**Strategies for Hard Times in Parenting**

When we became parents, most of us had no idea that we would need to master the art of handling stress. Nurturing children is a job that’s best done with ample and relaxed support—several committed people taking a variety of roles to see that each person in the family is able to thrive. But most of us find ourselves more or less alone as we care for our children. This isolation almost guarantees that we will encounter more stress in the work of parenting than in any other work we’ll ever do.

Our children’s behavior isn’t the core reason parenting is stressful, although it almost always feels that way.  We’re stressed because we love our children deeply and are determined to make their lives good. Couple this singular dedication with the lack of information, mentors, help, pay, respite, and daily encouragement, and you get—hard times!

With adequate support, we’d have the help we needed to enjoy our children so much more thoroughly. We would worry less and play more. We’d be freer to anticipate difficulties, and to solve them as they came along.

The things that most upset us are usually connected to “hot buttons” that were established when we were young.  If, for instance, you are a parent who grew up in a very strict family, where you and your siblings were yelled at and punished when you roughhoused, then a “hot button” was set up for you around physical play and laughter.  As much as you want your children to play freely, you’ll find it stressful when they romp through the house.  It will be hard to join them in the fun. The buried memories of punishment and blame will make you stiff or distant. You might be prone to anger, or, so as not to explode, you might isolate yourself, develop a headache, or reach for coffee or a cigarette to numb the edginess that bubbles up.

We call this triggering of stored hurt that landed on us in childhood **“restimulation.”**  When you realize that your history as a child can set you up for bad feelings as a parent, even though nothing hurtful is happening, you’ve taken a big step!  This awareness helps you stop blaming yourself and your children for how you feel.  You have more power to lower your daily level of upset and unhappiness, because you can figure out:

•  what events in your childhood planted that stress in you;

•  what triggers in your present life you want to disarm;

•  what reactions you have under stress that you want to change, so that you don’t pass the stress on to your children.

There are three basic strategies that can help you tackle hard times in parenting.

•  *Move your mind away* from the bad feelings that have been triggered.

•  *Release the feelings* that bubble up, so that over time, you carry fewer stored feelings to trouble you.

•  *Head off the restimulation* before it builds up.

Here are some experiments you might try with each of these strategies.

**Move Your Mind Away from the Upset**

•  **Change the scene.**  There are many ways of doing this. You can gather up the kids and take a walk, or if they’re fighting in the car, you can stop the car and all get out for a short walk or a drink of water. You can take a shower, fix a bath (for you or for them), or simply stop trying to do whatever you were trying to do when stress built up. Don’t fold the mountain of laundry, put on music and pick up the beat. Pour yourself a big glass of water, sit, sip, and pet the cat. Throw a pile of blankets and pillows on the floor, and watch the kids make burrows and tunnels, instead of cooking a hot meal. Cottage cheese and carrots will do. If you feel the need to cry as you give yourself permission to take a break, it’s smart. Go ahead.

**•  Stop and concentrate on your breath.**  Many people find that stopping for a few minutes to focus on their breath is a great tension-breaker. For some of us, taking a short time to do this at the beginning of the day or at some other regular time helps keep our tension load manageable.  It’s a way of giving respect to yourself, which you richly deserve.

**•  Exercise.**  Many parents find that they feel more in charge of their lives when they manage to exercise. Walk, jump rope, dance to your favorite music with your kids, find an exercise video at Goodwill, do some stretches, give your children “airplane rides” or play tag around the house with them. Find some simple way to insert exercise into your busy life.  Our bodies are meant to move!

**•  Cuddle.**  Even when you feel upset with your children’s behavior, it’s a good idea to a break for a cuddle or to sit together on the sofa. Simple touch can remind you that you love them (and remind them that they love you). The feel of their skin, the curl of their hair, the warmth of their bodies in your lap can sometimes break the hold that stress has on them and on you, too.

**•  Lie down on the floor.**  Sometimes children get locked into opposing us at every turn.  Sometimes we respond by trying to control their behavior minute to minute.  These power struggles temporarily rub out our feelings of love for our children.  So when you notice that you’ve been issuing orders and they’ve been resisting, stop. Lie down on the floor.  You don’t need any explanation.  Just lie down.

This changes the power balance between you and your children, a set-up that is working against all of you.  You don’t have to know what to do next.  Somehow, your children will find a way to come around and connect with you again.  They may come and sit on your tummy, or ask you what you’re doing, or bring you a toy they want you to see. One of them might cry in frustration, which lets off some emotional steam that was causing trouble. Lying down allows for a fresh start to emerge, because the agendas that weren’t working have been scrapped. Simply lie down. A reset will occur. You care, they care, and with you lying down, signs of that caring can emerge.

**Release the Feelings**

Stress releases in dependable ways.  Our children know this. They go for several episodes of stress release in the course of every day!  The way they release their bad feelings is to laugh long and hard, to cry, to have a tantrum, and to do “scared crying,” which is mostly trembling and perspiring in the middle of great protest. Although most people aren’t aware of this yet, when you offer attentive, caring support while your child has a deep cry or a tantrum, your child can actually *release* the tight, upset feelings that make life hard. When you’ve listened all the way through, the problem resolves in their mind, and they feel close to you, and hopeful that life will be good today.

We parents release the hurt feelings we carry—the worries, the irritations, the deep misgivings we have about our goodness or the goodness of our children—in the same way. Here’s how you can build emotional support, so you can become less vulnerable to stress, and enjoy your children more fully.

•  **Ask another adult to listen to you.  Then, listen in return.** Usually, when we talk to others, they have opinions, advice, or stresses of their own, similar to ours. They want to release upsets too, so they interrupt with their opinions or similar tales that have disturbed them. For dependable stress release, it’s a good idea to *take turns*, so that each person has 10 or 20 minutes to talk *without interruption or advic*e.  When you’re the listener, offer 100% of your attention, respect, and warmth. Ask the same from them. Over time, a [Listening Partnership](http://shop.handinhandparenting.org/product/LP/listeningpartnershipsforparents.php) like this becomes a safe place to cry, to laugh, to think, and to shed hurt feelings. The emotional burdens of parenting begin to lift.

**•  Phone a friend.**  Sometimes, the sound of a friend’s voice on the phone is enough to help you out of the worst of your feelings.  You can set up a “rescue plan” that involves an agreement between you and one friend or several that it’s OK to call for 5 minutes of listening time when things get hard.  The simple chance to let someone know how hard it is and how hard you are trying can help break the isolation you feel. Sometimes you’ll curse. Sometimes you’ll cry. Sometimes you’ll laugh. Sometimes you’ll step into the laundry room, close the door, and stomp and pound on the wall. It will help!

**•  Let your feelings show.**  It takes a lot of energy to keep our upset feelings from spilling out. We tend to become either impulsive or remote as we try hard to keep the emotional lid on.  Seeing us like this is hard on our children. So letting feelings show creates real relief!  It’s best if you can let feelings show with another adult, so you’re not depending on your children to comfort you, or aiming your upset at them. If you do find yourself crying in the presence of your children, go ahead. Just don’t voice the details of how you feel.  “I just need a good cry,” or, “I’m getting my feelings out.  I’ll help you in a little while,” are good ways to explain what’s going on to your children. Keep the negative details for your Listening Partner. He or she will understand.

**•  Remember someone you love.**  So much of the hardship of parenting comes from feeling alone in the world.  But most of us have memories of brief moments, or even days and weeks when life was good, we felt close to someone, and we were able to feel how much love we have to give.  Stopping and putting our minds on one of those memories can help change our feelings.  Sometimes, pulling up a good memory will bring us to tears, because the contrast with our feelings at the present moment is so great.  Those are useful, healing tears.  Relax and let them come.

**Head Off Stress Before it Builds**

This strategy involves some planning.  You can involve your children in the plans, too.  Identify a time of the day or a particular situation that often drives you over the edge, then, stop hoping it won’t happen today. *Plan that it* will *happen*. Plan how you’ll handle it!

**•  Ask for help.  Exchange help.**  For instance, when you know that grocery shopping with your twins brings all three of you to a breakdown, ask for help.  Ask another mother to shop for you, while you take care of her child, or ask a sister or brother or neighbor to shop for you twice a month, in exchange for a home-cooked dish you like to make.  It might work well for both you and the person you’ve asked.

**•  Use available resources.** Ask around. Your church or temple may have an organized outreach program for families with young children. There may be a Family Resource Center nearby, or a local YMCA or YWCA that provides exercise, childcare, and family activities that help parents build supportive relationships. There is most likely a Parental Stress Hotline in your community, and if not, there are national hotlines available. These are there for *you*. You don’t have to be tearing your hair out to call!  Make your first call during a quiet moment, when you’re NOT stressed, just to introduce yourself, and see who’s on the other end. That person is likely to be a parent who wants nothing more than to support you in a moment of need. So “practice” getting in touch with someone before you need to.  Then, when you feel things heating up, call *before*you’re ready to blow.

We don’t feel ashamed to call a tow truck when we have a dead battery. We don’t feel ashamed because we can’t cut our own hair nicely. We don’t feel ashamed to need a doctor or midwife to insure a safe birth for our children. There are some jobs that *do* require help from others. Parenting is one of them.

**•  Give each child Special Time.**  It’s amazing how much stress can be avoided when your child can feel in her bones that she’s special.  Letting your child play the way she like to play, with your attention and warmth, is what builds her sense that she is loved.  Even 5 or 10 minutes of your undivided attention can make a big difference in your child’s behavior! Set the timer, and tell her you’ll play whatever she wants to play for the amount of time you’ve decided on.  Don’t give her any direction at all unless she’s doing something dangerous.  Give your child the chance to be in charge, and in exchange, you’ll get to see what she loves to do. Special Time helps diffuse the power struggles that drain the fun out of family life.  And Special Time will allow you to see how smart and unique your child is.

**Set up regular breaks for yourself.**  This is hard to do when life is so full and parenting is so demanding.  But it’s essential to our sense that we are in charge of our lives. When we don’t feel in charge, we often wind up blaming our children, which creates more stress in the long run!  So figure out how you can be good to yourself.

Are there things you can do every day or every week that let you take care of yourself?  A warm bath after the children are asleep?  20 minutes of reading before they wake up?  A walk at noontime on your lunch break at work?  Turning off your phone during the afternoons, to reduce multitasking? Talking with your best friend one evening a week by phone?  Listening to music?  A short nap every afternoon?

We highly recommend setting up a [Listening Partnership](http://www.handinhandparenting.org/product/building-listening-partnership-easing-stress-parenting/), so that you and a friend can take turns listening to each other, with appreciation and understanding, and without any pressure to solve anything.

However stressed we may become, we are good parents. We love our children with all we’ve got. We are trying our hardest. And we deserve good support. Experiment every which way with building support for your parenting. You and the others you build support with will benefit greatly, as will your children.

<http://www.handinhandparenting.org/article/strategies-hard-times-parenting/?gclid=Cj0KEQjwiJiiBRDh3Z-ctPfS5MgBEiQAAlkbQjrhfQY4P8Te08iyUH324-NU_k_nuZyL317q-QnxtFsaAq358P8HAQ>