



Practicing GOOD Self-Care

We have all heard the parenting analogy of having to put your own oxygen mask on before putting masks on your children. The thinking behind this is that you must put your mask on first to make sure you are conscious enough to be able to put the mask on them. Ongoing appointments and emergencies keep parents so busy that attending to their own feelings and needs may be put on hold. As caregivers, we must take care of ourselves so that we are able to give full and proper care to our children. However, actually putting this into practice in our everyday lives is difficult for most parents.

Self-care, however, is crucial for parents. The physical and emotional toll of caring for children can be overwhelming. Children can project hurt onto parents and, at the same time, blame parents for feelings of loss and despair. Parents must understand both the complexities of foster care and adoption, and their child's unique needs. With that knowledge and an ongoing commitment to self-care, parents can more easily remain effective and balanced.

Barriers to Good Self-Care

Unfortunately, parents face many barriers to taking care of themselves. We know we should exercise, eat right, and do the "other stuff" needed to take care of ourselves. But family life can be chaotic and demanding.

Most days, parents devote far more energy to others' needs than to their own well-being. In fact, many are uncomfortable being on the receiving end of other people's attention and assistance.

Parents may also feel the desire to create a wonderful, safe and loving "family" experiences for their children. They may feel the weight of wanting to give their children the very best of childhood that they can give them. This idea can leave precious little room in your schedule for a moment or ten to breathe, re-focus, and refuel yourself.

Too many parents simply do not know what would help them. They know something is missing, but can't put their finger on what might make them feel better. Parents are often told, "Call if there is anything you need," but it is hard to call and ask for help, especially when you cannot even articulate what you need. Many parents are left feeling vulnerable and exhausted.

If you've struggled with self-care, you're not alone. Self-care is a skill, something you can practice and continue to improve. You will make mistakes or slip up, but if you keep at it, it will become easier and a natural part of your daily life. The things that keep you from self-care are the very reasons you should prioritize it. We cannot meet our children's needs or walk through their challenges if we cannot think clearly.

The Road to Good Self-Care

From working with parents, I know that to overcome social, mental, and emotional barriers to self-care, you must first come to understand the importance of taking care of yourself, and then build self-care into your daily routine. You must believe that you are worth taking care of, and that your happiness and well-being are not peripheral to, but essential to good parenting.

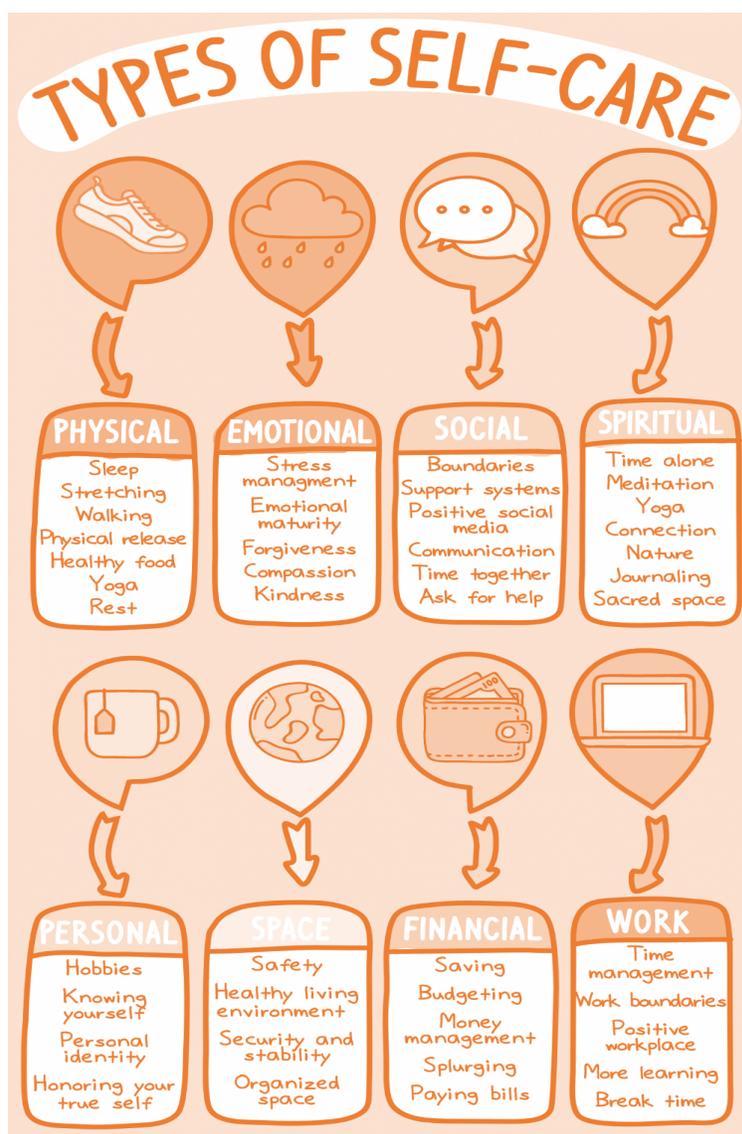
Keep it simple. Make life choices that fit your family. Develop consistent routines. Create a safe environment. Understand and respect both your limits and those of your children. Resist the impulse to over-commit what little time you have. Prioritize. Save energy for things that really matter, and seek outside help as soon as you need it. When possible, take advantage of respite opportunities to relieve some of the stress during really rough times.

Stop comparing yourself to other parents and families. They do not live your life, and they are not raising your children. Get comfortable with compromising and being different. Your child may talk, think, achieve, behave, and live differently than other children. Instead of measuring your family's worth by other people's standards, set expectations for your family based on your children's capabilities and your family's reality.

Join a parent support group. Meeting with other parents who have similar experiences and feelings is one of the most powerful and renewing activities for anyone raising children. Just knowing that you are with people who "get it" is affirming. Group members may also be able to trade respite care with you. If a group is not an option, find at least one person outside your immediate family with whom you can be real, and whom you can trust to understand what you are going through.

Have down time every day. Maybe it's a morning walk. It might be 10 minutes with the newspaper and a good cup of coffee. It can be writing in your journal before bed. It could be the drive into work, or times of silent prayer in church. Your mind, body, and soul need time to regenerate from life's stresses. If you have no down time—a time without distractions and demands—you cannot benefit from moments of reflection and calm that may help you to center and stay balanced.

Routinely have something to which you can look forward. Maybe it's coffee with a neighbor after the kids are at school. Or a glass of wine Friday night. Or date night with your partner. It could be going alone to the grocery store Saturday morning or having an uninterrupted bath. Remember, waiting too long to reward yourself for a job well done is not an effective way to shape your behavior. Immediate



positive reinforcement works for adults too.

Accentuate the positive. It may not be easy, but as you step back to evaluate how you and the family are doing, find time to laugh at the silly situations that come up. Recognize the good in yourself and your children. Celebrate every step forward, no matter how small. Stay connected with your partner. Eat something you really enjoy. (Nutrition is important. Indulgence is wonderful.) Find affirmation in the process of raising a child.

We have the responsibility as parents to take care of our body, mind, and spirit in order to stay healthy enough to meet the needs of our children. Caring for children is a matter of the heart. Self-care is a mindset and a positive choice. If you can find a balance between caring for your children and meeting your own needs, you will ultimately be better equipped for both.



Planning Ahead For The Holidays

Holidays can be challenging for children who have been adopted. They can trigger memories or just a vague sense of loss. Even when the child is unable to consciously connect their feelings to the fact that the holiday is a trigger, it can be overwhelming, overstimulating, and simply a change in routine. For children with neurological differences, such as those caused by trauma, Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, Anxiety, Depression, Autism Spectrum Disorder or Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, the challenges can be overwhelming to the parents as well.

One way to make the holidays less stressful and more enjoyable for the whole family is to identify your child's needs and plan ahead to meet them.

Take some time to think about each of your children and what they need in order to remain regulated and feel safe. Do an inventory of their specific challenges. Does your child have sensory differences and needs? Does your child have difficulty with transitions? Do social situations cause your child anxiety? Is a change of routine likely to be a trigger for oppositional behavior?

After you have identified your child's specific needs and challenges, you can plan ahead to mitigate the effects of the holiday season on your child's ability to remain regulated and participate in the celebrations.

Consider your family's schedule. One suggestion by Kim John Payne, author of *Simplicity Parenting*, is to sandwich an active day between two calm and quiet days, or at least follow a highly stimulating day with one that provides a lot of downtime. Plan for some quiet each day. You and your child both need time to escape from the busyness and unwind.

Plan for some respite for yourself and perhaps a few hours break for your child from the intensity of the parent-child relationship. Ask an aunt, grandparent or friend to take your child out to a holiday movie or have them over to bake holiday cookies, so that you can get a little bit of adult time or even a nap. You might want to have a conversation with your child(ren) ahead of the holidays about their needs and hopes for the season. Including them in planning will give them some feeling of control over their lives, which children with a trauma history often crave, and may give you insight into what's really most important to them. Sometimes we try to cram in a breakfast with Santa, an extra church service and a holiday concert, when what they are really looking forward to is having lazy days at home.

Have reasonable expectations. If your child has behaviors which are challenging for you, be honest about what you can reasonably expect and avoid magical thinking. Holidays are unlikely to be easier and smoother than ordinary days. This is probably not the time to take a break from mental health appointments or other supports. It is more likely that your child will need increased supports.

If you have a sensory seeking or sensory avoidant child, try to adapt the environment, schedule and activities to meet those needs. If your child typically comes unglued with the excitement of birthday parties and presents, think about how you can alter the traditional family gathering to make it less stimulating and intense. If your child becomes overwhelmed or anxious when around lots of people, give him or her permission to go to a bedroom for awhile to read, play a video game or to just be alone. If you have a little one who has a regular nap and bedtime schedule, try not to disrupt it over the holidays.

By adapting your holiday plans to meet your child's needs, your holidays may not be what you had imagined or become accustomed to, but it can still be an opportunity to create meaningful traditions and happy memories, build connections and felt safety, and enjoy each other's company.

We wish you and your family a happy and peaceful holiday season!

PARC Events

Build connections with and get support from others who truly understand!

Monthly On-Line Support Groups:

Fabulous Foster and Adoptive Parents

Date: 1st Monday of Each Month

Time: 6pm—8pm

Single Adoptive Parents

Date: 3rd Wednesday of Each Month

Time: 8:30pm—9:30pm

Family Connections

Date: 1st Thursday of Each Month

Time: 7:30pm—8:30pm

Dad's Only

Date: 2nd Wednesday of Each Month,

Time: 9pm—10pm

Mom's Only

Date: 3rd Thursday of Each Month

Time: 7:30pm—8:30pm

Married With Children

Date: 4th Friday of Each Month

Time: 9pm—10pm

Trainings and Conferences

1/23/21, 9-11AM — **Parenting in the Digital Age:**

Social Media Impact on Today's Youth

Coming in April — **Hope for the Journey**

Conference April 2021, more information to follow.

For questions or to register for support groups or events, contact parc_5@judsoncenter.org or 734-528-2047.

For a complete list of events, visit the calendar page on our website. Additional activities and resources are listed there as well!

<http://www.parc-judson.org/calendar>

We asked some of the families we have worked with, what PARC means to them. Here are their responses:

*Parenting my kids felt so hard that I didn't think I could keep doing it. It's been good to have support from PARC because now I have someone to talk to who understands and I don't feel like giving up."
~A Kalamazoo County Parent*

*"I never miss the support groups on Zoom because it's my only me-time and it feels like self-care."
~An Ingham County Parent*

*"I'm glad I found out about the book groups. It totally applies to my situation and I'm getting a lot of good ideas about how to do things differently to help my kids. It's a lot better than just reading the book on your own."
~A St. Joseph County Parent*



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CHILD & FAMILY SERVICES

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