

# **The Joy of Parenthood: How to Deal with Parental Stress and Increase your Sense of Fulfillment**

## **Societal Expectations**

A number of recent articles have talked about the pressures of parenting in the current times, e.g. making sure our children are physically healthy and their meals nutritious and that they are emotionally fulfilled as we shuttle them back and forth to enriching activities. For many families, providing the basic needs of food, clothing and shelter is already challenging. Parents may be working more hours or pursuing college degrees to be a role model for their children and to provide opportunities for their children that they never had. As noted by Sarah (2006), "There's a sense that modern life is competitive, expensive, and more difficult and we have to give our kids every advantage to succeed." Societal expectations and pressures on parents – and on our children – are intense, and many feel we have raised the bar too high and in the process "squeezed out the fun" (Tyre, 2005).

At the same time that we're parents, men and women also have other important roles – spouse or partner, son or daughter, friend, employee, student and citizen. Mothers and fathers may find themselves conflicted as they try to balance their need to be engaged in meaningful ways in the world, and supporting the family financially, with their children's needs and desires (Kabat-Zinn, 1997).

## **The Inner Experience of Parenting**

While external stressors are undeniable, one of our biggest stressors is often the high expectations we place on ourselves. We judge and label ourselves, saying we're "too" this or "not enough that." Then we often believe it, whether it is real or true or not. One common expectation is that we will do things well or "right." As the Kabat-Zinns (1997, p. 311-112) note, "We expect to do well in school, to succeed in the workplace, to be a good parent and a good son or daughter, to be liked by other people. Judging ourselves harshly when we feel that we don't 'measure up' can elicit a range of feelings: shame, stupidity, disappointment, embarrassment, anger, humiliation, inadequacy."

Not only do we tend to judge ourselves as parents, we also judge our children. We have opinions about them and who they are and how they should be. We hold them up against some standard that we have created. "Very often we're locked into seeing things in only one way, conditioned by views and feelings that are frequently unexamined, and that often put social decorum – what other people might think, or how embarrassed we are feeling -- above the emotional well being of our children"(Kabat-Zinn, 1997, p. 74). When we judge our children in this way, we cut ourselves off from them and them from us. Moreover, our children may experience the same feelings that we do (disappointment, anger, inadequacy) when they don't meet either our or their own expectations.

The stress we experience as parents often has to do with our resentment and regret about the past. Becoming a parent often brings up strong feelings about the way we were parented. We may dislike some of the decisions our parents made and vow not to make the same mistakes. We may feel inadequate and unprepared for this new way of life. We may regret poor decisions we made that impacted our children.

Being a parent makes us vulnerable in ways we weren't before. It calls us to be responsible and challenges us, taking our time and attention away from other things, including ourselves, as never before (Kabat-Zinn, 1997). However much we are doing – it can still

feel like it's not enough. It is tempting to disconnect when we cannot meet our expectations, when we cannot possibly be everything it feels like we need to be. "When faced with a range of family, social and cultural pressures to conform to frequently unstated and unconscious norms, and with all the inherent stresses of caring for children, as parents we often find ourselves, in spite of all our best intentions and our deep love for our children, running more or less on automatic pilot" (Kabat-Zinn, 1997, p. 16). To the extent that we are preoccupied and invariably pressed for time, we may be out of touch with the richness of the present moment and miss opportunities to connect with ourselves--and with our children.

## **Connection**

What is it that children need from their parents? What many people most wanted from their parents when they were children was: "to have been seen and accepted in the family for who they were, a desire to have been treated with kindness, compassion, understanding and respect; to have been accorded freedom, safety, and privacy, and a sense of belonging" (Kabat-Zinn, 1997, p. 64). All of these depend on a parent's ability to empathize, which depends on a level of awareness and attunement *in the present*. It is the everyday moments that determine the quality of our relationships with our children.

Ultimately, parenting is a continual process of striving for inner and outer balance, of examining options, making choices, observing the effect of our choices on our children, and making adjustments. Each of us has to work at defining what balance means for us and create it from moment to moment for ourselves, for our children and for the family as a whole, as best we can (Kabat-Zinn, 1997). Read on for some tips on how to do this.

## **Guidelines for achieving balance**

- Create your parenting vision. Many of us want a close relationship with our children, children who are capable, happy and self-confident, and to feel good about the way we parent. However, many of us parent with only short-term goals in mind, like getting the kids to clean their rooms. As Falcone (2003, p. 28) observes, "It's easy to lose sight of our long-term goals when we are caught up in the minutia of life." Let your bigger intentions guide your daily actions.
- Recognize that there will be countless factors that impact your children that you cannot necessarily control or prevent. "We can do all the 'right things' only to find out later that they were not so 'right' and that there were factors we were not aware of, perhaps that no one was aware of at the time." (Kabat-Zinn, 1997, p.366) Take a look at your expectations for your children (and yourself) and avoid trying to force a certain outcome.
- Make the best use of the time that you have. See that fears about the future are thoughts, while the present -- what is happening now -- is what's most important (Kabat-Zinn, 1997).
- Try to not over-schedule your children so that they are always going somewhere else; they need downtime. "If we are not aware of the effects of time pressures, we run the risk of living lives of continual acceleration, non-stop doing, and passing that on to our children" (Kabat-Zinn, 1997, p. 202).
- Develop an awareness of how your needs and your children's needs are interdependent: your children's well being affects yours, and yours affect theirs. As

the Kabat-Zinns (1997, p.26) note, "This means we have to continually work to be aware of our children's needs as well as our own, emotional as well as physical, and, depending on their ages, work at negotiations and compromises, with them and within ourselves, so that everybody can get something of what they most need."

- Create more of what you want by focusing on the positive. Our own partial seeing of our children, impacted by our needs, fears and expectations, and by the extent or lack of our resources in that moment, can lead to habitual negative labeling and judging of our child's behavior (Kabat-Zinn, 1997). One way to gain perspective is to spend some time focusing on what is positive about our children; better yet, to then express our appreciation to our children.
- Take responsibility for your actions (or inactions). Rather than denying or minimizing, spending our energy blaming ourselves or our children, or just wishing things could be different, acknowledge explicitly if we have harmed someone. Take action that might make amends or minimize the harm done, and commit ourselves to behaving differently in the future.
- In your most trying moments as a parent, step back and begin fresh, asking, "What is truly important here?" (Kabat-Zinn, 1997).
- View yourself with kindness and compassion, seeing and accepting your limitations, your humanness. By seeing and accepting ourselves as we are, we will be better able to provide a similar acceptance to our children (Kabat-Zinn, 1997).
- Realize that the greatest gift you can give your child is your self. This means that part of your work as a parent is to keep growing in self knowledge and in awareness (Kabat-Zinn, 1997).

While parenting creates, "chaos and disorder, feelings of inadequacy, occasions for arguments, struggles, irritation, noise, seemingly never-ending obligations and errands, and plenty of opportunities for getting stuck, angry, resentful, hurt, and for feeling overwhelmed, old and unimportant" (Kabat-Zinn, 1997, p. 89) it can also be a most satisfying and fulfilling relationship. Children embody what is best in life: they live in the present moment, embodying vitality, renewal and hope (Kabat-Zinn, 1997). Moreover, parents often find themselves connected to others in ways they might not have felt before. As the Kabat-Zinns (1997, p. 90) describe, "Our sphere of compassion tends to broaden. Concern for our children and their well being may give us a different perspective on poverty, the environment, war, and the future." Children remind us over and over again what is most important in life, and help us to experience the richness and vibrancy of life.

#### References:

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