

## Reducing Stress of Parenting

**Parenting and child care are easier when you are not worn out and running on "empty." Pay attention to your physical and emotional energy. Refill your tank before you run out. Here are some ideas you can use.**

### Take care of your body

There is no substitute for enough food and sleep! When you feel tired, hungry, or stressed, children test you more often. You don't have the ability to think as clearly or the energy to follow through with rules. Your children may become confused and you may get angry. Avoid this kind of stress by being realistic about your needs. Think about reducing outside commitments or lowering housekeeping standards so you can get enough sleep. An astute mother says,

*Sleep, sleep, sleep. Getting enough sleep is the form of self-care that makes the biggest difference in my ability to parent effectively. I am calmer and have more mental energy to deal with things. When I don't get enough sleep, I become cranky and demanding. When I get enough sleep I can think about the situation, come up with ideas, and act in a way that generally helps whatever the issue is.*

### Make time for exercise

Exercise is a wonderful way to reduce stress for both parents and children. The following are ways parents have found to work in physical activity for their kids.

• *Every day, rain or shine, we bundle up and walk around the block. I had to buy rain gear to use, but it was well worth it. Sometimes we hunt for things like 'signs of spring.' Other times the kids run. I like to do this late in the afternoon when tempers begin to get short.*

• *My daughter loves jumping and has since she was about 2. We bought a trampoline and put it in the corner of the living room. She uses it almost every day. When we are out or she doesn't think of it, the evening routines are much harder.*

• *When Dad gets home he takes the kids outside and they play kickball. It is a sort of wild time when they run around and kick madly. He doesn't try to teach the kids soccer. He just wants them to have fun and be active.*

• *We have dance time. I put on a record and we dance around*



*any way we want. Sometimes I get out scarves or dress-ups, but usually we just march or move around.*

• *My kids do better when they get exercise, but I don't like being out in the rain and snow. We either go to a community center that has a gym or to the mall; I walk briskly while Brian runs or marches nearby. I find the trips reduce my stress, too*

### Reduce expectations

A wise woman once said, "I can do anything, I just can't do everything." Expectations can be either personal standards or external commitments. To reduce them:

• **Ask, "Is this really important?"** You may find that you can fix simpler meals, clean the floors less frequently, purchase a birthday cake rather than making it yourself, or that some things are no longer as important to you.

• **Use a timer.** Maybe you don't have time to deep clean the living room, but you could tidy it for 15 minutes. Set the timer and see how much you can do.

• **Focus on progress, not perfection.** When the timer rings, look around to see how much you did. Be grateful for successes rather than critical of what is left undone.

### Take time to have fun

Most parents find it easier to act effectively when they can anticipate following their child care time with something they enjoy doing. This may be sewing, gardening, reading, carpentry, sports, music, or simply taking time to smell the roses or feel the rain on your face as you walk. The important thing is that the activities bring you a feeling of contentment and well-being.

### Develop a support system

Even when adults feel rested, parenting can be draining. You need ways to replenish your emotional bank. If you do not, you will probably find yourself yelling at your children or escaping from them.

You can increase your well-being by developing a network of more supportive friends, being realistic about what you can and can't do, and by taking a break when you need it.

If your family and friends are critical and demanding, find supportive friends. You can meet other parents at preschool, school, church groups, neighborhood centers, kids' sports, or in the park. Sometimes it works to start a baby sitting co-op or play group. That way you get adult friends and occasional babysitting for your child.

## Use positive self-talk

The language we use when we talk to ourselves can affect how we interpret our children's behavior and how we respond to them. When you say, "I am a bad mom," or, "I can't control this child" you may create a self-fulfilling situation. The alternative is to program yourself for success, as Erin does.

*Before I open my eyes in the morning, I lie still for several minutes coaching myself with positive self-talk. "I am a good mother. I love Chloe (3) and Cody (6)." Then I remind myself what I like about each child.*

*I visualize myself being patient and attentive as we walk to school and arrive relaxed and on time. I visualize smiling and speaking calmly, sincerely, and lovingly to my children throughout the day. At night, I will look in the mirror and remind myself, "I can be patient and kind even when I am tired."*

*What surprises me is that when I take the time to center myself before I get up, things really do go much better.*

## Create a "before bedtime" routine

Another way to reduce morning stress and be kind to yourself is to take a few minutes before bedtime to set out the things you and your kids will need in the morning.

- Gather all the things you need to take to work (briefcase, keys, shoes, book for a co-worker, etc.) and put them by the door.
- Make lunches for yourself and the kids and put them in the refrigerator.
- Check that kids' stuff is by the front door: coats, shoes, diaper bags, backpacks (with homework and permission slips), musical instruments, sports gear, etc.
- Choose clothes for yourself and kids if that will speed things up. Check that your clothes are pressed and that your children's soccer uniforms are clean.

## Get some time off.

Many parents find the endless demands of caring for children exhausting mentally and physically. Enough sleep and food help. So do a support system and positive self-talk. In addition, some people need time off. Here are several examples of how parents have found personal time.

- **Request help.** Amy's mother gave her a three-month subscription to a yoga class for her birthday. Amy asked her husband to take care of their kids two mornings a week so she could go to class before he went to work.
- **Join a babysitting co-op.** Susana found four kids were not much more difficult than two, and she could look forward to time off later on.
- **Sell extras for babysitting money.** Jan found selling surplus items on eBay and craigslist made money for babysitting and reduced clutter in her home.

- **Swap taking kids for a long walk.** Neighbors Tasha and Diane alternate taking all the kids out for a brisk, pre-dinner walk while the other parent does something fun.

- **Trade sitting one morning a week for one free weekend a quarter.** Jean liked to hike but that was difficult with two young children. She and Kelly made a deal. Jean took Kelly's kids one morning a week so Kelly could attend a class. Kelly took Jean's kids one weekend a quarter so she could hike without kids.

- **Do something enjoyable while kids nap.** Maria found that by lowering her housekeeping standards somewhat she could use her kids' nap time as personal time.

- **Schedule time off.** After having kids, Kimberley and David could not afford to pay for a babysitter so they could both continue to ski every weekend. Eventually they developed a schedule that really worked for them. Kimberley went skiing the first weekend of the month, and David took care of the kids. Kim took care of the kids the second weekend while David went skiing.

David and Kimberley paid for a babysitter for the third week so they could ski together. They took the kids up on the fourth weekend for family skiing. Each parent got to ski three weeks out of four, and they only paid for babysitting once a month.

## Summary

We have looked at support systems, positive self-talk, and finding personal time. However, important as taking care of yourself is, self-care alone won't improve your parenting unless you have appropriate parenting tools. Look for parenting classes and good books to help you fine tune your skills.



## Other resources

*STAR Parenting Tales and Tools: Respectful Guidance Strategies to Increase Parenting Effectiveness & Enjoyment* by Elizabeth Crary

*Mudras: Ancient Gestures to Ease Modern Stress* by Emily Fuller Williams

*Help! The Kids Are at It Again: Using Kids' Quarrels to Teach People Skills* by Elizabeth Crary

