

Decreasing stress

“Look at the picture Lilly drew! You should definitely put her into art classes” Art classes, summer camp, soccer, ballet, a lot of things to arrange. Which summer camp would be the best? Which piano teacher shall we choose? Should Jacob try Judo out this year instead of soccer? All these questions to answer and so much to organize!

When was the last time you asked yourself, “Did my child have a peaceful moment today? Did Emily have time to play with her dolls? Did the kids spend time outside for an hour? Did Mark get to roll around in the pile of autumn leaves we raked up last week?”

Do you remember as a kid watching the fire from that comfy chair, wrapped up in your grandmother’s old quilt, imagining stories in the fire? That is a calm moment. When was the last time you had one of those? When was the last time you dangled your feet in the swimming pool and just sat there feeling the cool water on your legs, with your little one sitting next to you?

Modern parents should not feel that if they are not running around from one activity to another that they are doing a less-than-good job. Time to do ‘nothing’ and restorative nights are essential elements for child as well as parent. So let’s take a look at how you can reduce stress — for both you and your child.

Step one: The stress diary

How stressed are you? Often parents do not realize how stressed their lives are. So I suggest keeping a seven-day stress diary. This is how it works. During one week you run around with a sheet of paper and write down each activity that you do, and next to it your stress level. A ‘zero’ represents no stress. A ten is very high stress, even distress. For instance, parents frequently rate getting ready in the morning as an eight or a nine! Walking your dog while your kids are in preschool or kindergarten is hopefully heading towards a zero or a one (that is if you have switched your mobile phone off, and I will talk about that too). But you get the idea. Be honest.

This diary should teach you (1) what the most stressful times of your day are, and (2) what your stressors are. We each have our personal stressors: for some it might be preparing Sunday lunch, or ironing or speaking to your mother-in-law!

Step two: Believe in the importance of calmness

You have to believe in the importance of calmness in your life because in the 21st century calm times need to be scheduled! In other words, the natural tendency is towards ‘doing’. We like a to-do list where all the items have been crossed off. So you have to schedule calm moments between shopping and picking up John, or write it down as an extra long shower, or staying in the car five minutes longer listening to your favorite CD before getting out. To do this you will have to be aware and believe it is important, because it will not come naturally to most of us, at least to begin with.

Step three: Trust your child

I am a firm believer that every child and adult has a gift, something that she can give to this world to make it a better place. Sure, children need support to develop, but this has to be in balance with letting them follow their own interests. If it is stressful getting Emily to practice her piano, make a note! More than simply giving children opportunities is supporting them in developing their inner-motivations. It has to come from *them*. It is not possible to create your child’s future.

Step four: Prioritize and reduce the amount of activities

I usually recommend one or two activities total for elementary school children. There are so many opportunities out there, that this usually means narrowing it down to what a child really, *really* wants. All too often I chat with kids who have one or two activities after school *per day*. They are tired, they have no free time and end up missing many of the activities they are signed up for – for example, to attend a birthday party instead. This also sends a message that the activities have no value anyway. Then there are battles to get homework done in the evening, plus the kids go to bed late. I suggest that parents go back to their stress diary and look at the highest stress levels. If they are associated with activities, and you really want to reduce your family’s stress level, follow the cue.

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Step five: Prepare solid routines for predictable stressful moments

These are usually mornings, when kids get back from preschool or school, and evenings. Developing a calm routine means compromising, for instance, between forcing the healthiest *Bircher-museli* breakfast into your kids and something else that your child might prefer. Plan to catch up on nutrition at a less stressful time. Getting everything prepared the evening before is also a well known trick: no homework in the morning, no preparing snack boxes in the mornings, no choosing clothes in the mornings. When organizing these predictable stressful moments, always ask, "Will this increase or decrease my stress level?" If the answer is 'yes' to increase, dump it. Many families do not take phones during evening times. Develop your own strategies to increase calmness around you. Remember you have a right to calm times too.

Step six: Control multitasking

An example of something that all parents do is: they get home and 1) collect coats, shoes, umbrellas, hats, four pairs of gloves to put away 2) prepare the meal, 3) settle their kids in, 4) make at least three phone calls that have to be done before 17:00, 5) get out children's homework, 6) make sure the little one gets to the bathroom on time ... and of course all of this and more at the same time. Multitasking is stressful. Moreover many professional personal organizers warn that in the end you do not get the jobs done faster or better.

If you want to remain sane in the 21st century, control your multitasking. So for instance, make that phone call short, tell your friend, "I just wanted to confirm our appointment tomorrow, can we talk about this then?"

Step seven: Schedule calm times for your children every day

A calm time is a time when your child has nothing to do other than relax, flip marbles around on the carpet or watch snow flakes fall down. An easy way to integrate a calm moment in the day is just after lunch, snack and dinner. Little ones can draw while sitting at the kitchen table as you clean up, older ones can read. They can play outside. In fact, I am a great believer in the green outdoors for restoring energy. It's all about doing what we call in the 21st century "nothing".

In general if you hesitate between doing an "activity" and doing "nothing" I encourage parents to go for "nothing". TV, VCR, DVD, iPod, Playstation do not count as downtime. But decreasing them significantly will give you a lot of 'time'. Finding time for downtime often means unplugging. No kind of TV program is going to beat downtime. Emailing with a pen pal in Hong Kong is never going to be as real as throwing hoops with a buddy.



Step eight: Schedule a calm time for yourself everyday

Start with planning five minutes of calm time. Does this seem easy? Then start today, everyday. It will be your New Year's gift to yourself. This does not need to be meditation, but it could be. Research has shown that meditation is a very efficacious way to rapidly lower your stress level. One way to do a miniature stress reduction is sit comfortably, close your eyes, and count one-two-one-two, focusing on the numbers. If your mind wanders, then bring it back to thinking about the numbers again ... for one minute. Then, for instance, pick up a book and read for four minutes or more, or just look out of the window. And you have just given yourself a five minute gift.

It is not necessary to schedule parent and child quiet times together. But what you will see is that they tend to happen together. Because, just as stress attracts stress, calm attracts calm. If you are upset and start raising your voice, predictably kids are going to get upset too. If you lie on your back in your living room floor, taking deep breaths, your kids will come. Teach them the rule, "I am having my calm time now, so if you are in the room you have to be quiet too". Encourage them to lie down and take some breaths too.

Step nine: Recognize the power of internal rhythm and sleep

Some of us are owls, some are early risers. Some need more sleep than others. Research has shown that these internal clocks will change little over a lifetime, so be aware of your internal clock and those of your partner and children. Work on the whole family getting enough sleep, following the individual demands of each one.

Step ten:

After one or two weeks try taking a stress diary again for a week. Have fun and let me know what your experiences are.

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