they join from home.
- Communicate acceptance to parents that you will “meet them where they are.” Joining from home means that parents are often involved in child care, food preparation, or other tasks. Be clear that parents are accepted for how and in what ways they are able to participate.
- Anticipate the “join-on” effect as parents join from home. Many pilot sites found that coparents tended to participate more (even if they were not formally registered for the program) when their partners attended *Early Connections* remotely.
- Ensure that a facilitator is available to join each breakout room discussion. Most pilot sites enrolled between 8 and 10 parent participants. Some chose to use the breakout room options suggested in the curriculum, whereas others opted to implement all activities as whole-group discussions. If you do use breakout rooms, place a facilitator in each virtual room to support and prompt interactions (if needed), ask questions to promote reflection and learning, and summarize parent insights and experiences.
- Familiarize yourself with your selected technology platform to ensure seamless online learning experiences. Offer parents the opportunity to join 30 minutes early on the first session to test out and troubleshoot technology, if they wish.

Responding to Sensitive Topics

An *Early Connections* meeting may offer a safe place where participants reveal sensitive issues such as trauma, abuse, neglect, domestic violence, extreme poverty, eviction, or other crises.

When sensitive issues are raised, it's important to first validate the parent's experience. You might say, “I hear how difficult this is for you, and we respect and honor the courage it took for you to share your story.” If possible, articulate a connection between the parent's shared experience and the conversation topic; if the parent is visibly upset, offer support and offer a short break. You may also normalize this experience and point out available resources—for example, “Many families experience difficulty with sourcing food consistently across the month. That is one of the reasons why our community offers [insert service/program].” If appropriate, after the group meeting, connect with the parent and ask whether they may want to explore referrals or community services for support with the issue they raised.

General guidelines for sensitively managing these emotionally intense moments include the following:

- Offer compassion and patience if someone becomes overwhelmed or starts crying. Model composure and support.
- Create a resource list for participants with local services and programs available to children and families, including activities, food and housing programs, parenting classes, continuing education, support groups, counseling, intimate partner violence programs, and emergency services. Keep this resource where you can easily refer to it during group sessions.
- Follow up with participants and *connect them with the appropriate resources, if they are interested*. Offer to sit with them while they call or email for more information.

Although it is not the role of the facilitator to resolve the family's challenges, the facilitator can provide a trusted, supportive relationship within which parents can identify their own hopes and goals, take positive action, and explore community resources.

Finally, many of the issues raised in this curriculum are emotionally intense, challenging, and thought provoking. Remember to give participants time to process what has been said as well as how they are feeling. There may be times when participants are quiet. Be comfortable with silence.

Sharing Your Agency's Policies Regarding Abuse and Neglect

It is also possible that a parent participant may reference a disciplinary practice they use that is considered abusive or neglectful. Your state or jurisdiction may require that professionals working with families or children report suspected child abuse or neglect. It is critical that facilitators understand and share their state's or jurisdiction's *reporting requirements with families at the outset of Early Connections* meetings. Your team should be clear on what is reportable and should ensure that participants have a clear understanding as well. It is important that all parent participants are made aware of child protective services policies so they can make an informed choice about what to share in *Early Connections* meetings. If parents disclose struggles with discipline/limit-setting, in addition to the strategies covered by *Early Connections*, you may wish to share information about local mental health services that support parents in building safe, nurturing relationships with their children.

Cultural Considerations

Early Connections represents an opportunity to engage and partner with diverse participants from the community. Some general guidance to ensure that the learning experience is welcoming to all is provided below:

- **Family composition**
 - Use language that embraces different family configurations. Avoid gender-specific terms. Instead of saying "mom" and "dad," say "parent," "coparent," or "family member." Remember that grandparents, step-parents, foster parents, and other family members are also caring for children.
- **Language**
 - Having prior knowledge of the language or languages of the participants who will attend is extremely helpful. Engaging a bilingual–bicultural facilitator is ideal in these situations. Currently, parent handouts and slides for *Early Connections* are available in both English and Spanish. Several units include videos currently in English, with Spanish subtitles.
 - If you plan to host bilingual parent group meetings, be prepared to support logistics such as identifying a reliable approach to simultaneous translation and determining how best to support rich, authentic interactions between parents who may not share a language. Also note that during group discussions, all comments need to be captured in both languages. Despite these logistical issues, it is worthwhile to bring community members together to explore parenting issues. Survey research indicates that parents (regardless of their backgrounds) often have more in common with the experience of child-rearing than not (ZERO TO THREE, 2016).
- **Literacy**
 - It is possible and even likely that participants will attend who are not yet fluent readers. Ensure that all instructions are provided orally as well as in written form (e.g., on the handouts). To reduce the literacy barrier to participation, curriculum activities frequently suggest that parents verbally share, write, or draw their responses to prompts.
- **Engaging fathers and father figures**
 - Fathers in ZERO TO THREE's (2016) national parent survey said they love being fathers and want—and deserve—more credit. Of the dads surveyed, 90% said being a parent is their greatest joy. Moreover, 63% agreed that "Dads don't get enough credit for their involvement in raising and caring for young children." In addition, 40% would like to be more involved in raising their child but feel that their parenting partner interferes. Men sometimes encounter bias in programs designed for parents, both because facilitators are often women and because mothers tend to be the primary attendees.
 - The national pilot of *Early Connections* included men and received positive feedback from male participants regarding its impact on their parenting and coparenting relationships. To

ensure that your program is welcoming to men enrolled in *Early Connections*, consider the following:

- including men in the planning process for the *Early Connections* implementation to ensure that the environment and setting are comfortable for fathers and male participants;
- implementing *Early Connections* with two facilitators—one of each gender;
- conducting outreach directly to men, perhaps through local fraternal organizations, church groups, barbershops, or other organizations in the community;
- ensuring that language and images in promotional materials do not feature mothers exclusively;
- creating a welcoming environment for all parents and avoiding wall decorations or other cues that may signal the experience is for mothers only; and
- ensuring that the examples that you provide during discussions include both genders.

Theoretical Foundations for *Early Connections*

The Parent Café Approach

The development of *Early Connections* was informed by the Caring Café Model (Whiteman et al., 2014), derived from the World Café Model. The parent café approach is a process of guided conversations that help to promote optimal development of very young children. These conversations also foster parent leadership and parent–provider partnership and, in the process, promote growth and action in participants.

Experiences in each unit are designed to facilitate meaningful, reflective conversations with, and among, parents and facilitators. Most importantly, brave and intimate conversations help to promote parent reflection and self-discovery. *Reflective practice* is the ability to thoughtfully consider one's actions to engage in a process of continuous learning (Schön, 1983), and the discussion questions in *Early Connections* are designed to engage parents in reflection as a means to facilitate learning from the past and planning for the future.

The role of facilitators in a parent café program is different from that found in more didactic or structured curricula. In *Early Connections*, facilitators weave content, research, and guidance into free-flowing conversations. They engage in “appropriate use of self,” sharing their own experiences not to gain support themselves but with an eye to normalizing parenting struggles and modeling healthy parenting and coparenting strategies. Their role shifts from “expert” to “guide” as they join in conversations, learn from parents, and bear witness to parents' experiences. Facilitators take on the role of active listener—noting patterns, insights, strategies, and connections between parents. They wonder with parents about historical patterns and influences on their child-rearing choices, explore possibilities for change, and share in moments of pride or struggle. They celebrate parents' accomplishments and discoveries. Most importantly, facilitators engage with both mind and heart, communicating research-informed parenting messages while also validating the reality of parents' lives and histories.

Emerging research on the parent café model (Be Strong Families, n.d.) has demonstrated that its use is associated with parents' increased ability to listen carefully to children and family members, an increased quality of interactions and relationships between parents and children, and an increased capacity to handle stressful situations with children or family members, among other outcomes.

Positive Parenting

In 2017, ZERO TO THREE convened a board, fellows, and staff work group to define *positive parenting*—the critical parenting practices that are associated with secure parent–child attachments

and healthy child development. ZERO TO THREE's definition of positive parenting includes the following parenting practices and behaviors:

1. Imagine your child's point of view, especially during tough moments.
2. Notice and celebrate your child's strengths, abilities, and capacity to learn and develop.
3. Delight in moments of connection with your child.
4. Respond with interest and sensitivity to your child's cues.
5. Provide consistent, age-based guidelines, limits, and boundaries.
6. Recognize and regulate your own feelings and behaviors before responding to your child.
7. Know that parenting can be stressful and that missteps are part of raising a child.
8. Work toward balancing your needs and your child's needs.
9. Seek help, support, or additional information on parenting when you need it.

These elements are threaded throughout *Early Connections*, and participants are offered repeated opportunities to explore, reflect on, and practice these skills and behaviors through activities and discussions.

Knowledge of Parent Beliefs, Experiences, and Needs

In 2016 and again in 2018, ZERO TO THREE conducted nationwide surveys to assess what parents know, want, and need with regard to parenting and child-rearing information. The voices of the parents who participated in these research efforts guided the development of this curriculum. Key findings are listed below and are addressed throughout *Early Connections*:

- Parents now know that the early years of life shape a child's future in profound ways.
 - Nearly 6 in 10 parents said that "knowing how important the first 5 years are makes me feel equally motivated and terrified."
- Parents recognize that their own childhood experiences influence their approach to parenting.
 - Nine in 10 parents said that the way they were raised is a key influence on their own parenting. About half of parent respondents see themselves as being more positive and present and using less harsh disciplinary strategies with their own children than they recall their own parents using with them.
- Parents want to use effective, positive parenting approaches.
 - More than 8 in 10 parents agreed that good parenting can be learned, and 7 in 10 parents surveyed said that if they knew more positive parenting strategies, they would use them.
 - About 6 in 10 parents struggled with finding effective ways to discipline. In addition, 4 in 10 did not want to yell or raise their voice as quickly as they do, and more than one third did not want to lose their temper so fast.
- Fathers are passionate about their parenting role but often feel shut out by their parenting partner.
 - Fathers in our survey sample reported that becoming a parent was a life-changing experience and expressed a great desire to be an active part of their children's lives; however, 4 in 10 felt frustrated and shut out by their parenting partner.
- Parents lack the support they feel would help them in their parenting role.
 - Nearly all parents (90% of moms and 85% of dads) feel judged, and almost half say they do not feel that they are getting the support they need when they feel stressed.
- Parents were unsure about what skills and abilities to expect from their children at different ages.
 - Significantly, about half the parents surveyed believed that children are capable of self-control and other developmental milestones much earlier than they actually are.

- At the same time, parents underestimated the impact of early experiences (e.g., quality of care, parents' emotional state, exposure to repeated violence) on infants in the first year of life.

The Role of Mindfulness

This curriculum marks the first time that ZERO TO THREE has included mindfulness practices as an essential part of a parenting program. Mindfulness as a tool for caregivers—both parents and early childhood educators—is a recent development. In *Early Connections*, parent mindfulness is defined, in part, by the following behaviors identified by Duncan et al. (2009):

1. listening to children with full attention (or fully noticing babies' cues);
2. bringing acceptance to themselves as parents (or teachers) and helping children to feel loving acceptance without judgment, even in the presence of clear boundaries and necessary rules;
3. noticing their emotions and those of children, even when they are subtle or just starting to arise;
4. finding ways to calm themselves down and self-regulate during interactions with children that are upsetting; and
5. bringing compassion to their experience as parents and to the experiences of their children.

Mindfulness exercises in the curriculum are designed to provide parents with opportunities to practice these five dimensions of mindful parenting.

It may be helpful for *Early Connections* facilitators to have some experience with the practice of mindfulness to share it with parents in a way that feels authentic. Engaging in mindfulness practices themselves and doing readings on the subject can enhance facilitators' delivery of this portion of the curriculum.

ZERO TO THREE Critical Competencies for Infant–Toddler Educators™

In 2016, ZERO TO THREE launched the *Critical Competencies for Infant–Toddler Educators™*. Ideally, to effectively implement *Early Connections*, facilitators should understand and practice the *Critical Competencies* related to **Supporting Social–Emotional Development** (Area 1, SE-1 through SE-5) and **Supporting Cognitive Development** (Area 2, C-3).

Not surprisingly, these *Critical Competencies* encompass a range of practices aligned with high-quality early childhood caregiving and also describe nurturing and responsive parenting. Although professionals bring their own expertise to the *Early Connections* curriculum, parents also have skills and strengths to share. For more information on ZERO TO THREE's *Critical Competencies*, visit www.zerotothree.org/resources/345-zero-to-three-critical-competencies-for-infant-toddler-educators.

In Conclusion

Early Connections facilitators can help participants reimagine their role as parents by providing a fuller understanding of child development, a greater appreciation of their child's unique temperament, and a wider variety of parenting strategies from which to choose. The guidance you provide honors the authentic experience of all members of the *Early Connections* group and brings this curriculum to life. We thank you for providing the safe space, knowledge, and compassion that make this transformation possible.

References

Be Strong Families. (n.d.). *Parent café evaluation*. www.beststrongfamilies.org/parent-cafe-evaluation

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- Schön, D. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic Books.
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Unit 1

The Parenting Journey

Overview

Parenting is a journey filled with moments of intense joy and delight as well as surprises and challenges. It is about meeting a baby's needs for food, sleep, and comfort; engaging in loving interactions (e.g., playing and learning together); and providing clear limits and expectations as young children grow. Becoming a parent requires patience and mindfulness—the ability to slow down and observe our emotions, reactions, and intentions. It also requires flexibility, or the ability to reflect on what is going well and what the parent might choose to change or adapt to meet the unique needs of their child and family.

Learning Goals

Group members will learn about and reflect on the following:

- how their expectations and images of their child have changed from pregnancy through parenthood,
- how their life experiences may influence the relationships they're building with their children, and
- the importance of noticing and adapting to the changing needs of their children across the first 3 years.

Positive Parenting Strategies

- Positive Parenting Strategy 2: Notice and celebrate your child's strengths, abilities, and capacity to learn and develop.
- Positive Parenting Strategy 7: Know that parenting can be stressful and that missteps are part of raising a child.
- Positive Parenting Strategy 9: Seek help, support, or additional information on parenting when you need it.

Agenda

- **Welcome** (25 minutes)
- **Introduction to the Parenting Journey** (10 minutes)
- **Image-Making Activity** (20 minutes)
- **Parenting Through the Ages** (25 minutes)
- **Mindfulness Practice** (5 minutes)
- **Closing Reflection** (5 minutes)

Materials

- Flip chart with markers
- **Handout 1.1: Positive Parenting: When You Need a Break**
- **Handout 1.2: Parenting Through the Ages**
- **Handout 1.3: Reflection Questions**

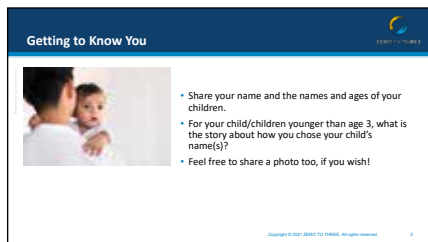
Preparation

- Prepare a brief response to the prompt posed on Slide 2. You may choose a story about your child's name, your own name, or the name of a friend or family member.
- Read through the mindfulness scripts in the **Welcome** and **Mindfulness Practice** sections so that the language feels comfortable to read aloud.

- If delivering in person, make copies of **Handouts 1.1** and **1.2**, one per participant. Make copies of **Handout 1.3**. Cut in half, one half-sheet per participant.
- If delivering virtually, provide slideshow and handouts to the participants before the group meeting.

Welcome (25 minutes)

- **Welcome** the participants.
- **Explain** that the *Early Connections* program is designed to give parents a place and an opportunity to think about parenting in a new way: to consider your own life experiences, your goals for your child and family, and your strengths and struggles. Together, we'll talk through these topics and practice new strategies and approaches that might help to make parenting more satisfying and fun as well as help us build even closer relationships with our children. Thank you all for joining us for this experience.
- **Introduce yourself** and other facilitators.
- **Share information regarding facilities** (e.g., restrooms, exits).



- **Show Slide 2.**
- **Ask participants to introduce** themselves to the group by sharing the following:
 - their name,
 - the name(s) and age(s) of their child(ren) (birth to 3 years old), and
 - the story behind the names they chose for their child(ren).

You might also ask parents to share a photo, if they feel comfortable doing so.

- **Explain the idea of ground rules** for the session and their purpose:
 - Ground rules are agreements we make about how we'll treat one another in the *Early Connections* group.
 - When we think about ground rules, sometimes it helps to think about the qualities of a good friend: What do they do or say that makes them such a good friend to us (e.g., They listen; they don't judge; they keep secrets; they're dependable; they pay attention when I'm talking.)?
 - Make the connection that many of these qualities also make good ground rules for the group. Try to keep the list of ground rules to about 5–7 items.
- If needed, some ideas for potential ground rules include:
 - use "I" statements (speak only for yourself),
 - avoid multitasking with phones,
 - make space for all voices (give everyone a chance to participate),
 - avoid judgment (recognize that there are many paths to positive parenting),

- keep confidentiality, and
- be brave or “Go out on a limb”: This statement can be a safe way to indicate that someone is feeling a bit unsure of sharing but is trusting other participants to show compassion and support without judgment.

Note to facilitator: Keep a copy or take a photo of this list for use in future group meetings.

VIRTUAL

If delivering virtually, ask participants to introduce themselves via the meeting platform and, if possible, to share a photo of their child by holding it up to the screen. Participants can share suggestions for ground rules in the chat function.



• Show Slide 3.

Make the following key points to frame the mindfulness exercise:

- It's clear you are all coming to this group because you care very deeply about your children and are thinking hard about how best to meet their needs. Just being here makes you great parents. At the same time, for many parents, the huge sense of responsibility they feel can cause a fair amount of stress.
- If you are experiencing other life challenges—such as financial struggles, issues at work, or difficulties in your coparenting relationship—that can add even more stress.
- One healthy way to cope with and reduce stress is by practicing mindfulness. This practice may be new to you.
- *Ask for a show of hands of people who have heard of “mindfulness.” Ask what words or ideas come up for them when they hear this term.*
- Mindfulness is the practice of slowing down and paying attention to how we are feeling and what we are experiencing in the moment. Mindfulness practice can often help us to feel calmer and more thoughtful, as well as to listen and respond more compassionately to our children.
- Mindfulness means taking just a few minutes to pay attention to how your body is feeling; to what you are experiencing through your senses; and to what you are feeling emotionally.
- The mindfulness exercises we use help calm our breathing, which signals the nervous system to calm down, which, in turn, sends a message to the brain to feel calmer, too.
- To give ourselves the gift of this peace and calm, we'll begin and end each group meeting with a mindfulness exercise.

- Short, simple exercises like these can help us feel better, manage stress, and be a more effective parent. And, like any exercise, the more you do them, the easier they become. You might want to try these during the day when you need a break or some time to calm down before responding to your child or others.

Note to facilitator: This initial mindfulness exercise may be awkward or uncomfortable for some participants. You might acknowledge this reality if you sense this kind of reaction—that anything new can feel uncomfortable—to defuse concern about doing the exercise “correctly.” The more parents do these exercises, the more comfortable they will feel with them. Trust the process.

Mindfulness Practice

Lead the group through the opening mindfulness practice below. Explain that this exercise will be a regular feature in each group session—that you will open and close with a brief mindfulness activity to help everyone feel calm and present. Read this script or adapt it, using your own words. Speak slowly and clearly.

- Take a moment to find a comfortable and upright seated position. You can close your eyes if that’s comfortable or just soften your gaze.
- Take a moment to settle—sit with your shoulders over your hips and your head centered between your shoulders.
- If your tongue is pressed to the roof of your mouth, let it relax.
- Begin to notice your breath, gently following your inhale and exhale. *(Pause)*
- Stay with your breath, paying attention to where you feel your breath most strongly in your body.
- You may feel the sensation of air moving in and out of your nostrils, or the rise and fall of your chest, or the expansion of your belly. Just stay with the sensations of breath for another moment. *(Pause)*
- Now ask yourself, “What are my hopes for today’s group?”; “What has brought me here today?”
- As you connect with these hopes, notice how your body feels. Do any emotions rise up?
- Let’s notice our breath once more, paying attention to where you feel your breath most strongly in your body. *(Pause)*
- You can open your eyes, and we’ll come back together as a group.

HANDOUT

Distribute Handout 1.1: Positive Parenting: When You Need a Break. Explain that parents can use this quick mindfulness exercise at home during moments of parenting stress.

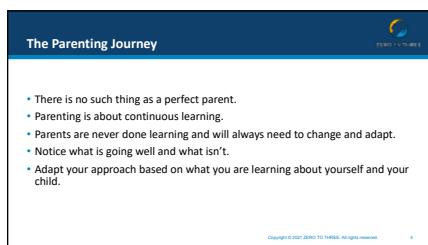
VIRTUAL

If delivering virtually, encourage participants to choose a posture that is most comfortable and, if they wish, to turn off their camera for this portion of the group.

Introduction to the Parenting Journey (10 minutes)

Make the following points to introduce the theme for today's meeting:

- The focus of today's meeting is on the parenting journey—starting from birth—and how we adapt to the changing needs of our children as they grow.
- **Ask:** What are some skills or personal qualities that you think are important for parents to have (or to develop)?
- Take several examples, noting that this group experience will offer parents many ways to practice and develop these skills over the 10 meetings.
- **Explain** that parenting starts before babies are even born—during pregnancy—when many expectant parents imagine what their babies will be like or imagine themselves as parents. This kind of imagining is the start of building a relationship with our babies.



- **Show Slide 4.**
 - Although we are always trying to be the best parents we can be, it's important to remember that there is no such thing as a perfect parent.
 - We try lots of different approaches and strategies to see which works best—whether we're trying to comfort our child, help them sleep, or learn to ride a tricycle. We are figuring it out as we go, and children are always changing, so what worked last month or even yesterday might not work now.
 - Parents are never done learning and will always need to adapt. Not knowing what to do sometimes is a normal part of the parenting process.
 - Great parenting is really about noticing what is going well and what isn't, and then adapting your approach based on what you are learning about yourself and your child.
 - Parenting is also about forgiving ourselves when we do something we regret, so we have the energy to learn and make adjustments, and better meet our children's needs next time. That's why we are all here—to learn and grow together. We believe that asking for help is a strength, not a weakness.