

REDUCING STRESS IN CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

BY CHIP DELORENZO, M.ED.

Many parents today are worried about not doing enough for their children. Unspoken expectations and perceived pressure from others is intense. Our families are more and more engaged in high levels of external activity in an effort to give our families the best: lessons, after-school activities, adult activities, volunteer work, careers, a perfectly clean or remodeled house, community service, etc. With the best intentions we try to be super-parents, involved in every aspect of our children's lives. While many of these activities are intrinsically good for us or for our children, the pressure that we put on ourselves and our families to achieve them is not.

It is vital, in helping develop emotionally capable and resilient children, that children have down time with their families, time to make choices, to connect, to rest, to work together and to bond. An over abundance of activity and stress, mixed with a shortage of rest and bonding time, is a recipe for stress. There is a plethora of research that shows that stress has negative impact on brain development, especially in the first six years of life.

“When a young child's stress response systems are activated within an environment of supportive relationships with adults, these physiological effects are buffered and brought back down to baseline. The result is the development of healthy stress response systems. However, if the stress response is extreme and long-lasting, and buffering relationships are unavailable to the child, the result can be damaged, weakened systems and brain architecture, with lifelong repercussions.” (Toxic Stress Response: The Facts; Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University: http://developingchild.harvard.edu/topics/science_of_early_childhood/toxic_stress_response/)

This is why it's so important to take care of ourselves as parents, to protect our down time, and set reasonable expectations and limits for ourselves and our children (*reasonable* meaning likely to be achieved). As parents, we are setting the bar for our children and modeling healthy behavior that they will most likely replicate as adults. And as so many people have said to us, “It goes by so quickly.”

Here are some questions to consider as we consider planning for healthy downtime:

- If you knew for sure that down time and family time for your children would guarantee success (you define it), what would your weekly schedule look like?
- What activities are in your schedule because of “adult peer pressure” (the pressure to be the perfect parent)?
- What would you like to do with your children if you had the time?
- What would your children like to do with you if you had the time?

Suggestions for reducing stress in our children:

- Plan down time and family time in your weekly calendar with the same importance that you'd plan a meeting at work. Consider devoting one whole weekend day to be “work free”.

- Allow more time to do household tasks/chores (maybe cleaning out the garage takes two weeks instead of one).
- Appropriate your financial resources to free up more time (lawn care, painting, household projects).
- Involve the children in household chores, and work together vs. working separately (i.e. everyone rakes leaves together, cleans the house together, etc.).
- Use child care to free up some of your personal time for errands to avoid “dragging the kids” with you.
- As a family, develop a list of activities that you’d like to do during family time.
- Involve children in the planning of the logistics of the week and the protection of family down time.
- Take time for training – teach children how to clean up after themselves, do household chores and participate in family responsibilities so that all the work is not done by the parents (this frees up a lot of time!). Book recommendation: *Chores Without Wars*, Lynn Lott and Riki Intner, Taylor Trade Publishing, 2005.