

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Positively a Parent: Embracing the Ups and Downs of Parenthood

Parenting brings out a range of powerful emotions and your feelings of love, happiness and pride can quickly turn to anger, guilt and exhaustion depending on the day, time and situation. And while most of us are happy to share all the great moments of parenting, it's a little harder for moms and dads to admit that it isn't always a bed of roses. Yes, it's the most rewarding job you're ever likely to have, but parenting can also be the most challenging one and at times can seem the most thankless.

All parents have moments where they wonder how they ended up being a short-order cook, chauffeur, cheerleader or personal assistant to a miniature "boss." But before you end up bursting into tears over your troublesome teen or one-upping your toddler's temper tantrum, know that you're not alone and that there are strategies you can use to move past the "bumps" of parenthood and remain focused on all its rewards.

Where Did You Go?

Probably the biggest shock new parents discover is how all-consuming the job is. Until your "bundle" arrived, your time, work, wants, needs, etc. were all front and centre. And while young babies are particularly demanding, for many parents it can take years, maybe even decades to go by before they go out to a movie, dinner or engage in an activity that isn't somehow related to their kids, school or parenting.

Others find relationships with their partner and friends take a back seat to life as a mommy or daddy. You may discover you suddenly have little in common with friends who don't have kids or that your passion for music, art, cars—you name it—has been numbed by the sleepless nights of early parenting or the exhaustive carting of older children to activities.

Making it all Work

While being a parent is clearly one of the most important roles around, you could be in for some real challenges if it's your main focus—especially once the kids have grown and left the nest. Avoid parental burnout, make the most of the kids' formative years and continue to have a life too by:

Believing in your abilities. Everyone has their own ideas about how to be a good parent—your family, friends, millions of books and endless information on the Internet. This can make you feel overwhelmed, under-confident and never quite good enough. Relax! There's no one right way to raise a family and no perfect parent with all the answers. Be open to advice and ideas but believe in yourself and your abilities. Learn to trust your instincts and do what feels right for you and your children. When you're secure and positive your kids will feel that way too.

Enjoying yourself. Every experienced parent will warn you: days turn into weeks, weeks into months and suddenly your tiny toddlers are towering over you! Time with your kids flies so be sure to stop and appreciate the little things. Sure your children will make mistakes, messes and act up. But while it's important to provide your kids with structure and guidelines, families can't survive on rules alone. Have fun together, be flexible and above all, hang on to your sense of humor. No one said parenting was easy, but it certainly can be pretty funny. Stop and appreciate the many moments your kids make you laugh and remember not to take yourself too seriously.

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Making time for your partner. If you're in a relationship, make sure you schedule regular time to do things together, talk about your day, share ideas and just relax. Find a babysitter you like and trust so you can spend time away from your children worry-free. Children learn about relationships by what they see around them so if your connection with your partners suffers, your kids will too.

Looking after you. Parents have a tendency to push themselves to the limit and feel guilty about needing a break, but it's imperative that you carve out a little time every week to do the things that help you decompress, reconnect with your friends and family or just make you happy. Have a bubble bath, enjoy a power nap, take in a round of golf or go for a run. Make sure you schedule the time and stick to it! Remember, the healthier and happier you are, the more likely your kids will be as well.

Asking for help. One of your best sources for advice, support and friendship will likely be other parents. Reaching out will help you discover that other parents share your frustrations, concerns and joys, and that there are different types of children and many ways to parent. Look for parent groups in your neighborhood that speak to your interests—whether it's walking, arts and crafts or child and parent yoga. If you live in a more remote area, online forums are a good way to connect and share insights, concerns and exchange information. A professional can also provide you with positive strategies to deal with parenting challenges and other sources of stress in your life.

You want your children to be happy, well-adjusted and successful adults so it's no surprise that the stress of these expectations can start to wear you down. It doesn't necessarily get easier, but as time passes, you will become more confident and better prepared to handle the challenges your kids present. Parenting is truly a roller coaster filled with ups, downs and unexpected turns. The best way to handle it is to let go, trust yourself to do the best job possible and enjoy the ride.