

Skills for Good Parenting: Elementary Ages - Self-care

It is all too easy, when juggling the demands you face as a parent, to put taking care of yourself at the bottom of your to-do list. We think that's bad! To be a positive and effective parent you must make sure to take care of yourself (and your relationships) too. Effective self-care requires that you know yourself, your own limits and needs. Before you can help someone else, you have to take care of yourself; this is not selfish. Just like on an airplane – you have to put on your own oxygen mask before you can help those around you. You have to **make** the time for self-care, not find the time. Plan ahead and create the time slot in your busy schedule, so that you know that you have time to take care of yourself and your partner. This is an example of integrating your priorities into your daily life.

Pause right now and take a few minutes to think about where in your week you can make the time for self-care and/or relationship building. If you're having trouble finding the time, take a step back and think about a couple of ways you can carve out that time; you may need to make choices; for example, relaxing your standards for housekeeping in order to have more quality time with your family. There's space on the worksheet for you to write down your thoughts and remind you to continue to think about this after you're finished listening to the podcast.

Where are your stress points? If you identify these ahead of time it will be easier for you to be pro-active rather than reactive. Know when to put yourself into your own "time out". You will also be modelling healthy self-care for your child. You can let your family know that you need to take a break. Try saying: "I need a break right now" and by example show them how to self-calm. First make sure that your child is in a safe place, and then take a few minutes for yourself, whether you need to take a few deep breaths, step outside, step into another room, or call a friend. Know what you need to do for yourself to hit the reset button. If the situation allows, take another minute to do your calming exercise together with your child.

Pause here and think about what makes you lose your cool – these are your stress points. Next, imagine yourself in a situation feeling that way and identify what you can do to make sure your child is in a safe space so that you can take a few minutes to take a few minutes to practice self-care.

Remember that at any time you can consult the Skills for Good Parenting: Elementary Ages Resource Guide to find links to additional resources and information to learn more.

What is your image of strength? This technique involves forming in your mind a visual cue that makes you feel in control and empowered, and picturing that cue when you need to keep your cool in the face of the challenges of parenting a child in elementary school. One example: super-hero parenting. Envision yourself as a superhero who can face and overcome the most challenging parenting moments. What would your superhero costume be? A cape, a mask, magical armlets or a shield on your chest? Have fun and empower yourself with the ability to face your most difficult parenting moments. Next time you're having a difficult parenting moment, close your eyes, take a deep breath and mentally put on your superhero garb; then

step back into the situation and save the day. If the superhero image doesn't work for you, think about what image will work – is it as a large boulder on the beach, remaining unmoved as the ocean breaks around it? Or a tall pine tree buffeted by wind, swaying but never breaking? Hold onto the image that works for you, and picture it when you are faced with a tough moment as a parent. Take a deep breath, conjure up your image of strength, then step back into the situation.

In addition to “in the moment” self-care techniques like creating and using your own “strength image” and taking your own “time-out”. There are many prevention-based self-care techniques you can plan for and schedule into your busy life such as exercise, healthy eating, and massage.

Another helpful self-care tool is that of mindfulness. The essence of mindfulness is to shift gears away from action and to shift to non-judgmental observation. The meditations, techniques and exercises are all designed to get you to hit the mental pause button and turn off trying to solve a problem, figuring out how to accomplish something, or thinking critically about something that has happened or you have done. Instead, you focus on becoming aware of simply being, without judging yourself. By focusing on the physical sensation of what you are doing in the moment, you are training your brain and body to awaken to a place where you can remember that you are not your thoughts. While there are many resources available to integrate mindful practices into your daily routine, mindfulness can be worked in any moment, by paying attention to your breath or focusing on some other physical sensation. We have provided links to additional information about how to integrate mindfulness practices into your routine and its benefits on our resources page relating to this podcast.

By taking care of yourself, you become better equipped to care for your family. Keeping all of the parenting balls in the air at once isn't always easy and practicing self-care makes that juggling more do-able. And by making self-care and mindful practices part of your own coping tool-kit, they become part of your family's routine.

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