

INSIGHTS

Parent self-care matters



Parents are known for putting their children's needs ahead of their own. With the mantra of 'be involved' in your child's life a dominant parenting message, it's now common for parents to neglect their own social and wellbeing to give their children the best possible start in life. This selfless approach is commendable, but questionable if it means you are constantly stretched, stressed and tired. Parenting is draining. Kids by their very nature take more than they give. Even the most loving, affectionate child will exhaust you at times so it's important to replenish, refresh and reinvigorate yourself.

Parenting author Maggie Dent says, "If we don't care for ourselves, not only do we run the risk of parenting less effectively and compassionately, but we are not modelling self-care for our children." Taking time for yourself seems obvious, however, the reality for many parents is that they are hard-wired to prioritise the wellbeing of others.

Start by giving yourself permission. Setting strict boundaries around key self-care activities help to make sure self-care happens. Turning occasional self-care into an ongoing habit is a great way to make sure you look after yourself. First, you need to give yourself permission to prioritise mental health and wellbeing, at least some of the time. So, what self-care activities should you be prioritising?

Get physical

Exercise is great for both mind and body. It releases endorphins, the feel-good hormone that enhances mood and helps put you in a positive state of mind. Exercise releases cortisol, the stress hormone, which builds up gradually over time, leading to anxiety and depression if not managed. You don't need to go to the gym to get the benefits of exercise. A brisk daily walk is an excellent self-care strategy for busy parents. It's affordable, accessible and has the bonus of taking you outside, which has added wellbeing benefits.

Stay social

Alfred Adler, the father of individual psychology, maintained that the people who lived the most content lives paid close attention to their social lives. When children come along, a parents' social life can easily play second fiddle to that of their children. Alternatively, social media becomes the main mode for staying in touch with friends, which is a poor replacement for face-to-face contact. One way of staying social is to schedule activities such as playing sport, joining a book club or sharing a coffee that keeps you connected to other adults.

Be mindful

Staying in the present moment, even for just a minute or two, can help you better manage parenting stresses. Engaging your senses is a good way to relax and find some inner peace. Enjoying the present moment, or mindfulness, can be practised by taking a walk, listening to music, or a taking a five minute meditation. Breathing exercises help reduce stress, so incorporate deep breathing into your daily routine to help stay fresh and alert.

parenting * ideas

Seek out play

If you think that play is just for kids, then think again. Everyone needs activities in their lives that sustain them and bring them joy. It's important to expand the definition of play to include hobbies and interests such as music, collecting things, making, tinkering and performing. Playful activities that contribute to parent self care are freely chosen, fun and create a state of flow so that you become lost in the activity. Playful activities boost your mood and help you manage the challenges and enjoy the pleasures of family life.

Decide to savour

If you feel that you're always in rush, the chances are that you don't have the opportunity to savour anything. Whether it's the first cup of coffee in the morning, snuggling up to your child at bedtime or reading a favourite book before bed, commit to savouring something and make it a daily habit.

In closing

Taking care of your physical, psychological and social needs helps you be the best parent you can be. Set aside time for self-care even when you feel like you don't have a single second to devote to yourself. Experiment with different self-care activities to figure out which strategies work best for you, your family and your lifestyle.



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Michael Grose, founder of Parenting Ideas, is one of Australia's leading parenting educators. He's an award-winning speaker and the author of 12 books for parents including *Spoonfed Generation*, and the bestselling *Why First Borns Rule the World and Last Borns Want to Change It*. Michael is a former teacher with 15 years experience, and has 30 years experience in parenting education. He also holds a Master of Educational Studies from Monash University specialising in parenting education.