

Being a parent can be one of life's most joyful and rewarding experiences, but there are times in everyone's life when the demands and hassles of daily living cause stress. The additional stress of caring for children can, at times, make parents feel angry, anxious, or just plain "stressed out." These tensions are a normal, inevitable part of family life, and parents need to learn ways to cope so that they don't feel overwhelmed by them.

As parents, we have to learn our jobs as we go along. Although we love our children, we soon realize that love isn't all that's needed. We need patience and creativity too, and sometimes, these qualities seem to be in short supply. Learning how to be a parent will probably continue until all your children are grown up. Because each child is unique, what worked with Joe will not necessarily work with Sally, and what worked for Sally probably will not help you cope with George.

Caring for small children is tiring. On bad days, we can feel trapped by the constant responsibility. Caring for older children is less physically draining but more worrisome because they spend much more time outside the home.

If there are young children in the family, there may not be enough time for parents to find time to spend together just enjoying each other's company. Single parents have difficulty finding time and energy to have a social life. Parents with full-time jobs have difficulty finding family play-time. Calendars tend to become over-scheduled. We all need time for ourselves, to concentrate on hobbies or interests, or just to relax.

HAVE A REALISTIC ATTITUDE

Most parents have high expectations of how things should be – we all want a perfect family and we all worry about how our children will turn out. It is important to remember there are no perfect children and no perfect parents. All children misbehave some times. Parents can make mistakes. Wanting the ideal family can get in the way of enjoying the one you have.

You may worry about whether your children will be successful. Remember – they are each individuals. Accept them for who they are. Children who are loved, encouraged and allowed to grow up at their own pace will develop good self-esteem and confidence.

It is helpful to step back and take a long-range point of view. Have confidence that things will turn out well. Children can go through difficult stages. What is stressful today may resolve itself in a short time.

HOW TO RECOGNIZE THE SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

Stress becomes a problem when you feel overwhelmed by the things that happen to you. You may feel "stressed out" when it seems there is too much to deal with all at once, and you are not sure how to handle it all.

When you feel stressed, you usually have some physical symptoms. You can feel tired, get headaches, stomach upsets or backaches, clench your jaw or grind your teeth, develop skin rashes, have recurring colds or flu, have muscle spasms or nervous twitches, or have problems sleeping.

Mental signs of stress include feeling pressured, having difficulty concentrating, being forgetful and having trouble making decisions.

Emotional signs include feeling angry, frustrated, tense, anxious, or more aggressive than usual.

HOW CAN YOU COPE?

Coping with the stress of parenting starts with understanding what makes you feel stressed, learning to recognize the symptoms of too much stress, and learning some new ways of handling life's problems. You may not always be able to tell exactly what is causing your emotional tension, but it is important to remind yourself that it is not your children's fault.

We all have reactions to life's events which are based on our own personal histories. For the most part, we never completely understand the deep-down causes of all our feelings. What we must realize is that our feelings of stress come from inside ourselves and that we can learn to keep our stress reactions under control. Here are some tips which can help:

- Make time for yourself. Reserve time each week for your own activities.
- Take care of your health with a good diet and regular exercise. Parents need a lot of energy to look after children.
- Avoid fatigue. Go to bed earlier and take short naps when you can.
- Take a break from looking after the children. Help keep stress from building up. Ask for help from friends or relatives to take care of the children for a while. Exchange babysitting services with a neighbour, or hire a teenager, even for a short time once a week to get some time for yourself.
- Look for community programs for parents and children. They offer activities that are fun, other parents to talk with, and some even have babysitting.
- Talk to someone. Sharing your worries is a great stress reducer!
- Look for parenting courses and groups in your community.

- Learn some ways of unwinding to manage the tension. Simple daily stretching exercises help relieve muscle tension. Vigorous walking, aerobics or sports are excellent ways for some people to unwind and work off tension; others find deep-breathing exercises are a fast, easy and effective way to control physical and mental tension.

- If you're feeling pressured, tense or drawn out at the end of a busy day, say so. Tell your children calmly that you will be happy to give them some attention soon but first you need a short "quiet time" so that you can relax.

- Practise time management. Set aside time to spend with the children, time for yourself, and time for your spouse and/or friends. Learn to say "no" to requests that interfere with these important times. Cut down on outside activities that cause the family to feel rushed.

DEVELOP GOOD RELATIONSHIPS

Family relationships are built over time with loving care and concern for other people's feelings. Talk over family problems in a warm, relaxed atmosphere. Focus on solutions rather than finding blame. If you are too busy or upset to listen well at a certain time, say so. Then agree on a better time, and make sure to do it.

Laugh together, be appreciative of each other, and give compliments often. It may be very hard to schedule time to spend with your family, doing things that you all enjoy, but it is the best time you will ever invest.

Parents and children need time to spend one-to-one. Whether yours is a one or two-parent family, each parent should try to find a little time to spend alone with each child. You could read a bedtime story, play a game, or go for a walk together.

DO YOU NEED MORE HELP?

If you are considering getting some additional support or information to help you cope with the stress of parenting, there are many different resources available, including books and video tapes on stress management, parenting courses and workshops, professional counselling and self-help groups. Contact a community organization, such as the Canadian Mental Health Association, for more information about services in your community.

The Canadian Mental Health Association is a nation-wide, voluntary organization that promotes the mental health of all and supports the resilience and recovery of people experiencing mental illness. CMHA accomplishes this mission through advocacy, education, research and service.

Visit the CMHA website at www.cmha.ca today.

CHILDREN AND THE STRESS OF PARENTING



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