

Supporting parents and carers to look after themselves

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Simon's story



Simon was a confident, talkative boy who usually loved going to preschool. However, at a time when his parents were under a lot of stress Simon would cry when he arrived at preschool and wouldn't let go of his mum when it was time for her to leave. At home he started playing rough games where he would punch and kick his toys, not listening to his mum or sleeping in his own bed. When Simon's parents sat down to talk about his behaviour, they thought it may be a reaction to the tension in their relationship and the silence between them at home. After considering the effects on Simon, his parents decided to work on looking after themselves and their relationship. They tried to make sure they were eating healthily and exercising. They tried to talk to each other about how they were feeling and also gave each other space to relax each day. Simon's parents also explained to him in simple words what was causing their stress and how they were dealing with it. They hoped that this would help reduce their tension and the negative effects on Simon.



Family protective and risk factors: The influence on children

There are many protective and risk factors that influence people's mental health and wellbeing. Building on protective factors and reducing risk factors can prevent mental health difficulties. Although some risk factors cannot be changed, when parents and carers look after themselves, by having a healthy lifestyle and good family relationships, they are able to draw on their protective factors and reduce their exposure to risk factors. Protective factors are strengths that reduce the chance people will experience mental health difficulties. Protective factors also help people to have positive mental health and wellbeing even though risk factors may be around. For example, positive relationships between families and early childhood staff support children's achievement even if there are other risk factors present.

Examples of family protective factors are:

- ▶ strong and stable family relationships (e.g., consistent, caring relationships)
- ▶ supportive parenting or caregiving (e.g., being available to listen to and talk to children)
- ▶ strong family values (e.g., having a shared understanding of doing the right thing by others)
- ▶ consistency in routines and limits (e.g., responding the same way to children's behaviour).

For more information on risk and protective factors, refer to *Component 4: Helping children who are experiencing mental health difficulties 'Risk and protective factors for children's mental health'*.

When parents and carers look after themselves, their children, and their family environment, the factors that put themselves and their children at risk of developing mental health difficulties are reduced. Also, when families look after themselves and accept support to manage difficulties, it can help them address any concerns they have early (e.g., stress in managing parenting). Addressing concerns when they are first noticed also helps to improve children's mental health.

Risk factors are things that can increase the chance of mental health difficulties developing. An example might be a stressful event, like having a child start preschool, which challenges a person's emotional wellbeing. Sometimes risk factors can be specific events (such as a death in the family), sometimes they can be things that happen over time (such as having a family member with an illness) and often they are linked. When people are exposed to many risk factors, it increases their chances of experiencing mental health difficulties.

Examples of family risk factors are:

- ▶ family conflict, instability or separation
- ▶ inconsistent parenting by parents or carers
- ▶ parents or carers experiencing mental health difficulties or substance abuse
- ▶ family members with a serious illness or disability
- ▶ having financial difficulties.

Not all people who face risk factors develop mental health difficulties. A sense of connection to others, supportive relationships and personal resources reduces the impact of risk factors.

Looking after parents and carers

Looking after parents' and carers' mental and physical health is just as important as looking after children's. When parents and carers look after themselves and feel supported, they are more able to provide their children with the best care they can. Having healthy parents and carers is also good for children's mental health and wellbeing. When parents and carers are more relaxed and less stressed, they are more able to relate to their children, make good decisions and model appropriate responses.

At the heart of being healthy is:

- ▶ eating well
- ▶ exercising regularly
- ▶ building and maintaining positive relationships
- ▶ developing or maintaining personal interests.

A healthy diet creates a nourished body and mind and sustains high performance in everyday life. It also reduces the risk of getting sick. A healthy diet includes eating a balanced amount of fruit, vegetables, breads and pastas, eating breakfast every day and drinking plenty of water. Eating good quality food and exercising regularly are two ways parents and carers can look after themselves. Being physically active regularly increases energy levels, reduces stress and promotes health. A casual way of including exercise into a family's routine can be for parents or carers to go for a walk or swim with their child or play an energetic game together. Playing with children helps parents and carers develop a close relationship with them. Children benefit from close relationships with adults who they can trust and share fun times with.

It is also good for parents and carers to build positive relationships with other adults. Experiencing positive relationships with other adults provides support from people who are trusted, respected and safe. Children benefit when they see their parents and carers interacting positively with other adults. By watching adults, children learn skills like communicating effectively, relating well to others and how to build and maintain healthy relationships. Parents and carers who maintain personal interests also provide children with a model for a balanced life. When parents and carers have time to relax and do things they enjoy, this allows them to be happier and less stressed when with their family.

Healthy choices by adults allow for a healthy self and healthy child.



Parents and carers looking after their relationships

Looking after a relationship takes time and effort. Supportive relationships with significant people in parents' and carers' lives are important for children. These relationships may be with partners, friends, family members or early childhood services. Below are some suggestions that may help parents and carers to build and maintain relationships.

- ▶ Openly, respectfully and regularly communicate feelings.
- ▶ Accept support when trying something new. Offer it to others if you can.
- ▶ Pay attention to and act on the needs of others (e.g., provide space for your partner to relax if they are stressed).
- ▶ Be aware of your own needs within the relationship (e.g., make time to do something you enjoy, talk about your need for personal space).
- ▶ Try to understand and respect others' beliefs and values.
- ▶ Work together when making important decisions.

When people in relationships show these qualities, they nurture one another. When parents and carers feel nurtured, they are able to feel more confident and comfortable in their role as a caregiver and they may find that their relationship grows stronger and they work together as an effective team. This enables parents and carers to provide a positive environment for raising children.

Parents and carers who look after themselves are looking after their children too

Parents and carers can often forget to look after themselves as their priority is their children. It is important however for parents and carers to make sure they look after their own health and wellbeing as well as their child's. Some things parents and carers can do to look after themselves are explained in the highlighted boxes following. Even trying one or two of these things could make a big difference to parents' and carers' health and wellbeing.



Parents and carers with babies (birth to around 18 months)

The relationships parents and carers have (e.g., with their partner) can change when a child arrives. Parents and carers with newborn babies have experienced a major event in their lives. It can take time before they return to the energy levels they had before their baby arrived and it is important parents and carers allow themselves time to recover.

Giving birth can have a big physical impact on mothers. Their body may take time to recover in ways like returning to their usual weight, energy levels and generally feeling themselves. The length of time this recovery takes can vary between women and often depends on the support they have. For example, mothers can recover faster if they are supported by the people around them (like their partner, family or friends). Mothers acknowledging changes in their body and being realistic about what they are now able to do will also help their recovery. Parents and carers invest a huge amount of energy looking after a totally dependent baby. Realistic expectations about what can get done when caring for a baby (e.g., doing only one or two jobs a day or catching up with friends) can help parents and carers feel more in control and happier. Acknowledging life will now be different (e.g., more interruptions, less sleep, trying to balance work and family life) can help parents and carers nurture themselves and their important relationships, and in turn nurture their baby. Also, allowing each partner time to rest means both parents and carers are able to provide the best care to their baby that they can.

Suggestions for looking after parents or carers when they have a baby:

- ▶ Ask for help if you need it and accept it when it is offered.
- ▶ Rest, exercise and have time out—even if it is just for a short time (e.g., going for a walk).
- ▶ Have a health check by your doctor after six to eight weeks of your baby's arrival to ensure you are recovering and to address any concerns early.
- ▶ Discuss any concerns you have about your baby with friends, family or health professionals.
- ▶ Spend time with your partner or a friend.
- ▶ Help your partner around the house or with the shopping.
- ▶ Regularly do things you enjoy.
- ▶ Have a sleep when your baby is sleeping.
- ▶ Eat well.
- ▶ Relax by listening to music, watching a movie, reading a book or ringing someone for a chat.

Parents and carers with toddlers (around 18 months to three years)

Parents' and carers' lifestyles continually change, particularly when their babies develop into toddlers. Throughout toddlerhood children develop and practice new skills (e.g., walking and feeding themselves). As toddlers become more self-aware and independent, parents and carers may find themselves doing multiple things at once. They may need to organise their time between keeping their child safe, guiding developing behaviours and following their child's lead. Supporting children to explore the world safely, making sure that they are eating and sleeping well and establishing boundaries to assist self-control may have parents rushing around a lot, especially if they also have other children in their care. This can lead to increased stress and lower levels of energy, which can leave a person feeling exhausted. When parents and carers manage their stress, they are able to slow down and appreciate time with their toddler which is rewarding and benefits both themselves and their child. This in itself can assist parents and carers to manage stress. Some ways of managing stress as a parent or carer with a toddler may be to:

- ▶ Try and be patient with toddlers and understand their world.
- ▶ Be aware of your stress and the ways in which this may impact on your child.
- ▶ Enjoy moments with toddlers, sometimes other tasks can wait.
- ▶ Try and set appropriate limits for toddlers.
- ▶ Help toddlers explore the world safely and be a place for them to return to for comfort.
- ▶ Allow yourself to say no when people ask you to do things if you are already too committed.
- ▶ Reflect on how you communicate with your child and how flexible you are with routines, limits and discipline.
- ▶ Ensure parents or carers provide consistent rules and boundaries.

It can be hard to balance everything in life when raising a toddler. Sometimes it helps to take a step back and look at the bigger picture rather than focussing on the difficulties that might be happening in the here and now.



Zahra's story



Gabrielle thought she would take her one and a half year old daughter, Zahra, to the park for a short time before doing some jobs down the street and getting home to make phone calls. When Gabrielle and Zahra walked to the park together, Zahra kept stopping to look at things like flowers and small leaves beside the footpath. She would bend her legs to get close enough to see and touch things she was interested in. When her mum would call out to encourage her to hurry Zahra would grab the leaves and flowers and keep walking. When Zahra arrived at the park she continued squatting and inspecting nature. Gabrielle decided to think about her jobs when she and Zahra got home and sat down beside Zahra to look at the grass. Gabrielle realised that the most important thing at that point was to enjoy a moment with Zahra. Gabrielle decided that going to the park was helpful for looking after herself as a parent and that she felt relaxed to be able to share time with her daughter.

Parents and carers with preschoolers (around three to five years)

Starting preschool can be a significant milestone for children and their families, even if they have already been attending an early childhood service. While parents and carers often feel proud of their child when they start preschool, many also feel anxious about how their child might cope and sad that they will not be at home with them as much anymore (particularly if it is their youngest child). To make starting preschool easier on everyone, it is important for parents and carers to look after themselves and to support their child through this transition.

Things that may help parents and carers look after themselves when their child goes to preschool:

- ▶ Remember there are many positive things about children attending preschool. For example, children have the chance to learn new skills, become more independent and make new friends when they attend preschool. Parents and carers also often have more time to invest in themselves when their child starts preschool.
- ▶ Place some photos around the house of you and your child having fun.
- ▶ Try not to feel guilty about leaving your child in the care of others. Children benefit from attending preschool and early childhood services have well trained staff and are safe environments.
- ▶ Keep in touch with other parents or carers from the early childhood service, this is a great way to build a support network of people who understand what it is like to have a child starting preschool.

For healthy development children need to receive effective care and have positive relationships with their caregivers.

Supportive relationships promote self-care

All journeys through parenthood will be different. It is very important all parents and carers have access to the support of family, friends and early childhood professionals to help them on this journey. Parents and carers benefit from having supportive relationships with other adults in many ways. For example, being supported by other people can inspire parents and carers to make healthy lifestyle decisions. Supportive relationships act as a barrier to stress. Parents and carers who know they have reliable support available to them react more positively to stressful events than those who do not. For example, if a parent or carer has concerns about their child, they manage much better when they have support, access to information about their concern and a referral to see a mental health professional when it is required. Such support might be provided by a staff member at their early childhood service.

In summary, support for parents and carers is helpful because it means they:

- ▶ work with others to find solutions
- ▶ receive help to understand and act on any concerns about their child
- ▶ have an opportunity to share their stress
- ▶ receive encouragement.

Accessing support in the community

For parents and carers, early childhood services are an ideal place to build relationships with other families. Early childhood staff are in a position to build relationships with the families at their service and may be able to provide information on topics like childhood development and mental health in early childhood, details of local parenting groups or hold information sessions on specific topics. Parents and carers can use this information and these resources to make decisions for their children. Parents and carers may also find the service is a good place to connect and build relationships with other families who may be experiencing similar things as them. For example, there might be more new fathers or families with children the same age as theirs. Getting to know other families provides an opportunity to build friendships, and by supporting each other, cope in challenging times and share children's achievements and milestones.





Recognising stress

Recognising signs of stress is an important part of parents and carers looking after themselves. Stress is the body's reaction to change or overload. This reaction can be experienced physically and mentally. Stress may be the result of changes or overloads related to work, family, relationships or in fact, any event that requires a person to respond physically, mentally or emotionally.

Signs of stress include:

- ▶ difficulty sleeping
- ▶ tiredness
- ▶ poor concentration
- ▶ over-reacting to small things
- ▶ poor appetite
- ▶ sweating or shaking
- ▶ shortness of breath
- ▶ headaches
- ▶ mood swings
- ▶ irritability and frustration
- ▶ low levels of motivation.

People feel the effects of stress differently. For example, having a child start preschool maybe very stressful for one parent or carer, but not as stressful for another. However, everyone experiences stress sometime; it is a fact of life. Stress that occurs in small amounts can create energy, alertness and motivation so people can respond to life's demands. When stress reactions are severe; occur frequently; or over a long period of time it can become a problem. Stress can be managed so it is kept at a useful level rather than a harmful one. This requires awareness and an understanding of stress. When parents and carers do things to help them manage their stress, it is easier to make healthy life decisions for themselves and their children.

Causes of stress and strategies to reduce it

There are many reasons people experience stress. One of the most common reasons is sudden or unexpected change. Even changes that are normal and are not sudden (e.g., a child beginning toilet training) can be stressful. Changes can also happen in many parts of a person's life at the same time. For example, changes to a person's physical environment (e.g., moving house, starting a new job), social environment (e.g., a new baby in the family, feeling culturally isolated after moving to a new place) or physical appearance (e.g., ageing or pregnancy).

Just like the many causes of stress, there are many things parents and carers can do to ease it. Some of strategies are outlined below. Parents and carers might like to try a couple of these strategies and may find one or two that work best for them.

Practising relaxation

Relaxation skills can help release both physical and emotional tension. Some ways to relax include: deep breathing, tensing and then releasing muscles or closing your eyes and imagining a calm place. When the muscles in people's bodies are eased they stop a panic message from going to the brain, this allows feelings of physical and mental calmness. When these techniques are practised over time it helps to develop skills for coping with stressful events.

Reflecting on thoughts

The way people make sense of stressful events can influence their reaction to them. Sometimes it can feel as though stress is overwhelming. When people are able to take a step back from their stress, it allows them to think the situation through, feel more in control and able to cope. This can be an important step in finding a way to cope with stress. For example, when thoughts become overwhelming, 'I just cannot go on dealing with my child's behaviour any more', they can become linked to unhealthy reactions to stress and this ultimately lowers the ability to make decisions. After taking some time, a parent or carer might decide to talk to early childhood service staff or a health professional about their concerns.

Developing problem solving skills

It can be helpful to have a flexible way of dealing with stress. When people feel in control of a situation, they have less chance of feeling overwhelmed by it. To do this, it helps to think of strategies that have worked well in similar situations as well as potential new solutions.

Making healthy choices

Decisions about many things in life can impact on people's mental health and wellbeing. When people are under stress their ability to make decisions can be weakened. In times of stress, it is important to try and approach decisions calmly. It can be good to think of the pros and cons (both short-term and long-term) of a particular option and discuss them with someone else before making a big decision. Support from another person provides another perspective, and may help with decision making.

Stress can be managed so it is kept at a useful level.

It is not stress itself, but adults' reactions to stress, that influence children.

Managing stress benefits children

Being stressed over a long time can increase the risk of developing both physical and mental health difficulties. This can impact on the quality of parenting or caregiving, which can then impact on children's development. Parents and carers who look after themselves and their stress are able to provide the best care for their children. They are able to be more responsive, fun and open with their children. This helps children feel secure, relaxed and develop an understanding of how to manage life's difficulties. When children are raised by parents and carers who respond to life's challenges in a healthy and calm way, they have the chance to enjoy their childhood experiences and are more able to get through stressful times.



Bouncing back after tough times

Being able to overcome challenges, by thinking positively, managing stress and having a realistic outlook on life, helps to strengthen mental health and wellbeing and increases the ability to cope with difficulties. This is known as resilience. Skills that can help parents and carers build resilience are:

- ▶ the ability to recognise and manage emotions
- ▶ good communication skills
- ▶ the ability to solve problems
- ▶ accepting responsibility for actions and mistakes
- ▶ good decision making skills
- ▶ the ability to set and achieve goals
- ▶ having empathy for others
- ▶ being willing to seek help when needed
- ▶ having a positive, reflective outlook on life
- ▶ keeping a sense of humour.

As people take care of themselves and maintain supportive relationships, these skills can be developed and their overall health and wellbeing is boosted. With these skills, people can be optimistic in understanding that even though there are challenging times in life, they have the skills and abilities needed to cope. Parents and carers respond best to life's challenges when they have supportive relationships with family, friends, early childhood staff and the community, and possess good personal social and emotional skills. In difficult situations resilient parents and carers can draw on both their own skills and flexibility and the support of others to help them cope. Resilient parents and carers are more likely to think and feel positively, which increases their ability to cope with challenges. Parents' and carers' resilience in life helps them to contribute to a healthy, happy child.

One way children learn to cope is by watching what their parents and carers do to handle stress and difficult situations.

An example of bouncing back: Coping with family separation

Family separation can be stressful and can affect individuals differently. For parents and carers, separation signals the end of the relationship with their primary partner. Grief can be a natural feeling when families are going through a separation. Parents and carers need to look after themselves at this time to help reassure and support their children to adjust to the separation. When this happens, children cope better with change and are more likely to recover without long-term negative effects.

Some things for parents and carers to consider when looking after themselves during family separation are:

- ▶ Strong feelings and mood swings are part of a normal reaction when families separate.
- ▶ Allow time to come to terms with feelings of loss and grief
- ▶ Do not be surprised if the demands of parenting or caregiving seem more difficult when you are under stress. Make allowances for yourself and develop strategies to help you cope
- ▶ Look for support from family, friends and early childhood service staff. Professional support can also be helpful for dealing with difficult feelings and finding ways to cope.



Looking after parents and carers helps children cope with separation

Children can be affected by the way their parents or carers respond to the separation with their partner. While most children continue their relationship with their parents or carers, these relationships may be affected by changes to their lifestyle and the way they feeling. Sometimes children may talk about their feelings, but young children more often show it in their behaviour. For example, some children may become anxious and want to stay close to their parents or carers, after the family has separated. Other children may feel angry and express this by getting into conflict. These are reactions to the sense of loss and powerlessness most children feel when their families separate. If there is ongoing conflict between parents or carers, this can affect children's wellbeing. This can mean children may have more difficulty for coping and returning to their usual routines. When parents or carers access support, they tend to manage the stress of separation better. When parents and carers cope effectively with separation it also helps children to manage the change better.



This resource and further information on the national KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative is available to download at www.kidsmatter.edu.au. The KidsMatter Early Childhood team also welcomes your feedback which can be submitted through the website.



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