

Parenting & Stress: Developing Your Own Coping Strategies

Stress is an inevitable aspect of parenting. It can begin in pregnancy, or even earlier for people with reproductive issues. By the time a child is born, no parent is immune from the stresses of their position. By the time a child is a teen you have either learned some healthy ways to cope or you are about to lose your mind!

As the child grows into adolescence, discipline becomes another source of stress. In addition, there is the misconception that parenting stress ends when the child reaches a certain age. This, and other incorrect assumptions, often contribute to parenting being harder than it has to be.

These are the facts. First, the stress you feel as a parent will continue throughout course of your life and the life of your children. The sources of that stress, and how best to deal with it, is what changes as you and your children grow. Second, stress-free parenting is as much of a myth as Bigfoot. Stress is an inherent aspect of parenting; you will not eliminate it, but you can try to prevent some of it and effectively manage the rest. The following techniques can be used by any parent to reduce stress and increase their enjoyment of the wonderful gift that they have been given.

#1 Establish support systems

A good support network can make life as a parent much easier. Establishing a support system early will lay a foundation for parents in the years to come. This is an essential step that applies to every parent regardless of marital status, employment status, or socio-economic status. Everyone needs help at some point and like a well-stocked emergency kit, it pays to have a system in place before you need it. There are two ways to go about building support systems, and parents should pursue both.

First, accept the help that is offered. If you have family or friends that are willing and offering to help lend a hand, allow them to do so. Second, seek the help you need. You don't have to just wait around for people to make offers. Be proactive in arranging to have extra help. Those who can afford to have a cleaning service or cook should do research and interviews in advance, so when the need hits, they are ready. This can take some of the load off your family. Those small time savings can be a big stress relief, without having to take on an additional long-term expense.

If paying for outside help is out of the question, look to friends and family. They may not realize you are open to receiving help, but once they do, people often jump at the chance. There are also several professional organizations that can provide free or inexpensive support in a variety of ways. For example, sources of support can be found in schools, parenting groups and places of worship. Remember that you are not the first person to attempt this parenting thing, and the help you need is out there.

#2 Take the time to do fun things

Taking time out with your kids for enjoyable activities will improve the lines of communication. One of the best parts of being a parent is getting to have fun with your kids. Unfortunately, this message sometimes gets lost in today's atmosphere of academic competition and strategically chosen extracurricular activities. It is no longer enough for a school to have a caring staff or broad curriculum.

It is important to remember that not everything you do with your child has to be resume-worthy. Simply spending time with them, running around at a park or doing something around the house is immensely valuable. Having dinner together on a regular basis is the single most effective way to increase communication and build relationship with your child.

You may not find the perfect activity right away, and that does not matter. Once you've established that these times are set aside for pure enjoyment, free of criticisms or judgments, your kids will start to suggest activities that interest them more.

Kids who are used to doing enjoyable things with their parents are more likely to open up about their lives, fears and challenges as they grow. It's an almost magical two-for-one experience. Without the pressure to perform or the fear of being corrected, kids can become extremely chatty when having fun. They naturally will bring up things from their day, their friends or their inner thoughts. Having this open line of communication is a major source of stress relief because parents don't need to guess what's going on in their child's life. Listen to what they say without pressing them, resist the urge to turn it into an interrogation, and offer your thoughts in a non-threatening way to keep the communication going. The positive memories you build during these no-pressure, fun times will serve as buffers when more stressful times inevitably come around.

#3 Corral the chaos

Getting organized can reduce the stress of things like getting ready for school. A chaotic space contributes to a chaotic mind. An unbelievable amount of parenting stress comes from the everyday environment. If you are constantly late getting out the door in the morning because socks can't be found or lunch hasn't been arranged, you are starting off each day with an unnecessarily elevated stress level. Establishing systems for yourself and your children will make everyday routines run more smoothly. In the mornings, this reduces the anxiety and stress of getting out of the house, and it makes for a much healthier start to the day. In the evenings, a more orderly environment will keep you from adding to the stress you've accumulated at work or throughout the day.

Household stress with kids falls into two major categories: Location and Time. Location is having things where they can be found when needed. Time is being able to get where you need to be by a certain deadline. Location problems often lead to time problems. By making things easier to find, you will make it easier to be on time, and everyone will be less stressed out.

Common examples of location issues are backpacks, extracurricular supplies and school lunches. Backpacks should go in the same spot: baskets or heavy-duty hooks by the door can eliminate the mad dash. Extra-curricular

items like sports uniforms or art supplies should likewise be kept together in a basket or large bag so they are easy to find. Once you've established where things go, get in the routine of placing them there every day. Routines create a sense of familiarity and comfort for children. If everyone knows what is expected and when, it is easier to enforce the rules.

#4 Seek out professional help

Sometimes professional help or therapy can help to put things in perspective. Despite your best efforts to prevent or manage your parenting stress, sometimes things will inevitably be too much for you to deal with on your own or with your support systems. Unforeseen events or sudden changes in lifestyle, a parent or child using drugs or alcohol, a death, natural disasters or a parent becoming unemployed, can cause an inordinate amount of stress for parents and children alike. In other cases, a parent may have to cope with a child who suffers from a physical, mental health, or behavioral issue. When you recognize that you're feeling overwhelmed, take action. Enlist the help of a licensed mental health professional.

It can be confusing to choose what help is best suited for your situation. Counselors, psychologists and psychiatrists each have strengths suited to particular problems. Simply discussing your stress can often go a long way to making it disappear.

Counselors

Counselors will have at least a Master's Degree in marriage and family therapy or counseling. They primarily use talk therapy to help people manage their problems. Parents may turn to a counselor when trying to handle anxiety issues, eating disorders, life changes, or relationship issues.

Psychologists

Psychologists in private practice and clinical psychologists will have a Ph.D. or Psy.D. and can handle all of the same issues as a counselor. Additionally, they administer diagnostic or psychological tests and consult with other healthcare professionals on a comprehensive approach to patient treatment. In only two states can clinical psychologists actually prescribe medications.

Psychiatrists

Psychiatrists are medical doctors who have specialized in psychiatry. They can diagnose mood disorders like depression and anxiety, and have expertise in severe psychological problems like schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or major depression. They also treat these disorders. Although they are trained and qualified to provide psychotherapy, most choose to employ pharmacotherapy and medication management.

If you're not sure who exactly you should see, it doesn't matter. The most important thing is that you just reach out for help. Any reputable professional will tell you if they are suited to your needs or point you in the right direction. Once you have chosen the right type of professional, make sure you are a good match. Just like any other relationship, the one with your mental health provider is a personal one. You and your children will be more compatible with some people, and less compatible with others. Before making any long-term commitment, it is OK to sit down with the counselor or doctor, talk about their treatment options and styles and see if you and your family are a good fit. There's nothing hidden or subversive about this. Providers will encourage you to continue treatment with someone else if you are not comfortable with them.

Don't fall victim to any imagined stigma. It is not a failure on your part to get professional help; rather it is the mark of a caring and competent parent. It is also an opportunity to impart a life lesson: mental health is just as important as physical health. No one is stigmatized for seeing a doctor about their physical problems, so why should they feel ashamed for addressing their psyche? Professionals can provide tools for coping, and valuable resources for continuing support. Addressing behavioral problems or parenting challenges with their help is an effective way to handle parenting stress.

Conclusion

Parenting and stress go together like peanut butter and jelly. You can't have one without some measure of the other. As a parent you will never eliminate stress entirely, but that doesn't mean you're powerless. There are methods available for every parent to effectively reduce and manage their stress. Build

a network of support and don't be afraid to use it often. Get out and have fun with your kids. Remember that a little organization can go a long way. And don't be afraid to reach out to a professional when you need to.

You may not employ all these strategies all at once; it's more likely that you will use one or more as your individual situation dictates. These methods are flexible and will grow with you, and the specifics will change according to the age of your children and your family circumstances.