

# Self Care for Parents

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Any time you travel on an airplane, the flight attendants announce that if the oxygen masks drop down, you should first put on your own mask, then assist small children. Think of this as good advice for parenting in general. Yes, our children have many needs that have to be met, and many more desires they would like to have fulfilled. But in order to have the energy to care for them, you need to also take care of yourself! Take a whiff of parenting “oxygen” now and then.

How do you continue to meet your own needs when you have a small child to care for?

## Working with Your Child’s Schedule and Needs

Try fitting in activities you enjoy around the needs you know your child will have:

1. **Feeding Time:** Try and think of what you could do during that time, and be ready. Set up some “feeding stations” stocked with magazines, writing supplies, the TV remote control, or a laptop. Keep your phone nearby so you can chat with friends, or read Facebook while your child eats.
2. **Moving Time:** Babies and toddlers like to be held and like to be on the move. Figure out ways to make that enjoyable for yourself. Put on your favorite music and dance with the baby. Pop in your movie and bounce baby on an exercise ball while you watch. Go for a walk with a friend in your favorite neighborhood or mall. If your baby always falls asleep in the car, keep a stash of fun things in your car for you to do while she naps: books, notecards, art supplies...
3. **Bath Time:** If you love long baths, take one with your child. Set the water temperature warm enough to keep you both comfortable, and you can play/relax in the tub for quite a while. (Some parents put a swim diaper on the baby). You can nurse or bottle-feed while you soak. You can also take baby in the shower with you –be careful, as wet babies are slippery! Note: if you’d rather shower on your own: set your baby in a swing, bouncy seat or car seat in the bathroom. (The white noise of the water and the fan may even help him sleep while you relax.)
4. **Social Time:** Babies enjoy getting out, exploring the world and being social each day. Think about the places you want to go, and the people you want to see, and how to mix that in. For example, if you used to love going out to dinner with friends, that may seem impossible now when your baby has his crying period every evening. Try planning a workday lunch, coffee break, or Sunday brunch at a time when your baby will enjoy it too. If you have a toddler who can’t sit still, find restaurants and cafés with fenced-off play areas for toddlers that allow them to play while you socialize. Or... if your child naps well in the car consider picking up a friend, driving through a drive-through and sitting in the car, eating and talking while your child naps.
5. **Middle of the night wakeups:** Some moms recommend that you do something you like to do, like surf the internet. (However, others say if you want baby to learn the difference between night and day, keep night-time wakeups quiet and dark. Do what helps you feel better.)

Often, you can meet your needs while still meeting your child’s. Sometimes you choose to prioritize your own needs for just a little while... As one parent said: “in the early weeks, I was overwhelmed. I felt like I couldn’t take a shower, go to the bathroom, or make a meal for myself, because my baby would cry. Then, I came to terms with the idea that it was OK to leave her alone in a crib or playpen for 5 – 10 minutes while I did what I needed to do. Sometimes she cried for the whole time, and that was hard. But sometimes she’d be happy. Either way, I would come back with more energy for her.”

## 5 minute self-care ideas

Have a plan for quick little treats you can give yourself when your child is settled for a moment. Don’t think of *jobs* for a to-do list – think of things that serve only to make you happy. Make a list of fun ideas. Post it where you’ll see it when you can take advantage of one. Then seize those moments.

Sometimes it turns out you don't have five minutes – your child needs you sooner than expected and you get interrupted just as you started on something. But that doesn't mean you "failed" at self care! If baby wakes up after 2 minutes, or your toddler needs you after 4 minutes, and you don't finish what you started, that's OK, because at least you took two minutes for yourself! Speaking of that....

### Contingency Planning

Once you've made a plan for what you most want, then have a plan for contingencies: if X happens, what will I do? If Y happens, who will deal with it? Think: what's the worst thing that could happen? What's the point where I would decide it was time to give up, and try again some other day?

Have alternatives planned. Even if your original plan fails, at least you tried! If nothing else, you will have accomplished one very important thing. You will have demonstrated that your own needs are important, and placed a priority on nurturing you. Celebrate that!! And have a plan to try again.

### Prioritizing - Figuring Out What You Most Need

Sometimes when we feel needy, we're not even sure what we need. We just know that something important is missing, or something is going wrong. One way to pinpoint unmet needs is to look for recurrent conflicts or chronic complaints. Think about comments you make which start with "you always," "I never", "why can't I", "why don't you", and "if I only had ten minutes to myself..." Think about all the things you find yourself longing for, even if they don't make sense to you.

Try to prioritize a couple things that would *most* help you to feel nurtured and re-energized. Figure out *why* you want that, and what part of it is most important to you. For example, if you find yourself longing for a movie, figure out: is it getting caught up in a story that matters? If so, watch videos at home. Is it being out in a theater that matters? If so, take baby to a movie in the afternoon when he is most likely to nap, or to a "mom's day at the movies". Is it just important to have two hours of uninterrupted time where you're responsible for nothing and nobody is interrupting you? Maybe what you need is a couple hours of child care so you can just do whatever you want for a big chunk of time.

Once you have a clearer sense of what you most need, then you can make a plan to make it happen.

### Asking for Support for Self Care

Sometimes you realize that you can't manage on your own. Once you have an idea for what you need, go to your partner, friend, or family member, and let them know that you could use their help. Make a specific request. Try to make sure it's something that is actually possible for them to do. If they want to help, but they can't do that specific thing, then work together to figure out other ways to meet your underlying need. If they just can't help, don't give up. Ask someone else. Or figure out some creative solution. Once you've identified an important self-care need, keep looking for a way to get that need met. Remember that taking care of yourself makes you a calmer, happier, better parent! And, you are also modeling for your children the importance of caring for your own needs.

### Make a commitment to self care

Once a day, spend one minute deciding what you are going to do for yourself that day. Start small – promise yourself just 15 minutes a day. Do something simple that makes you feel good. Over time, with experimentation, you'll find more options, and more ways of getting some of your needs met.

You'll soon see the rewards (for yourself, and for your family) of a little bit of "me time."

### Resources:

For support with parenting challenges, call the Family Help Line 1-800-932-HOPE

Stress management tips: [www.parenttrust.org/for-families/parenting-advice/parenting-tips/tips-stress-management/](http://www.parenttrust.org/for-families/parenting-advice/parenting-tips/tips-stress-management/)

Check out any of Jennifer Louden's books, like The Woman's Comfort Book. Or The Mother's Guide to Self-Renewal by Trudeau and Guzman.

10 Self Care Ideas: [www.beliefnet.com/Love-Family/Parenting/2009/03/Self-Care-Tips-for-Moms.aspx](http://www.beliefnet.com/Love-Family/Parenting/2009/03/Self-Care-Tips-for-Moms.aspx)

Lots of great articles at [www.parentmap.com/finding-balance/parent-life/finding-balance](http://www.parentmap.com/finding-balance/parent-life/finding-balance)