



by Karen Stephens

## Parenting Stress: Find Creative Ways to Cope

Raising kids can be an exhilarating adventure — rewarding and precious. Seeing life through a child's eyes keeps parents in touch with our own sense of wonder. Kids remind us of the simple, everyday beauties and mysteries we adults often take for granted.

Being a parent *centers* us by giving us a clear purpose. Being responsible for kids' welfare gives us a frame of reference for making life decisions — both big and small. And in the grand scheme, good parenting is a great way to make a positive contribution to the world.

But in nitty-gritty daily life, child-rearing is also a tough, draining, and stressful job. It's often overwhelming and confusing. And it just never lets up. Even when kids are grown and gone, worries still haunt the dark of a parent's sleepless night.

There are scores of nagging questions to face as you shape the character of children. How do we raise kids who accept and love themselves as well as others? How do we teach them to get the most out of life, while giving it their best? How do we help children create a life that brings them joy, satisfaction, self-respect, and dignity?

Those are the big questions parents butt up against; and wouldn't it be nice if that's all there were to worry about. But while grappling with these big issues, you also have to figure out what to feed the tykes and how to clean *them* and *their* clothes on a daily basis. Then there's the carpooling and child care or school dates to remember, and so on.

Because of those diverse demands, parenting is riddled with occupational hazards: fatigue, nagging self-doubt, short-temper, and mental-exhaustion — in other words, parent burn-out. When burn-out isn't avoided, or early symptoms are not managed effectively, important things in life get lost in the shuffle — important things like creating a peaceful and nurturing home environment for kids.

You are your kids' primary support, their safety net as they learn to independently maneuver the challenges, expectations, and obstacles of life. To do your best, parents need a lot of stamina and fortitude. You have to take good care of yourself *first*. Only then can you take good care of the kids. If you burn out, their sense of stability and security is undermined.

One way to prevent parent burn-out is to reach out for help, guidance, reassurance, or inspiration when your energy runs low. Turn to trusted family members, friends, neighbors, co-workers, or fellow members of your faith community. Accept their assistance and ask for their input as you wrestle with parenting challenges. Work to visualize the family life you want and make plans and decisions accordingly.

And there's more you can do. Practice what you preach to the kids about good eating, regular sleep and exercise. Work to moderate smoking and drinking. So you don't resent the time kids take, schedule weekly personal time for yourself. It will

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give you some mental relief from non-stop parenting demands. Some people find mental relief in a movie or a good novel, others in a favorite meditation spot. Discover what works for you.

Being a parent doesn't mean you have to forget who you are as an individual. Whatever your personal passion is, follow it and put focused concentration into it. Hobbies are anywhere you turn, from scrapbooking to photography to woodworking or collecting baseball caps. Just find something that stimulates your own imagination and tickles your fancy. Pursuing your own interests is a great role model for kids' learning.

At least monthly, have dinner with friends at a restaurant that doesn't even HAVE a children's menu. It doesn't have to be fancy, but it does have to be for grown-ups. If you prefer to cook for friends, hire a babysitter to come in for the evening to keep the kids occupied while you enjoy adult conversation and laughs.

A quick way to counter parenting stress is to keep inspirational reading within easy reach. It doesn't have to be long or heavy duty. Sometimes you get more relief from an on-target cartoon, joke, or poem than from reading an entire book. Book sellers have a bevy of inspirational parenting books on their shelves.

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For quick *pick-me-ups*, clip poems or jokes that really speak to you. Post them at a handy spot, such as your bulletin board, refrigerator, bathroom mirror, car visor. Refer to them when your patience is stretched too thin or you're at your wit's end and need a fast attitude adjustment.

When all is said and done, what kids need most is your energy, positive attitude, time, and attention. Providing that is a more precious and influential gift than money could ever buy. So to counter burn-out, make time for yourself. Manage your time wisely. Work at keeping in touch with your enthusiasm for parenting, and keep your emotional reserves in good shape. Only then will you consistently be able to give your kids the support they need most — your helping hand and understanding shoulder to lean upon.

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.