

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, and “then assist small children.” Think of this good advice as a metaphor 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 make sure that you’re also taking care of yourself! Take a few whiffs of parenting “oxygen” now and then to rejuvenate yourself. Here are some things that PEPS members have told us they do to “keep your batteries charged”. Some take advanced planning or a big chunk of time, but some you can do in just minutes! Read through these, and see if they inspire you with any ideas for nurturing yourself.

Ideas for meeting physical needs:

- Exercise, on your own and as a family – even a short walk, or a daily stretch feels good
- Sleep (as much as you can), and nap when your child naps
- Eat right: food affects mood, so try to eat as wholesomely as possible, maybe cutting down on excess sugar, which can drain energy. (Feel free to have special treats, though!)
- Get or give a massage. Connect physically with your partner.
- Take a hot shower, or a long bath
- Have a cup of a soothing drink (warm milk, chamomile tea, hot chocolate)
- Go for a long walk outdoors - on your own, or with your child in a sling or stroller
- Dress up – looking good can help you feel good

Ideas for meeting emotional and social needs:

- Spend time with friends each week; Spend time alone each day
- Prioritize the activities that make you happy
- Be creative / flexible about social activities you can work around your child’s needs
- Schedule time each day to talk to another adult; connect with other new parents
- Allow yourself to cry
- Find things that make you laugh
- Find a way to have a weekly date with your partner
- Say no to extra responsibilities

Ideas for meeting intellectual or artistic needs:

- Take your child to the library, but pick up something for yourself too while you’re there
- Listen to radio programs, audio books, or podcasts while you drive or do housework.
- If your child is doing an art project, sit down and create your own art!
- Write – stories, a blog, a personal journal – get your thoughts out on paper or screen
- While you nurse or pump, watch documentaries on TV, or on DVD from the library or Netflix
- Play a few songs on a musical instrument
- Return to old hobbies you may not have pursued since your baby’s birth

Ideas for meeting spiritual needs:

- Go to religious services
- Spend time outdoors
- Meditate or pray each morning, or each evening
- Do volunteer work or help out others spontaneously
- Contribute to causes you believe in
- Write in a journal – reflect on your new life

Finding Time to Take Care of Your Own Needs

Parenting a baby or toddler is incredibly hard work. It can challenge you in ways you've never been challenged before. You are responsible for all of your child's needs 24/7, yet you may not fully understand exactly what those needs are! It's easy to feel like a failure when your baby is crying non-stop, or your toddler is screaming in frustration, and you've run out of ideas for how to help her. Taking care of a young child can be so all-encompassing that you have very little time to take care of yourself, whether you're a stay-at-home parent or a working parent. Even simple tasks like eating and showering get neglected, simple errands become infinitely more complicated, and going out on a date with your partner may seem an insurmountable challenge.

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

Giving Yourself Permission to Take Care of Your Needs

The first big step is to acknowledge that you do still have your own individual needs and that you do have the right to sometimes be "selfish" and put your own needs first. In the end, this will help you be a more relaxed, happier, more energized parent, which leads to happier kids.

Let go of your own internal "rules" for how good parents "should" act. Forgive yourself for imperfections, and bad days. Try not to get too caught up in worries about whether your baby will "always" need so much, or whether if you do something wrong now, your baby will "never" do well. Focus only on what to do in the moment to help keep everyone healthy and happy.

Working with Baby's Schedule and Baby's Needs

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

Babies and toddlers can spend a lot of their time breastfeeding, bottle-feeding or eating finger foods. Try and think of what you could do during that time (what's both physically and mentally possible), and be ready – for example, set up some "nursing stations" in the spots where you find yourself hanging out, stocked with magazines, writing supplies, or TV remote controls. Keep your phone nearby – you can speaker phone with friends while your baby feeds.

Babies and toddlers like to be held a lot and like to be on the move. What can you do to make that enjoyable for yourself? Ideas include going for walks outside, dancing with your baby, sitting on an exercise ball near the TV and bouncing the baby, and strolling the mall. If your child loves car rides, keep some of your favorite CD's and books on tape in the car to entertain you both. If your child always falls asleep in the car, and you find yourself parked with a sleeper, stash a kit of things in your car (a notebook for making lists, pencils, a book, some notecards) to do while your baby snoozes.

Do you miss exercising? Lots of health clubs have drop-in child care for toddlers, which allow you to get a short break. Or, if your baby still fits in an infant car seat, try taking baby in a car seat to a health club with lots of white noise in the background... baby may sleep while you work out. You may be able to join a water aerobics class: set baby's car seat a few feet from the pool so you can hear her if she wakes up... babies often sleep the full time because of all the white noise of the water splashing. Speaking of white noise.... If you want a nice long shower, try setting up the bouncy seat or swing in the bathroom, or just lay baby on his changing pad on the floor while you shower. Sometimes the white noise of the shower and the fan may help him sleep while you relax.

Did you use to love going out to dinner with friends, but now find that evening is an awful time for baby? Try planning a workday lunch, coffee break, or Sunday brunch with friends at a time when your baby will likely enjoy it too. Have you found that your toddler simply can't sit still and behave at a restaurant? There are a few restaurants and coffee shops in town with fenced-off play areas for toddlers that allow them to play while you socialize. Or... consider picking up a friend, driving through a drive-through and sitting in the car, eating and talking while your child naps in her car seat.

What about middle-of-the-night wakeups? Some moms recommend that if you're up at 2:00 am, do

something that you like to do, like surf the internet while baby nurses. (However, others say that if you want baby to learn the difference between night and day, you should keep night-time wakeups quiet and dark. Do whatever helps you feel better.)

Some parents have told us that in the early weeks with their babies, they were exhausted and overwhelmed because they felt like they couldn't take a shower, or go to the bathroom, or anything because their baby would cry. Then, they report that they came to terms with the idea that it was OK to leave their baby alone in a crib or playpen for 5 – 10 minutes while they took care of some of their own basic needs. They say that yes, sometimes the baby would cry for the whole 5 – 10 minutes, but sometimes not. And they then had more energy and attention to care for the baby, knowing that their own needs had been met.

5 minute self-care ideas

Have a plan for quick little treats you can give yourself when your child is settled for a moment. Make a list of these fun ideas and post it somewhere you'll see it when you can take advantage of one. Don't think of *jobs* for your to-do list – think of things that serve only to make you happy.

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

Is there something you would *love* to do, but just can't figure out how to make it happen? If so, start making a plan. First, figure out *why* you want that thing, and what part of it is most important to you (e.g. 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? Well, then the point is to be child-free, and it doesn't matter much what you do!)

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.

Make a commitment to self care

Once a day, spend one minute deciding what you are going to do for yourself that day. Or, as you think of 'me time' ideas throughout the day, jot them down, so that if you find yourself with some unexpected time on your hands, you have ideas at the ready. 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
Read stress management tips for parents: 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

Lots of great articles at www.parentmap.com/finding-balance/parent-life/finding-balance

Asking for Support with Self-Care

Some parents have a hard time ever asking for help. Even if friends or family members offer to help or even if they could hire professional help, they feel bad asking anyone else to care for their child. Remember that when someone else is caring for your child, not only are you getting a break, your child is having a learning experience, discovering what makes people different from each other, and how different people meet their needs.

Other parents will ask their partner or other people to take care of the baby while they do things they *have* to do, like grocery shopping or doctor's appointments, but they feel guilty asking for help just so they can do something "selfish" that they want to do, like meeting a friend for coffee, or just taking a morning off. Remember: it's OK to ask for help getting your desires met as well as your needs!

Figuring Out What You 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", and "why don't you." Think about all the things you find yourself "longing" for, even if they don't make sense to you. (Have you found yourself thinking: "If I could just have fifteen free minutes..." What have you been thinking you would do with that time if you had it?)

Brainstorm a list of things you have been wanting. When you've collected a list of complaints and/or longings, get a clean piece of paper. Try to prioritize a list of what would *most* help you to feel nurtured and re-energized. Try to be as concrete as possible about your ideas.

Asking for Help

Once you have an idea for what you need, go to your helper (your partner, friend, family member, etc.) and let them know that you could use their support.

When you ask for help, make a specific request. Try to make sure it's something that is actually possible for them to do for you.

If they say that they can't do that specific thing for you, but they do want to help, then work together to come up with a solution. (For example: "I can't help you on a Tuesday morning... but I could definitely help out on a Saturday afternoon – could that work?") Help them understand what's important to you – what you most need – and then figure out how to make something happen that meets your goals. Ask them for other ideas for ways to meet your underlying need. ("I hear it's hard for you to babysit my child when you're already busy with your own... do you have any recommendations for babysitters?")

What If the First Person You Ask Turns Down Your Request?

Sometimes, no matter how clearly you state your needs, and no matter how simple your request seems to you, someone will turn it down. Or the situation changes and the plan needs to change.

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.