

# Keys to Great Parenting

*Fun and Learning with Your Baby or Toddler*

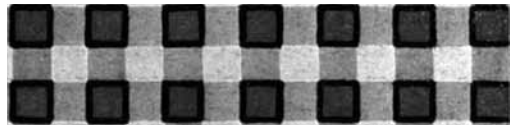


Cooperative Extension Service  
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# Care for Yourself

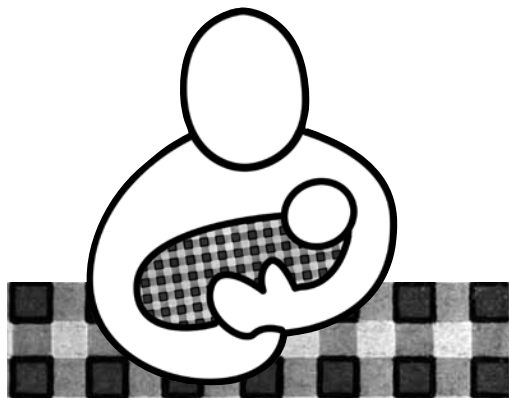
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**N**obody can take your place in your child's eyes. You are your child's first and most important teacher! One of the best ways you can teach is by example, because your baby or toddler takes in everything you say and do.

That is why this key—**Care for Yourself**—is so essential. When you take good care of yourself, you are more likely to be happy and loving. Your child feels it in the sound of your voice, your posture, and the expressions on your face and thrives on it.

"How can I care for myself when I have so much to do?" you might ask. Parents of babies and toddlers often feel tired and frazzled. They worry about doing everything exactly right. It is important to keep in mind that *doing* well starts with *being* well. You can learn to reduce stress and nurture yourself. Both you and your child will reap the benefits.

Understanding how much your well-being influences your child is awesome—even scary! Here is the good news: **You do not have to be perfect.** No one is. Try some of the following ideas to help keep your life in balance.



## Share Your Feelings

Being a parent can be exciting and satisfying. It also can be lonely and confusing. You need support—at least one other person who understands—someone with whom you can share your thoughts and feelings. It should be someone who listens well, cares about you, and offers helpful suggestions.

- Your support can be a trusted friend or relative, a caring minister or other professional, or people in a parenting education class. If it is hard for you to get out of the house, a trained home visitor may be just what you need. Your local Cooperative Extension Service office may be able to help you find home visitors or parenting classes.



## Enjoy Time of Your Own

Make time to do what you like best. Enjoy a hobby, reading, or journal writing. Talking with a friend on the phone and walking in the great outdoors also are good ways to recharge your batteries.

- Search for a sitter or offer to exchange child care with a neighbor, friend, or relative. For lists of caregivers, check with a resource and referral agency for child care, churches or other faith communities, or social service agencies. When you have found good child care, enjoy some favorite activities, either with friends or by yourself.

## Keep a Sense of Humor

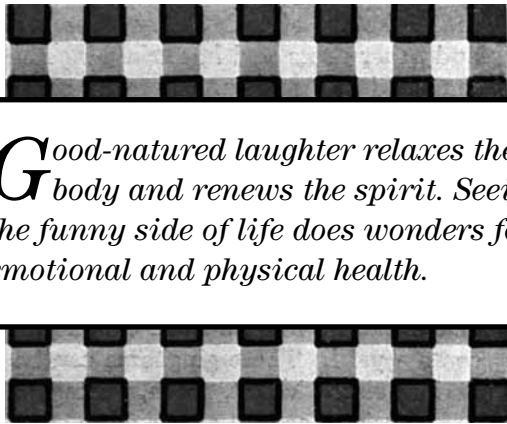
Good-natured laughter relaxes the body and renews the spirit. Seeing the funny side of life does wonders for emotional and physical health.

- To give your funny bone a workout, read the newspaper comics or enjoy fun-loving friends. Take in a humorous television or radio program. Most of all, have fun playing with your baby or toddler. Children are experts at having a great time, especially when they know that you appreciate them!

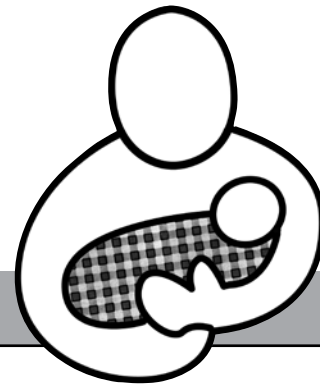
## Celebrate What You Do Well

Notice and celebrate when you do something well. It does not have to be a major accomplishment. Maybe you learned something new about parenting; maybe you just completed something that was difficult. Congratulations!

- Give yourself a pat on the back for even small successes. You might simply say to yourself, "Hey, look at that! When I gave Tony his favorite truck, he stopped fussing with Jason. I handled that really well!" You might also call a friend and share your good news.



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*Take time to rest away from your baby. Your child deserves the best care you can give, and sometimes that means you first must regain your energy.*

## Nourish Your Body

Enjoy eating healthy foods that appeal to you. Eating nutritious foods in moderate amounts helps you to be strong and energetic. It also is a great example for your child.

Your child's nutritional needs may differ from yours, so talk to her doctor about what she needs for good health.

If you are pregnant, visit your health-care provider regularly and follow any dietary instructions you are given. Remember that women of childbearing age need 400 micrograms of folic acid every day. This reduces the chance of having a baby with a birth defect of the brain or spinal cord, such as spina bifida.

- Base your diet on whole grain bread, pasta, cereals, and lots of fruits and vegetables. Choose non-fat milk and milk products often. Eat only small amounts of fats and sweets. Remember to drink lots of caffeine-free beverages, preferably water. You need at least six full glasses every day. Your county Cooperative Extension Service office is a great source of nutrition information.

## Stay Away from Harmful Influences

According to recent studies, smoking or use of alcohol or drugs while you are pregnant may cause low birth weight, birth defects, and serious behavior and learning problems in your baby. Do not allow smoking around your baby, toddler, or even your young child, because breathing second-hand smoke is dangerous to a young one's health.



Do your best to avoid other potentially harmful influences such as violence on television, including abusive behavior such as hitting, yelling, or putting down another person.

- If you want to reduce harmful influences in your life, seek help from a friend or professional you trust. Your local health department, Cooperative Extension Service office, family resource center, or faith community are good places to contact. It is never too late to make positive changes in your life.

## Get Plenty of Sleep

How do you feel when you get a good night's sleep? Most people feel calm, energetic, and more cheerful. Getting enough sleep helps you to better solve problems and to handle your children when they are a challenge. If you are tired all the time it can make you short tempered, forgetful, clumsy, and prone to poor judgment. The peace and harmony that is so important for the well-being of your baby or toddler will be damaged.

- *Daytime naps.* With a new baby, night feedings are necessary. Parents are going to lose sleep. Taking a nap during your baby's daytime sleeping hours or taking turns with another adult for the night feedings are ways to make up for lost sleep at night.
- *Extra rest on weekends.* If you are a working parent, daytime naps may not be an option. Plan for extra rest on the weekends. Ask a spouse or friend to give you some breaks.

Do not be too hard on yourself; try not to feel guilty about taking time to rest away from your baby. Your child deserves the best care you can give, and sometimes that means you first must regain your energy.

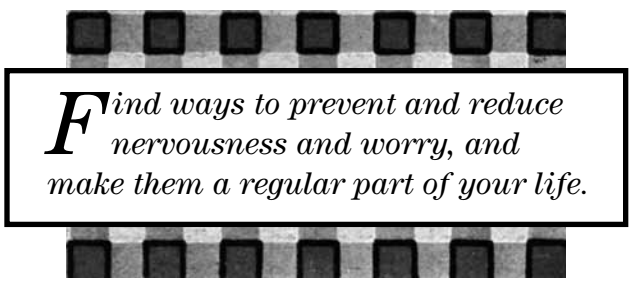
- *Sleeping plan.* Develop a sleeping schedule for your child, yourself, and other family members. A sleeping plan prevents problems and arguments. A predictable routine makes children feel secure. Plan enjoyable routines leading up to bedtime, such as bathing, story reading, or other calming activities.

## Enjoy Physical Activity

Exercise is wonderful for your overall well-being, and it does not necessarily need to be strenuous. For example, walking 20 to 30 minutes three or more times a week is a great way to exercise. Even brief periods of activity during the day, such as climbing stairs, dancing, playing catch, washing windows, gardening, or joining your toddler as he explores the out-of-doors, add up to healthy benefits.

- Put on some comfortable shoes and find a safe, pleasant place to walk, such as a local park. Invite a friend to go with you, if you like. When weather allows, why not take your little one along in a stroller? Try to set aside a half hour three times a week for your walks. Enjoy other physical activities as well.





*Find ways to prevent and reduce nervousness and worry, and make them a regular part of your life.*

## Keep Your Adult Relationships Healthy

Little ones are quick to pick up on adult moods. If arguments and fights often take place in your home, your baby or toddler is likely to feel disturbed, distrustful, even badly frightened. These feelings interfere with your child's brain growth and cause learning and behavior problems. If you and your partner get along well, your child will develop a sense of trust, and her brain will grow in healthy ways.

- Practice courtesy and kindness, and learn to resolve conflicts peacefully. If you have conflicts in your household, resolve the problems that cause them. Your child needs to know that you can restore peace and happiness. Do not hesitate to seek help from trusted friends, family counselors, or organizations such as Parents Anonymous.

## Recognize and Manage Stress

Stress and tension increase when people are worried, going through big changes, or have too many demands on their time and energy. Babies and toddlers can sense stress and become anxious or upset, and too much anxiety can interfere with their brain development.

Be on the lookout for signals that you are becoming more tense, such as a dull headache, feelings of hopelessness and discouragement, an urge to cry, an irritable reply, or muscle tightness in your stomach, neck, or back. With practice, you can recognize the tension as soon as it starts to build and deal with it before it grows into a monster.

What helps you stay calm, alert, and full of energy? Find ways to reduce nervousness and worry. Make your worry-reducers a regular part of your life. Here are a few relaxation exercises you may find helpful:

- Relax the various parts of your body by tensing the muscles in one area, such as your face, neck, back, arms, hands, or legs. After tensing one part of the body while counting slowly to four, completely relax that area. Then tense another part, hold for a count of four, and relax. Do this sitting, standing, lying down, or in a hot bath until your whole body is very relaxed.
- Quietly sit, stand, or lie down. Keep your eyes open and focus on something around you that you find pleasant and interesting. Try to shut everything else out of your mind. Breathe slowly and deeply.
- Practice "belly breathing." (Most babies are experts at this.) As you slowly breathe in, let your belly expand like a balloon. As you slowly breathe out, let your belly slowly sink in. Belly breathing is nature's way; it calms and energizes. Make it a habit.
- Lie on the floor with your feet up on a chair. Place a cool washcloth on your face and think of the most peaceful scene you can imagine. Stay in position and keep the scene in your mind for at least five minutes.

Soon after giving birth, occasional feelings of sadness, gloom, and discouragement are common for many mothers. This depression is due primarily to hormone changes. New fathers may also feel depressed because of the changes in their lives. These feelings usually go away in a few days. Some of the suggestions offered in this brochure may help lift blue moods. However, if your depression is severe and continues for more than two weeks, seek professional counseling. Long-term depression is harmful to you and to the parent-child relationship.

## Live in the Present

To worry less, relax and concentrate fully on what you are doing right now, living in the present moment as much as possible. The past cannot be changed; let it go. Plan for the future but try not to worry about it. Another way to cut down on worry is to handle time wisely. Give yourself enough minutes or hours to get jobs done without rushing.

- Most young children are experts at living in the moment. Notice how your young baby totally focuses on the movements of her mobile or the family pet. Watch how your toddler carefully works at putting one block on top of another. Like your child, if you give your full attention to the present moment, you will enjoy life more.



## Focus on the Positive

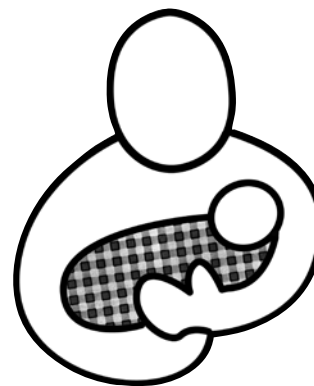
A positive attitude has many benefits. The more you practice being positive, the better at it you become.

- Choose to see the positive in your child, in life, and in other people. Make cheerfulness and optimism a habit. Remember your many blessings often. Welcome challenges as chances for learning and growing.

## Keep Learning and Exploring

It is fun to play with ideas, dream big, and step into fresh adventures! Explore new information, skills, and possibilities that interest you.

- Take a trip to the public library, where you can read newspapers and magazines or check out a book, CD, or video. Surf the Internet and download fascinating facts. Why not get that GED, enjoy an informal continuing education class, or check out possibilities at the nearest college or university?



*Take good care of yourself. You will feel better and have so much more to give your child and others. Your good example—and your love—make all the difference in the world!*

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This publication provides information about good parenting. Readers are encouraged to use it for education but not as a substitute for other professional advice.

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## Keys to Great Parenting Web Site

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## Care for Yourself

This publication is No.1 in a seven-part series on fun and learning with your baby or toddler, an educational program based on seven keys to unlocking your child's wonderful abilities:

- 1 Care for Yourself
- 2 Cuddle, Talk, and Read with Your Child
- 3 Know How Your Child Develops
- 4 Be Playful with Your Child
- 5 Show Your Child the World
- 6 Teach Self-Control
- 7 Practice Health and Safety

