

Caring for Yourself

Introduction

For many people, parenting can feel all-consuming, with little or no time left for oneself. This summary offers some ideas on how you can take some time to do things for yourself, in addition to everything you do for your family. Caring for a child with special needs presents a unique set of challenges which may include:

- Having a busy schedule with multiple appointments a day including occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, ABA therapists, doctor's appointments, enrichment classes and more.
- Juggling the needs of other children in the family together with your special needs child can be difficult.
- Families where one parent has decided to stay home to care for their child may feel like he/she is the only one caring for the child a majority of the time.
- Many parents may feel a deep sense of guilt when choosing to do something for themselves over their children. They feel as if they are being unfair to their child by spending time on themselves, when their child needs so much support and structure.
- Some parents feel that they cannot trust anyone else to care for their child. This is understandable, as your child has unique needs. However, one of the first steps to making time for yourself is to actually ask for support when you need it.

In short, each family has its own set of challenges and priorities. The one thing that is common to all families of small children, with or without special needs, is that caring for yourself can be difficult and last on a long list of priorities.

There is no question about it – children with special needs require a huge amount of time and attention from their caregivers. However, caring for yourself is very important, and not a selfish thing to do. Not only does it provide you with a much needed break to catch your breath and center yourself, but it also

benefits your partner and your children. Parents who care for themselves, can relieve stress, feel more fulfilled, and feel happier in the long run. It is also a way for you to continue to grow as a human being.

Tips on Caring for Yourself

Before we talk about what you can do to care for yourself, let's talk about how you can free up time to focus on yourself. Here are some ideas you can consider:

- **Respite care** – Respite care refers to care provided to a person with a disability so that the person's caregiver may receive a short-term break. Types of respite care can range from in-home care to specialized facilities where you may drop off those needing care for a short time. Many states and provinces have provisions for respite care, which can include a stipend or access to community services provided by special needs associations, or local agencies. There may even be respite funds to pay a family member or others to watch your child.
- **Create a "core group" of supporters** – You may have a small group of adults whom you trust around your child such as grandparents, aunts and uncles, babysitters, therapists or even friends or families of other children with autism. You can create some time for yourself by leaning on this core group. Think about having designated days when people from this group can care for your child for a few hours. You could even ask your child's therapist for trusted childcare options. If you cannot afford to pay for childcare, then you could consider creating a baby-sitting co-op with other families that you know and are willing to care for your child. You could arrange to care for their child for a few hours and have them care for your child for a few hours in exchange.
- **Having dedicated time off** – Have designated time off in the week for you and your spouse. For example, you could designate Friday evenings as time off for mom, and Saturday mornings as time off for dad. This will enable you to plan ahead, knowing that you will have this time to yourself. If you have the ability to work a flexible schedule,

you could also schedule work in a way that allows you to take time off for yourself when your child is at school.

- **Taking “power breaks”** – You don’t always have to have a few hours to yourself to do something for yourself. You could use 15 minutes at a time to do something you love, such as reading, listening to music, writing, going for a walk etc. Quick “power breaks” will give you a few minutes to unwind and focus on yourself.

Here are some ideas on what you can do for yourself when you have some free time:

- **Join a class** – You could consider learning something new, or attending a dance class, a yoga class or even pursuing a certification in something of interest. Many community colleges as well as community centers offer classes for adults which range from art, to language to exercise.
- **Make time for your partner** – If you are in a relationship, it is important to make time for your partner as well. Often times, parents forget to take time to nurture their own relationship. This could be something as simple as getting lunch together during the work day, or even taking a walk together.
- **Socialize** – Socializing with friends and family is also a good way to enjoy an afternoon or evening. For example, you could organize a “Mom’s Night Out”, go for a movie or dinner with a friend.
- **Get moving** – Exercising is a very positive way to do something for yourself. You could enjoy a simple walk or run, or do yoga, meditation or even attend an exercise class. Exercise can improve your mood as well as help you with your wellness goals.
- **Pamper yourself** – Many parents feel rejuvenated when they take the time to do something relaxing or therapeutic for themselves. For example, you could get a massage, or spend time at a spa if you find it relaxing. Others might find shopping therapeutic. Finding a way to spoil yourself once in a while is important!
- **Do something you enjoy** – Perhaps you have interests that you haven’t been able to spend much time on, such as gardening, or reading, or

doing something artistic. Rekindling an interest is also a way for you to spend time doing something you enjoy. Consider pursuing a project that you can work on a little bit at a time.

Conclusion

Making time for yourself is important, and we hope that you have found these ideas useful. If you are in a relationship, you could explore this further by talking about how you can implement some of these ideas with your partner. It is hard to make time for yourself if you don’t ask for help. Not every solution works for everyone, but you will find the right balance through trial and error. www.porchlighteducation.org