

Parenting - coping with stress

Being a parent brings out a range of powerful emotions from exhilaration to despair. Your feelings of love, happiness and pride may quickly turn to anger, hate or guilt, depending on the situation and the degree of support available to you. These feelings are completely normal. Most parents experience negative emotions from time to time.

It is important to manage feelings like anger and frustration so that you can enjoy parenting and maintain a safe, happy home for your child. It may be helpful to talk to other parents – you'll soon discover that everyone is experiencing the same rollercoaster of feelings and experiences.

Build a trusting, loving and respectful relationship

The type of relationship you build with your child is what guides them throughout their life. Children learn by following the examples set by adults around them and from their experience of their own relationship with their parents.

To become a person who is able to control themselves, manage their negative feelings in a peaceful way, trust and respect others, and behave with care and compassion, your child will have to experience and see these behaviours.

Physical discipline can injure your child

Some parents believe that physical discipline, such as smacking, is for the child's own good. Children are dependent on their parents for love and care – they never deserve to be punished by physical discipline.

Young children, such as those less than 12 months of age, don't have the intellectual maturity to understand discipline of any kind. Hitting or smacking will only frighten a young child or cause serious and permanent injuries. By using physical discipline with your child, you are teaching them that the acceptable way to resolve conflict is by using violence.

Some parents may also lash out at their child when angry or stressed. This is particularly dangerous as parents may not recognise their own strength and can cause their child a lot of pain and injury.

Experiencing negative feelings is normal

Parents can feel tired, ill, stressed and angry and so can children. Children often cannot tell us how they are feeling but instead 'act out' their feelings through their behaviours. When parents are under pressure themselves, it is more difficult to take the time to work out what your child is trying to tell you. Parents may often just react to the behaviour.

Most children experience difficult times. Try to remember that these times can be normal phases of growing up and will probably pass.

Suggestions on dealing with your child's unhappy behaviour include:

- Ask for support. Remember that 'it takes a village to bring up a child', so don't try to parent on your own.
- Take time out from the care of your child. Leave your child with a responsible adult and have a break to catch up on some sleep, go to the hairdresser or talk to a friend.
- Seek out like-minded people who will encourage you in your parenting and build your confidence as a person and parent.
- Attend a parent group that has the same philosophy and values as you have.

Dealing with frustration and anger

If you feel frustrated and angry to the point where you feel you might lose control, you need to take time out to deal with these feelings.

Some short-term suggestions include:

- Put your child in a safe place and leave the room.
- Walk around the house or go outside.
- Inhale deeply and exhale slowly and steadily.
- Count your breaths to focus your concentration.
- Be aware of your body language and try to change it so that you are more relaxed.
- Recognise how to reduce your frustration and anger and take action:
- Play your favourite music – you may need earplugs!
- Make yourself a comforting warm drink.
- Physical activity – try sprinting from one end of your backyard to the other or punch a pillow.
- Call a friend or relative and ask for help.

Managing in the long term

It is important to take care of your own needs and feelings. No matter how loving and selfless, a parent can't continue to give to their children while receiving little or no emotional nourishment themselves.

Some suggestions include:

- Make the time to maintain your relationship with your partner (if you have one), even if all you can manage is dinner alone together once a week.
- Reward yourself by scheduling at least one self-indulgent activity every day, such as sitting down in a quiet room to read a book or having coffee with a friend.
- Find support from family members, friends or counsellors who are prepared to listen to your problems sympathetically.
- Mix with other parents to share stories and swap parenting tips.
- Learn about child development, so that you can better understand and anticipate your child's behaviour.
- Recognise and try to attend to underlying problems such as financial stresses, marital difficulties or problems at work, which can impact on your relationship with your child.
- Investigate stress management options such as yoga, meditation or regular exercise.
- Remember that seeking professional help is the smartest option if some problems are too complex to solve on your own.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your partner
- Family members and friends
- Parentline Tel. 132 289
- Family Relationship Advice Line Tel. 1800 050 321 Monday to Friday, 8am to 8pm, Saturday, 10am to 4pm
- Maternal and child health nurse
- Your local community health centre
- Professionals such as counsellors.

Things to remember

- Most parents experience negative emotions from time to time.
- It is important to manage frustration and anger so that you can enjoy parenting and maintain a safe, happy home for your child.
- Seek professional help if problems are too complex to solve on your own.

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