

The Importance of Prioritizing Leisure for Parents

Caring for young children is demanding, and parents and caregivers often feel tired and stressed. Parenting stress is the physical and emotional strain parents experience when life feels overwhelming or when parenting demands on them feel greater than the resources or time they have.ⁱ Over time, ongoing stress can lead to parental burnout, which is a state of deep exhaustion, emotional distance from parenting, and feeling overwhelmed or ineffective as a parent.ⁱⁱ

That's why it's important for parents to have some time for themselves. This is where leisure comes in. Leisure activities are enjoyable activities people choose to do in their free time.ⁱⁱⁱ They provide relaxation, stress relief, and a chance to socialize with others. This article encourages parents, organizations that work with families, community groups, and workplaces to recognize that leisure is important and to support parents in making time for it.

Research^{iv} has found that a positive attitude toward leisure means you believe that leisure activities can help renew your energy and that you value your leisure time. Parents who felt more positive about leisure had less stress and had more closeness with their child. This is supported by past research showing that leisure is linked to lower stress and better well-being.^v In other words, when parents see leisure for themselves as important, it can help protect their relationship with their child, especially during more stressful times. What's a good takeaway? When parents understand that leisure helps both them and their children, they may feel more motivated to make time for it. This can also help reduce the guilt many parents feel when they take time for themselves.

When working with parents, here are some specific strategies that may be helpful to include in parenting programs:

- Teach parents that leisure is part of healthy parenting, not a “luxury.”
- Encourage parents to start small with low-cost, low-investment leisure activities (e.g., walking, listening to music, reading).
- Teach parents to reframe guilt: *“Taking time for myself helps me be a better parent.”*
- Help parents make a simple “leisure plan.” For example, if the goal is to have 15 minutes of uninterrupted time four days a week, add it on the calendar like any other important appointment.
- For households with more than one adult, have families practice “time trade” planning (e.g., one parent or caregiver gets 30 minutes, then the other does).

Community support can also help families overcome barriers to leisure, such as cost, time, or lack of child care. This includes partnerships among local service providers and financial support programs. Here are some specific strategies for communities:

- Provide discounts or scholarships for classes, gyms, or recreation programs.
- Partner with schools, churches, or nonprofits to create “parent break” events. For example, members would rotate roles – some volunteer to supervise children while others take a break, then switch the next time—so every parent has a chance to rest or enjoy a few hours off.
- Create resource lists that show where parents can find low-cost leisure options nearby.
- Offer free or affordable child care as part of parenting programs or community classes (e.g., fitness, cooking, family events at the library, support group meetings).

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The workplace can also help support parents.

Research findings^{iv} also suggest the importance of free time, paid time off, and flexible work schedules, so parents have space for their own leisure. Paid time off can support parents' well-being and family relationships, and it can also help improve workforce retention. Here are some specific strategies for the workplace:

- Encourage employees to actually use their paid time off.
- Offer flexible options when possible (shift swaps, flexible start times).
- Normalize short breaks for well-being (walking breaks, lunch away from desk).
- Share messages that time off supports strong work and strong families.

Leisure is an important part not only of a healthy lifestyle, but also of healthy parenting. When parents have time to rest and recharge with activities that they enjoy, they feel less stressed and more able to respond warmly to stressful parenting situations, which can help them feel much closer or connected with their children. And when programs, communities, and workplaces use research-based strategies to support parents' leisure time, it can certainly make a positive difference for everyone.

References

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