

Healthy Parenting Taking Care of Yourself

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Working with the Young Child: Ages 4 - 8

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Parenting is a Learning Process

People are not born with parenting skills, but people have the need for these skills. Parents as well anyone who cares for a child soon discovers that parenting is a continual, learning process.

Parenting is a complicated task. It requires an understanding of the child's needs and the ability to meet those needs. It involves providing physical care, encouragement, love, support and guidance. All this is done with the goal of helping the child develop to the fullest.

There is not one right method of parenting. To care well for children, many different parenting skills are needed. Effective caregivers continue to develop these skills all their lives.

They learn by:

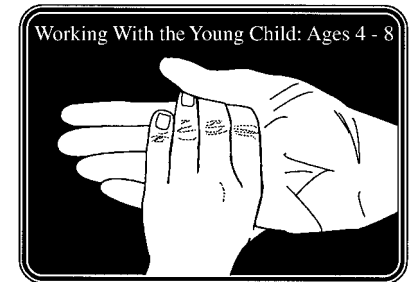
- Asking the advice of friends and family members
- Reading books and magazines about parenting
- Observing other parents and children
- Attending parenting classes
- Gaining experience with children

The Nurturing Process

Skills needed also change as the children in the family grow up. Infants' needs are different from those of preschoolers, early adolescents or adolescents. New skills are needed at each stage of development. Of course, not all families are typical. Some have special needs, concerns, parenting styles or techniques.

Nurturing is an important part of parenting. A parent nurtures a child by providing encouragement and enriching experiences. Nurturing also means showing love, support, concern and understanding to yourself as the parent. If you do not take care of yourself, then how can you take care of your child?

Caregivers need to be realistic about what children are capable of. Giving a preschooler a puzzle that is too difficult will make the child frustrated...thus frustrating the parent. An understanding parent can help guide the child toward a more suitable activity.



It is important to understand and respect the differences between children. The more time parents spend talking with and observing their children, the better they will be able to meet each child's individual needs.

The Elementary Years

Children's entrance into school marks a new stage in parenthood. Children spend more time away from parents in school and with peers. They are absorbing new information and are exposed to new values. This parental state is called the **interpretive state**. Parents and caregivers share facts and information about the world, teach values and guide children's behavior in certain directions.

At this point, parents have a more realistic view of their role and a greater understanding of their children as individuals. They have a sense of how their child will react in a different situation. Most have developed a sense of their strengths and difficulties and a confidence that they and their children are okay.

Parents need to develop strategies for dealing with other caregivers who may see the child from a different position. An attitude that stresses cooperation among adults seems more effective. When parents need to seek information about the child and offer observations from home, the focus should be on eliminating the problem or settling the differences. Adults can work together to make the child's experience in that environment an optimal one.

Providing Substitute Care

One responsibility of a parent is providing quality substitute care when they must be away from their children. In some families, substitute care is needed only occasionally. However, an increasing number of parents depend on others to care for their children on a regular basis.

Those who are faced with finding substitute care must choose wisely from the many types that are available. Child care facilities range from a babysitter in the home, group day care facilities or after school programs. Caregivers also differ. They must know about the physical, emotional, social and intellectual needs of children. Caregivers should also have attitudes and skills necessary for working with and caring for young children.

There are no easy answers as to which type of child care is the best for an individual child. Parents must consider many factors. The available care costs, convenience, and the individual needs of the child will all influence the parental decision.

Special Parenting Situations

All parents have many things in common - the responsibilities that come with their role and the satisfaction they may gain from it. However, in some situations parents also face unique concerns and challenges. These situations include single parenting, step parenting, teen parenting and adoption. Many of these different parenting situations have their own support groups.

Single Parents

Single parents include divorced, widowed or never married people with children. The number of single parents has increased dramatically in recent years. One concern that faces single parents is the need for their children to develop positive relationships with adults of the opposite sex. Single parenting puts many demands on parents. They have a great deal of responsibility, less free time and no spouse with whom to share problems and joys. Many communities have support groups for single parents.

Stepparents

When a single parent marries, his or her new spouse becomes a stepparent. In some marriages both the husbands and wives have children from previous relationships. Each becomes a stepparent to the other's children. In situations like these, a blended family is created. Both the children and the parents may experience problems in establishing a new family unity. Stepparents often find that discipline is a problem. Both husband and wife must agree on how to handle discipline, as well, as other issues that will arise in their new family.

Adoption

Adoption was a favorite theme of fiction and movies for years. Today, the attitude has changed. Most people accept adoption as a logical way to give children the love and care they need. Experts advise parents to tell children they are adopted as soon as they can understand. It can be very upsetting to a child to find out later that parents are not their biological parents.

Teen Parents

Teens parents need to learn how to parent. The help of family members, social workers, and parent education classes is especially valuable in these cases. Young parents who marry must also learn to handle the give-and-take that is part of a stable relationship. At stake is not only their own happiness, but the well-being of their child. Teen parents face more difficulties than most parents.

Teens can care for themselves by:

- trading "time off" once a week with another single or teen parent.
- take a walk each evening or morning to break away from their hectic schedule.

Family Strengths

Families are strengthened by expressions of caring and appreciation. Even when a family member makes mistakes, members of strong families find ways to encourage and support each other. Strong families draw on other people and organizations for support. If they have a hard time dealing with a problem, they often become willing to seek outside help. Strong families also tend to be closely involved with schools, churches, synagogues and local organizations that promote the well-being of the community and each individual.

Families can be strengthened by:

- Allowing for the individual differences of family members.
- Reinforcing and modeling family values.
- Taking time to understand all viewpoints of family members.

Being Understanding — The Key to Healthy Parenting

Being understanding with children can result in less conflicting relationships with them. Being understanding is also an important part of helping adults become healthy and secure parents and caregivers. Most people feel that they already have the skills necessary to show understanding. But there are surprises in the process of

understanding. The ways that parents try to show understanding does not always work out as planned.

When children are very young they are not able to engage in a lot of talking; however, as they get older, they must be allowed time to express their feelings, which will lead to trust and closeness.

Sometimes it's hard to deal with children because the parent may be tired or lonely. When this happens, they need to find ways to strengthen themselves. They need to take time with their own friends or make time for hobbies. It's hard to give love when one feels empty. They should take time to listen to children's feelings, to try to understand them and remember that what the child is experiencing is very real. Parents should not try to discuss problems with an angry child. They must remember that each child feels loved and appreciated for his/her feelings.

Suggestions for Additional Reading

Brooks, Jane B., "The Process of Parenting," Mayfield Publishing Company, 1991.

Fontenelle, Don H., "How to Live with Your Children," Fisher Publishing, 1989.

Gordon, Thomas; "Parent Effectiveness Training," Weyden Publishers, New York, 1975.

Nelson, Jane, & Lott, Lynn "I'm on Your Side," Prime Publishing, 1990.

"Working with the Young Child: Ages 4-8" is a series of six bulletins authored by Arizona Cooperative Extension Family Task Force members. The bulletins cover the same major topics found in "Understanding Youth: Working With the Early Adolescent" curriculum, but address younger children.

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