PARENTING TECHNIQUES—AGES 0-3

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RAISING CHILDREN CAN BE STRESSFUL FOR EVERY PARENT, NOT ONLY FOR PARENTS WITH PSYCHIATRIC DISABILITIES. To be a good parent, you need to be continually attentive to the changing needs and wants of your child. This can be difficult, especially when you are trying to manage your household, engage in a relationship with your partner and possibly hold down a job at the same time. As a parent with a psychiatric disability, you may feel even more stress because you may also need to work at managing your symptoms. Healthy parenting is essential to reducing your overall stress level.

One way to reduce stress is to proactively parent. Proactive parenting involves actively taking charge of caring for your children by creating routines for them and organizing your time. For example, you may be feeling overwhelmed by the demands of your children, household, partner and job. A proactive approach to this problem is, for example, to create a written daily schedule for yourself and for your child/children. This schedule can break down all of your tasks in a manageable way and it can help you see what your children need over the course of the day. This kind of planning can make you a better parent and will reduce stress.

Understandably, as a parent of a child ages 0-3, you may have difficulty creating routines. Babies and toddlers take time to adjust to a schedule, and there may be days where, despite your best efforts, they will not be able to follow it. Even so, there are many things that you can do to help your child.

On the following pages, we will examine some of the areas of concern to parents of children ages 0-3 and we will provide some tips for how to deal with stressful situations that may occur. Some of these tips will be directly related to reducing your stress while others may be more general.
Sleep Schedules

Sleep schedules may seem almost impossible when your newborn first comes home, but getting your child on the road to sleeping on a schedule is important. Sleep routines mean that your days with your infant and toddler will be more predictable. Not only will this result in less stress for you, but it also ensures that your baby or toddler is getting enough rest. The following are some sleep-related tips for babies and toddlers:

Most experts say that babies who are between 3 and 4 months old are generally ready to start a schedule. You should always follow the advice of your baby’s doctor (as well as trusting your own instincts) before starting a regular sleep schedule with your baby.¹

Begin by taking cues from your baby. You will most likely see patterns develop over time. It may help to record your baby’s naps, feedings, playtimes, bed-times, etc., in a notebook or on the computer to help you identify these patterns.²

Establish a bedtime routine. Pick a suitable bedtime and prepare for bed with soothing activities: perhaps a warm bath, a story, a feeding and then lights out.³

Many newborns mix up their days and nights. You may need to teach your child the difference between day and night. Do this by keeping the house bright and sunny (or at least well-lit) during the day, and dark and quiet at night. Socialize with your baby when you feed her during the day, but keep talking to a minimum at nighttime.⁴

When your child gets older, adjust the schedule to suit his age. As your baby becomes a toddler, he will need less time for naps and more time for play. Again, take cues from your baby as to when and how to adjust his schedule.⁵
how can i soothe a crying baby?

Most infants tend to have regular fussy periods. These are often between about 6 p.m. and midnight, just as you are trying to settle them down to go to sleep. Fortunately, by ages 3 to 4 months, most babies are fussy no more than 1 to 2 hours per day. But if you are finding that your baby’s crying does not stop after 1 to 2 hours and intensifies as the night wears on, the crying may be a sign of colic.6

Colic means that your baby will go through periods when he cries inconsolably. Other signs of colic are if he is screaming, extending his legs and passing gas. These crying spells can happen anytime during the day, but usually become worse in the early evening. No one knows why colic occurs. It usually lasts for 3 to 4 months, though in some cases it can go on until the baby is 6 months old.7

What can I do to soothe a fussy or colicky baby?8

• Swaddle your baby in a large blanket to help him feel secure.
• Rub your baby’s back; burp your baby frequently.
• Walk your baby in a body carrier or carry him in a “football” hold.
• Turn on a calming sound like running water.
• Avoid overfeeding; watch your baby’s sensitivity to certain foods.
• Introduce a pacifier.
• Lie your baby on a warm hot water bottle that is covered by a towel.

How can I take care of myself while taking care of a colicky baby?9

• Reach out for support to other parents who are also dealing with colicky babies.
• On occasion, leave your baby with relatives during a fussy period. It will help others understand what you are going through, and you also deserve a break.
• Remember that colic is NOT the parent’s fault!
• Do not be afraid or ashamed to get professional help if you are feeling extremely stressed, angry or upset.
feeding/eating schedules

A feeding/eating schedule for your baby or toddler is just as important to keeping stress at a minimum as good sleep habits. Again, most experts say that babies aren’t ready for a feeding/eating schedule until they are around 3 to 4 months of age.¹⁰

As your child grows older, you should take cues from her about when she is hungry and needs to eat. You and your child’s doctor should monitor her eating patterns and weight gain to make sure that she is getting the proper nutrition. As long as she is growing at a steady rate, you can start to institute a schedule of feeding/eating that works in tandem with her naps and bedtime schedule.

A sample schedule for a 6-month-old might be:

- 6:00 a.m. to 8:30 a.m.—Wake up and eat breakfast
- 8:30 a.m. to 10:00 a.m.—Nap
- 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.—Eat lunch and play
- 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.—Nap
- 3:00 p.m. to 4:45 p.m.—Eat snack and play
- 4:45 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.—Nap
- 5:30 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.—Eat dinner and play
- 7:00 p.m.—Bedtime (maybe have a feeding)

A sample schedule for a 2-year-old might be:

- 7:00 a.m.—Wake up and eat breakfast
- 10:00 a.m.—Eat snack
- 12:00 p.m.—Eat lunch
- 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.—Nap
- 4:00 p.m.—Eat snack
- 5:30 p.m.—Eat dinner
- 7:00 p.m. —Bedtime
Most babies start to get their first teeth at around 4 to 6 months, but that is a general guideline; some babies are earlier, some later. The last teeth, which are back molars, usually appear around your child’s second birthday. By age 3, the full set of 20 baby teeth should have come in. These baby teeth will start to be replaced by permanent teeth at around age 6.\(^1\)

As teeth break through the surface of your baby’s gums, he will most likely experience discomfort and the symptoms of teething. These symptoms are:

- Drooling (which may lead to facial rash)
- Gum swelling and sensitivity
- Irritability and fussiness
- Biting
- Refusing food
- Sleep problems\(^12\)

Other symptoms that may be related to teething are diarrhea, a runny nose or even a fever. Experts disagree as to whether teething causes these symptoms or whether they just seem to happen at the same time as teeth appear. In any case, some parents report that they see these symptoms during times of teething. It is wise to consult with your doctor if your baby has these kinds of symptoms.\(^13\)

What can you do to help your child through the teething process?

- Give your baby something to chew on like a teething ring or a washcloth.
- If he can eat solids, give your baby some cold food or a teething cracker.
- You can try rubbing your finger over your baby’s sore gums.
- Check with your doctor first and, if your doctor agrees, you can give your baby some infant’s acetaminophen or use a topical pain relief gel.\(^14\)

Helping your baby go through the teething process with as little pain as possible will decrease the stress that you and your baby experience.
Playing with your baby or toddler is not only critical for her development, but it can help lower your stress as well. Taking time to play with your child allows you to bond with her. Through play, you get to know her personality and you see how she is developing. Likewise, the additional positive experiences she has with you as her parent helps her to bond with you. Playing together will strengthen your relationship, making stressful times such as teething or potty training less difficult.

Suggestions for Playtime:
• Think of playtime as more than toy time. You do not need toys to play with your baby or toddler. Most babies are happy if you are singing songs together or chasing each other around the room.
• Get down on the floor with your baby. Talk to your baby as you play; that will promote his language skills.
• Introduce play activities when your baby is happy and rested.
• Stop when your child has had enough.
• Let your child choose the activities and control the direction of his play.15

Some easy and inexpensive play activities for babies:
• Play with magazines: use magazine pictures that you have at home and point out to your baby what is on the pictures.
• Play with a flashlight: watch the beams dance across the walls and ceiling.
• Play with music: dance with your baby while listening to your favorite songs.
• Some easy and inexpensive play activities for toddlers:
  • Go for a ride on a local bus or train.
  • Play with playdough or pizza dough, or let him help you decorate cupcakes or cookies.
  • Play with wrapping paper and bows.
(Additional suggestions can be found at www.babycenter.com)
Here are some ideas from other mothers on how to reduce stress in the postpartum period:

- Go with your intuition. Your baby is unique and you know him best.
- Record your baby’s sleeping and eating patterns in a notebook so that you can easily keep track of them.
- Allow older children to help out.
- Ask visitors to watch your baby so you can play with your older children.
- Don’t worry about the house being in perfect order.
- Make sure to carve out some time to spend by yourself or with friends and family.
- Join a new mother’s support group or a playgroup.¹⁶

Recognize that your emotions will be up and down for a while. This is completely normal. But if you find that your ups and downs go on for longer than six weeks, or if you feel like harming yourself or your baby, seek professional help immediately.¹⁷

If you are prone to depression, there is a greater likelihood that you will experience postpartum depression. But, as with major depression, there are many effective treatments available to mothers with postpartum depression. If you think that you have postpartum depression, get treatment, seek support from friends and family, and take care of yourself.¹⁸
What is respite care and why do I need it?

**Respite Care** is child care that gives you a either a short or a long break from caring for your child. Respite care allows parents to de-stress, recharge, and come back to their children refreshed and excited about parenting.

Parents with psychiatric disabilities can especially benefit from respite care. There are times when your symptoms may get in the way of your ability to focus on caring for your child/children. Respite care will give you the time that you need to decrease your stress level, deal with your symptoms and seek help or support if you need it.

There are many different types of respite care. It can be as simple as asking a friend or relative to watch your child, or it can involve taking your child to a respite or child care center. If you are going to use a respite or child care center, you will need to fill out paperwork and your child’s pediatrician may also need to fill out some forms. Additionally, you should ask for some references about the agency and/or interview some of the staff.
Having more than one child can be a blessing and a struggle all at once. Some siblings adore each other and become life-long friends. Others may find it difficult to have to spend large quantities of time with a sibling who is very different from themselves. Inevitably, siblings will compete with each other for their parents’ attention to some degree.19

What can you do to ease this competition and encourage good sibling relationships?20

- Help your older child prepare for a new baby. Read your child books about being a big brother or sister, and spend time together with other people’s babies. Once the baby is born, carve out some special time to be alone with your older child. Never blame the baby if you can’t do something with your older child.
- Don’t try to treat each child the same way. Think about what is appropriate for each child given their age and level of development, and be fair when doing things with them.
- Avoid comparing your kids to each other.
- Remind your children of their family bond. For example, say, “Give your brother back his toy” instead of “Give Sam back his toy.”
- It is often a good idea to let your children sort their problems out on their own.
- Don’t force friendships between your children: some children get along great, others less so. But remind your children that they must always treat each other with respect.
- Encourage patience in your younger child if your older one is being bossy, and in your older child if your younger one is tagging along too much.
- Keep their toys separate as much as possible. If they get into a squabble over a toy, make a rule such as: the kid who touched the toy first gets it for another five minutes. Set a timer if you need to.
- The more you can decrease competition between your children, the easier it will be for them to get along and the less stressful your environment will be.
Potty training is one of the most important milestones for a toddler. But, like other milestones, it is important to let your child reach it at his own pace and in his own way. Also, remember that potty training is a process. It is normal to experience successes and then setbacks. Relax and let it happen when your child is ready. The more you do this, the less stress you will experience.

**Tips from other parents on potty training your toddler:**

- When your child is ready, have him pick out his own pull-ups or underpants at the store.
- Timing is important: set a timer to go off every hour to check to see if your child has to go to the bathroom.
- Use incentives like stickers or candy to reward your child when she uses the potty chair or toilet. If those incentives don’t work, try to find something that will, such as a play date with a friend or a call to grandma. Reward yourself as well when you experience success!
- Put toys around the potty chair or toilet so that you encourage your child to be there.
- Try to get your child to “give” his new diaper supply away to a younger child.
- Get your child to know peers who are younger or the same age who are potty trained. This may inspire her to potty train herself.
- Use a blue toilet bowl cleaner to get him interested in the toilet.
  - If you experience a series of setbacks, return to diapers and try again in a few months.
It is perfectly normal for babies and toddlers to be fearful of many things. They may not only fear strangers but, at times, relatives and friends. They may be afraid of animals, of loud noises or of the dark. At certain ages, they may especially fear being left by their caregiver; this is called separation anxiety.23 Remember that these anxieties are just a normal part of their development. As your child grows and matures, these fears will likely fade.24

What can you can do to ease your child’s fears and support your child?

• Do not ignore or make light of your child’s fears. Acknowledge these fears and talk to your child about them. You can say something like, “I know that you are afraid of the doggie. But I will protect you and make sure that you are safe.”
• Use a transitional object or a “lovey.” These comfort objects, such as blankets or stuffed animals, can give a child a sense of security when he is fearful.
• Problem-solve through play, and use your imagination to help your child deal with her fears. If your child is afraid of the doctor, it might help to get her a toy doctor kit. If she is afraid of the dark, set up a favorite stuffed animal to guard the door during the night.
• For separation anxiety, make sure that you help your child ahead of time by talking about where you are going and when you will be back. Wave goodbye when you leave, rather than trying to sneak out.
• Transition gradually. You can for instance, bring your child to child care or have a babysitter arrive a few minutes early. This will allow him time to explore and become acquainted (and hopefully engrossed in an activity) with his caregivers before you leave.25

Reducing the fear or anxiety that your child feels will necessarily reduce stress for both you and your child. If these tactics do not help or if your child’s fears begin to interfere with her daily activities, you should seek help from your child’s pediatrician.
how does consistent discipline of my toddler reduce stress?

Disciplining your toddler is one of the most important things you can do to help your child mature. Appropriate discipline teaches responsibility, protects your child from dangerous situations, and demonstrates socially acceptable ways to behave. It may take energy and effort to discipline consistently but it is worth it. When your child is responsible, safe, and behaves well, both of you will experience less stress. Disciplining children is a controversial topic. There is no one right way to discipline a child. Every child is unique and responds to different methods of discipline in his or her own way. What works for one child may not work for another, even if they are siblings.

Some tips for disciplining your toddler are:

- Find a balanced approach to discipline, where misbehavior is punished but good behavior is continually positively reinforced.
- Explain the rules to your child clearly, describe the consequences of not following the rules and then be consistent about discipline if your child breaks the rules.
- Make sure that the punishment matches the negative behavior; never give a harsh punishment for a minor offense.
- Time the punishment so that it happens immediately after the negative behavior, or as soon afterward as possible.
- Be careful that you do not inadvertently reinforce negative behavior. For example, let’s say you start laughing when your toddler drops her food on the floor because you think it is cute. This sends a mixed message.
- Be a strong role model. One of the most important ways your child will learn how to behave is by watching you.
One of the best ways to decrease your stress as a parent is to proactively address parenting issues with your children. If possible, try to set up sleeping and feeding schedules for them so that you and your children know what to expect and when to expect it. Following tips for playtime and dealing with teething and colic, etc., can help you decrease stress. Anything that you as a parent can do ahead of time to ease transitions for your children or help them through difficult situations will result in better emotional health for you and your family.
homework

1. What does proactive parenting mean to you?

2. List some areas where you proactively parent (sleep schedules, eating routines, discipline, etc.)

3. List one area you’d like to focus on being more proactive. List some of the steps you will take. (For additional suggestions on deciding how to begin, you can e-mail the Listserv.)

4. Name some ways that you can bond with your infant or toddler.
endnotes


