

Self-Care: Barriers and Basics for Foster/Adoptive Parents

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When a foster or adopted child has special needs, parents must juggle appointments with mental health therapists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech therapists, psychiatrists, ophthalmologists, allergists, and asthma specialists. They must attend IEP meetings, keep in touch with the school principal and their child's teacher, check in with the social worker, and establish a schedule for personal care attendants (PCAs). Ongoing appointments and emergencies keep parents so busy that attending to their own feelings and needs may be put on hold.

Self-care, however, is crucial for foster and adoptive parents. The physical and emotional toll of caring for traumatized children can be overwhelming. Children can project hurt onto parents and, at the same time, blame parents for feelings of loss and despair. Parents must understand both the complexities of foster care and adoption, and their child's unique needs. With that knowledge and an ongoing commitment to self-care, parents can more easily remain effective and balanced.

Barriers to Good Self-Care

Unfortunately, adoptive and foster parents face many barriers to taking care of themselves.

To start, the phrase—"Take care of yourself!"—has become so trite that, for many, it has lost all meaning. When someone casually tells an adoptive mom whose kids have special needs to take care of herself, she may feel frustrated and angry. It's easy to say. It's not easy to do.

Second, many who choose to foster and adopt are natural caregivers. They have pets, partners, children, and aging parents who all require care and attention. Most days, the amount of energy they devote to others' needs far exceeds any energy directed to their well-being. In fact, many caregivers are uncomfortable being on the receiving end of others' attention and assistance. They don't want to be too needy, or seem like they are not up to the challenges they have taken on.

Third, many adoptive and foster parents really want to be there for their families. They want to remember birthdays with a homemade cake. They want to be the cheerful volunteer at their child's school. They want to deliver a meal to a sick friend, help out at church, and serve on task forces that address children's needs. So, they work longer and try harder to meet their families' needs.

Fourth, too many parents simply do not know what would help them. They know something is missing, but can't put their finger on just what might make them feel better. Parents are often told, "Call if there is anything you need," but it is hard to call and ask for help, especially when you cannot even articulate what you need. This leaves many parents vulnerable and exhausted.

Even more significantly, too many foster and adoptive parents believe they somehow shouldn't need support. Many times I have heard parents say that they are in no position to complain or ask for help since they chose to foster or adopt their children. But even when parents know what challenges the child faces, it is often impossible to predict how living with a certain child will change a family.

Compounding matters, recent disasters—9/11, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the earthquake in Pakistan, and the prolonged conflict in Iraq—remind us all that there are always other people who are worse off. We are taught as children to be happy with what we have since other people have it much harder. It is little wonder we sometimes feel guilty because our ongoing trauma pales in comparison to these catastrophic tragedies.

The Road to Good Self-Care

From working with parents, I know that to overcome social, mental, and emotional barriers to self-care, you must first come to understand the importance of taking care of yourself, and then build self-care into your daily routine. You must believe that you are worth taking care of, and that your happiness and well-being are not peripheral to, but essential for good parenting. Once you can accept that:

- **Give yourself permission to need something.** It is okay to ask for help. Having needs and trying to meet them is not a sign of incompetence or weakness. It is part of healthy family life. Thirst is your body's signal to drink and prevent dehydration. In the same way, when you feel stressed out, it is time to take a break so you can regain perspective and deal with the issue at hand more constructively.
- **Keep it simple.** Make life choices that fit your family. Develop consistent routines. Create a safe environment. Understand and respect both your limits and those of your children. Resist the impulse to over-commit what little time you have. Prioritize. Save energy for things that really matter, and seek outside help as soon as you need it. When possible, take advantage of respite opportunities and PCAs to relieve some of the stress during really rough times.
- **Stop comparing yourself to other adults and families.** They do not live your life, and they are not raising your children. Get comfortable with compromising and being different. Your child may talk, think, achieve, behave, and live differently than other children. Instead of measuring your family's worth by other people's standards, set expectations for your family based on your children's capabilities and your family's reality.
- **Know which part of the day is the hardest and have a plan to make it go more smoothly.** If getting ready for school is rough, prepare as much as you can the night before. If bedtime is hard, start early and set a predictable routine. Decide beforehand how you will respond to behaviors that make that time of day so trying. Accept that you won't get anything else done, and do only what you must to get through the hard parts.
- **Join a parent support group.** Meeting with other parents who have similar experiences and feelings is one of the most powerful and renewing activities for anyone raising children who have special needs. Just knowing that you are with people who "get it" is affirming. Group members may also be able to trade respite care with you. If a group is not an option, find at least one person outside your immediate family with whom you can be real, and whom you can trust to understand.
- **Have down time every day.** Maybe it's a morning walk. It might be 10 minutes with the paper and a good cup of coffee. It can be writing in your journal before bed. It could be the drive into work, or times of silent prayer in church. Your mind, body, and soul need time to regenerate from life's stresses. If you have no down time—a time without distractions and demands—you cannot benefit from moments of reflection and calm that may help you to center and stay balanced.

- **Routinely have something to which you can look forward.** Maybe it's coffee with a neighbor after the kids are at school. Or a glass of wine Friday night. Or date night with your partner. It could be going alone to the grocery store Saturday morning or having an uninterrupted bath. Remember, waiting too long to reward yourself for a job well done is not an effective way to shape your behavior. Immediate positive reinforcement works for adults too.
- **Accentuate the positive.** It may not be easy, but as you step back to evaluate how you and the family are doing, find time to laugh at the silly situations that come up. Recognize the good in yourself and your children. Celebrate every step forward, no matter how small. Stay connected with your partner. Eat something you really enjoy. (Nutrition is important. Indulgence is wonderful.) Find affirmation in the process of raising an adopted child.

Caring for children who have special needs is a matter of the heart. Self-care is a mind-set and a positive choice. If you can find a balance between caring for your children and meeting your own needs, you will ultimately be much better equipped to do both.