

The foundations for healthy living Strategies to consider for the family

These are strategies which help parents to provide the foundations for a home life which supports healthy, unhurried growth for children. When these foundations are in place, they act as a buffer against stress and difficult circumstances in the child's life, for example, learning difficulties which batter self-esteem, change of school, difficulties in friendships, bullying, separation of parents etc. They also support the family when the adults are in troubled times as well. While these are similar to many of the strategies suggested for younger children, they have a slightly different focus.

Strategy 1: Stay centred & cut down on stress & hurrying.

It is a characteristic feature of life today that many people are hurried, stressed and sleep deprived. Both physical and emotional stress affects our health, our feelings of wellbeing and our sleep. In addition, parenting is one of the most challenging tasks most of us ever do. It is not a task which can be walked away from when things get tough. Unfortunately children absorb and reflect our stress and our state of wellbeing. It is important, for their sake as well as our own, to consider what we can do to make our lives less stressed and less hurried so that we can increase the possibilities for enjoying the beauty of the moment. Consider the following:

- Ask yourself what can you do to cut down on stress in your life for at least this transitional healing period. Prioritise. What can you let

go of? Ask yourself if it really matters if you don't do this? Can you say: 'Let go'? What is important? What is urgent?

- Consider your needs—what do you need in order to feel together and inwardly at peace? How can you give those things to yourself more often? Being mindful also empowers us, even within stressful situations.
- Adult relationship stresses—for those in partnerships, especially if there is tension between you, it may help to negotiate a short personal sharing each day with each other. Three questions can help to deepen this sharing: What has been most important today? What has been most enjoyable? What came as an unexpected delight today?

Strategy 2: Create a mood of love, respect & understanding

Love and respect in the family flourishes when the self esteem of adults and children is consciously nurtured. If your child is experiencing poor self esteem it can be indicated by associated behaviours including attention

seeking, aggressiveness towards others, bullying, being bullied, lack of confidence, inability to love, trust, accept themselves or others etc.

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Consider the following strategies to help nourish love, respect and self-esteem in your family right now:

- Try to give unconditional love and understanding to each person in the family.
 - It helps to treat your children (and expect them to treat you and everyone in the family) with love, respect and politeness. This means no put-downs are acceptable.
 - Many parents have had success with giving “sacred time” to each child: this means shared time for you and one child with no interruptions (turn phones off if necessary). Even 15 minutes of this special time helps.
- Talk together, do things together. Let the child suggest what you could do. Bedtimes are good for this.
 - When the children are home, especially after school, children want parents to really be there for them. It helps to include them in your household work and listen to them. Again, particularly watch your use of your mobile phone which can, more easily than ever, intrude on your time together.
 - It helps in problem times, to very consciously surround your child with love. Conscious acknowledgement of a problem can be healing in itself.

Strategy 3: Provide protection against overstimulation.

All children in today’s busy world need more quiet times than they get, as well as more healthy, creative and physical activity. They need more protection from exposure to things which stress their senses and their emotional well being.

Ask yourself about your children’s activities: Are these activities really nurturing their growth and nourishing their senses or are they merely entertaining and stimulating? For example: nourishing activities may involve nature, beauty and the arts; other activities may nurture creativity and imagination (like free play), or competence in enjoyable practical everyday skills, physical wellbeing through healthy physical activity, which allows free or rhythmic movement.

Consider the following strategies:

- **Reduce screen time.** Screen time is increasingly replacing healthy activities in childhood and compromises growth in many areas. The younger the child the more they need the real, concrete and sensory world to develop, and the more detrimental screen time is. Teach your older children how to live

in healthy ways with technology. See also the article *Technology and your teenager*

- **Avoid noisy toys** or toys which encourage noisy aggressive play.
- **Give them quiet.** Cut down on all unnecessary sound (not just loud music) in the car or at home. If they are used to constant noise, it may take a little while for them to be able to rediscover themselves in the silence.
- **Children need unstressed unhurried time.** Overscheduling to give children the experience of many activities can be self-defeating in the long run. They need time for free play, the child’s great teacher.
- **Encourage them to be alone** sometimes (within the family) and to enjoy the inward peace of that and to not always depend on other children to play with. Children are less stressed by one playmate at a time.
- **Plan simple short outings** - avoid overstimulating situations. Eg. too much car travel and supermarket shopping with children.

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- **Simplify.** Have fewer toys, fewer activities, fewer demands. (See *Simplicity Parenting*.)
- **Create quiet moments for wonder,** like in nature when you observe the little bird's nest, or when you tell a story with candles and a gentle song. Whisper more. Use 'soft voices'. Let your child experience feelings of reverence and awe. Insist that the child is quiet and respectful of the wonder of the

special moment. Children need to learn when noisy expression is appropriate and when it is not.

- Go slow yourself. Plan ahead so that you don't have to hurry. Speak quietly and more slowly if your tendency is to talk quickly. Try to be quiet, gentle and peaceful yourself. Be mindful around your children.

Strategy 4: Provide children with order & predictability.

Children need the emotional security of order and predictability in daily routines. Their growing bodies need the regularity of consistent meals and bed times because internal organs like the liver use these as cues in their rhythmic cycles. Many adults and children are now sleep deprived which affects emotional wellbeing and learning. While it may take time to establish good daily rhythms for the family, we are more than repaid for the effort we make in calmer lives in the long run, when life goes along so much more smoothly within these routines. In addition, when more difficult times arise in our lives, these house routines actually carry us through the difficulties.

It is tempting in very difficult times to let our routines slip, but actually these are the very times when our children need us to keep to them as strong as possible. For when other things are rocky, at least the routines offer security and comfort.

House Rules

Much of our behaviour is ordered by our family rules – acknowledged and unacknowledged. It helps us to be clear on what our household rules are regarding safety, privacy, personal care, cleaning jobs etc. Consider whether it would help to clarify, restate and firmly follow up on your family's rules and boundaries. Older children can also help work these through.

Children feel more secure when they know what is expected from them and what can be expected from others.

House Routines

To bring a sense of order and predictability into our children's lives, along with some beautiful quiet, nourishing touches, consider some of the following:

- **Preparation the night before** Many parents find that it helps to get the children to prepare their clothes the night before, to save on the "where's your shoe?" syndrome. Similarly some people find lunches are better made the night before. (Staler but saner?)
- **Waking** It benefits younger children to be individually "welcomed awake" by each parent with a hug, kiss, stroke or an "I love you" or something which affirms them and their self esteem.

For late wakers, it is better for younger children to be woken with a little song or gentle stroke than an alarm clock, especially radio alarms. Of course very young children are more likely to wake you. Here you can start to teach about the value of sleep by teaching them to do something quietly until others are awake.

- **Breakfast** A calm, sit-down-together, nourishing breakfast gives the child a good

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nutritional start to the day. Consider the nutritional aspects of breakfast. A few pieces of light toast do not give the same level of sustained blood sugar (and energy) as whole grain cereals or proteins. Children with low blood sugar tend to be irritable and lacking in attentiveness within an hour or so.

Similarly, excessive sugar or highly sweetened cereals can push the blood sugar level up quickly, with a sharp drop again in a short time.

- **After School and Evenings.** Get the shopping done *before* picking the children up from school, so that tired children can be taken home quietly and directly. Share a snack with them and hear some of the day's stories if the children want to share them but be mindful of when children just need space and don't want to talk just then. Some children need time away from younger siblings, when they get home.
- **The evening meal.** Ideally, this meal is home cooked with love, and hopefully it is eaten together with all the family. If we begin the meal with a candle lighting and blessing, it begins the process of bringing the day to an end in an ordered way. This is also a time for sharing stories about the day, each person

having their turn.

- **The Story.** After preparations for the next day and for bed, a story shared together makes a wonderful end of day ritual. Reading stories aloud should not just be considered for children who cannot read. It is a wonderful thing to go on doing together as a family, even as children get older.
- **Bed time.** Times for bed are best individualised for each child so that parents can have a little time with each child separately when it is needed. For children who have difficulty sleeping, gentle massage of the ear is quietening, or a foot massage with a soothing oil (like lavender) can help. Hard to settle younger children can be reassured of adult presence if a parent sings quietly nearby doing little chores. Some ages are more fearful than others.
- **Establishing routines and helping tasks.** Colourful charts with boxes to tick when tasks are done can bring more mindfulness to daily routines, reduce the need for reminders and get the family into better habits and children generally love them! This can work well even to get children into bed on time.

These strategies support us all in living richer, more fulfilling lives together. It may take some effort to establish these as ways of doing things in the family, but the rewards in individual and family wellbeing make it all worthwhile.

Further reading

Payne, Kim John, with Lisa M. Ross *Simplicity Parenting Using the Extraordinary Power of Less to Raise Calmer, Happier and More Secure kids.* (Ballantine Books Trade Paperbacks, New York, 2009)

Other articles of interest on the website

Avoiding trouble series Strategies for healthy living with young children and A brief checklist for stressful times Building self esteem