

Self-Reflection in Parenting: Help for Getting through Stressful Times



Again and again, parents have demonstrated the capacity to be caring and effective despite stressful and difficult experiences. With the help of family, friends, and community organizations, including Head Start, parents can deal with difficult stressors such as bereavement, job loss, or even depression. Some keys for coping are: recognizing that the experience is difficult, reaching out to others, not trying to go it alone, acknowledging the need for help, and working to set realistic goals. This can be easier said than done. Many people under stress find it painful to look at their choices and the circumstances that surround them. It can be too easy to forget the positive experiences in their lives, both individually and in the history of their family. But taking the time to think about your life and plan for the future, also known as self-reflection, can be a very useful tool for parenting through such tough times.

Self-reflection can help you:

- **Keep track of what happens to you and your family** and, with practice, provide a focus on what has worked out. Even remembering a past difficult time can be positive when you can pay attention to how it was resolved or how it was handled. Noting what works for you and your family helps to build successful parenting strategies and can give your spirits a lift.
- **Recognize your place in the larger picture:** Taking time to gain perspective can help you to identify the circumstances that are beyond your control in order to focus on the circumstances that you can change. Also, all of us are part of many communities: churches, neighborhoods, and, of course, families. Recognizing your place in these larger groups and participating in them are important for you and your children.
- **Plan for your future:** Being able to plan is essential, particularly if struggling with a difficult time. The plan may simply be how to make it through the day, how to get to your next appointment, or how to get help in taking care of your

children. Try to pay special attention to scheduling mealtimes and bedtimes when at all possible. Planning and then following a routine can be very comforting during times that are otherwise uncertain.

- **Start fresh:** Being able to start over is important. Don't hesitate to go back and start over in thinking about how to help your children.

What are some ways to practice productive self-reflection?

- **Find a quiet moment to take a breath:** As tough as it might be to find the place and time to simply reflect on our lives, it is one of the most important things you can do to take care of yourself as a parent.
- **Keep a journal:** Many families find it helpful to write down reflections about what has gone well and how they solve problems. This can also help in anticipating and dealing with future stresses.
- **Talk with others about positive events, and also about getting through difficult ones.** →



- **Create a drawing** or other object to remember an important event.
- **Take pictures:** Keep collections of photographs depicting the good times to help you and your family remember that such positive experiences are possible.
- **Celebrate the meaningful holidays and traditions** of your culture or religious faith and help your children learn about them.
- **Share music and other art forms with your children:** Songs, hymns, music, and art often encourage people to remember the positives and express a range of feelings.

Open communication is the foundation of good relationships, and celebrating the positives in yourself, your children, your family, and in the larger community is tremendously important. Making it through a difficult time means finding and connecting with many different resources at many times— with community, religious faith, caregivers, friends and families. Feeling down and blue or undergoing a loss can disrupt these connections, but they can be reestablished. Focusing on what children need, providing what you can, getting others to help, and remembering what works are essential resources.

For more support on this topic please see the following Family Connections materials:

Short Papers:

The Ability to Cope: Building resilience in yourself and your child
Parenting through Tough Times: Coping with depression

Additional Resources

Beardslee, William. "The Role of Self-Understanding in Resilient Individuals: The Development of a Perspective." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 59, no. 2 (1989): 266-278.

Beardslee, William. *When a Parent is Depressed: How to Protect your Children from the Effects of Depression in the Family*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 2003.

Coloroso, Barbara. *Parenting Through a Crisis: Helping Kids in Times of Loss, Grief, and Change*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.



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