



The Massachusetts Psychological Association
2023 Annual Conference

Raising the Next Generation: Innovation to Address the Evolving Needs of Youth and the Profession

Saturday, November 4th, 2023
Norwood, MA

***It's All about the Process: Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) to Support
Flexible and Values-Consistent Parenting (1.5CE)***

Presented by Alison Sagon, PhD

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a mindfulness-based behavior therapy that has been demonstrated to be effective in addressing a wide range of clinical concerns. ACT rests on the assumption that pain is inevitable to the human experience, but suffering is not. ACT addresses human suffering by teaching individuals to “unhook” from uncomfortable internal experiences in service of engaging in meaningful and fulfilling behavior. When we act in line with our values, we can tolerate pain as we experience vitality, meaning, and purpose. With this stance, ACT shifts away from the traditional model of providing strategies to shrink suffering, and instead provides a model for growing vitality. This model holds particular relevance for parents who are on the receiving end of a steady stream of difficult experiences. Parenting stress is a common source of psychological suffering, and has been a prominent presence before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Use of ACT to target psychological suffering among parents has been shown to be effective in fostering psychological flexibility, or the ability to notice and adapt to situational demands, to remain aware and open to the present moment, such that one can identify and flexibly adjust behavior strategies dependent on the demands of the situation, and to engage in actions that are congruent with one’s own personally-defined values. ACT fosters psychological flexibility through use of a process-based and experiential model. Rather than solely providing strategies to trial, this model provides opportunities to confront one’s own relationship with difficult thoughts and emotions that emerge and explore how an individual’s relationship with these internal experiences may be influencing their behavior. By confronting the relationship with these experiences, rather than the experiences themselves, ACT teaches parents to attend to controlling their behavior rather than controlling their emotion. In this vein, parents can learn adopt greater acceptance for their emotional experience, which opens them up to allowing their values, rather than their discomfort, guide their experience. This process allows parents to change their relationship with sources of discomfort, ultimately leading to a greater capacity to be curious, open, and flexible with their overall experience. This presentation is intended to provide an introduction to a process-based model for addressing parenting stress and parent mental health, and it will provide listeners with a sense of how prioritizing process can lead to therapeutic change. This presentation will feature the practice of experiential strategies for examining the internal experience as a means for adopting a more flexible relationship with thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. Listeners will leave with a greater understanding of how to target parents’ relationship to their own internal experiences in order to facilitate greater emotional acceptance and flexible behavioral change.

Learning Objectives:

- Participants will develop an understanding of ACT as a process-based intervention that can be used to support parents;
- Participants will explain how to use tune into process in order to facilitate more flexible awareness;
- Participants will describe strategies for increasing experiential opportunities for curiosity and exploration in sessions with parents.

Dr. Alison Sagon is the Intake Director and Director of the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) Program at Boston Child Study Center where she specializes in evidence-based treatments including ACT, dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), exposure and response prevention (ERP), and parent-child interaction therapy (PCIT). She is experienced in treating emotion dysregulation and a range of anxiety, mood, and behavioral disorders among children, adolescents, young adults, parents, and families.

Dr. Sagon received her B.A. in Psychology at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor before completing her M.S. and Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology at Suffolk University. She completed her predoctoral internship at Texas Children's Hospital/Baylor College of Medicine where she specialized in the treatment of OCD, selective mutism, and anxiety-related disorders as well as brief behavioral interventions for disruptive behavior disorders and ADHD. In addition, she received training in trauma-focused CBT (TF-CBT) aimed at addressing trauma in children, adolescents, and family systems. Following internship, she completed a postdoctoral fellowship at BCSC where she received additional training in utilizing ACT to guide family systems in facilitating better communication, deeper connection, and greater awareness and acceptance of emotion. Dr. Sagon also completed clinical externships at the McLean Hospital Obsessive Compulsive Disorder Institute (OCDI) for children and adolescents, the Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders (CARD) at Boston University, Neuropsychology and Education Services for Children and Adolescents (NESCA), New England Center for OCD and Anxiety, and Boston Child Study Center. She also conducted research on emotion regulation within the department of developmental medicine at Boston Children's Hospital.