

# Stressed out!

## A Lesson on Reducing Motherhood Stress

### Playgroup # 20

#### Materials Needed

- Encourage mothers to bring a past day planner or calendar with them.

#### Handouts

- 30 proven stress reducers
- Weekly Stress Log

### Introduction

Parenting can be very stressful. Whether you are a stay at home parent, a working parent, a single parent, a married parent, a mother, a father, a parent of one child or a parent of several children; remaining cool, calm, and full of energy can help get you through the day. But it is important to first realize what it is that stresses you out.

With a partner or as a group, have the mothers think about their past week, month, and year and to talk about the things that make them stressed out. They can look at a day planner or calendar to help jog their memory.



### Lesson Plan

#### Lesson Objectives

- Understanding Motherhood Stress and how it affects your child
- Discovering ways to prevent and reduce stress

Mothers are so busy taking care of everyone else in the family, that they often put themselves last on the list—or leave themselves off the list altogether! However, since the rest of the family relies heavily on mom, they need to be sure to take care of themselves, and be willing to accept help from others as well.

### Understanding Stress

When we are worried, anxious, or hurried our body begins to feel tense. This is a natural reaction; our body is preparing us for flight or fight. Our body has been given the signal to prepare to respond to a threat. If a real physical danger were present, we would be able to protect ourselves by attack or retreat. When the emergency was over, an "all clear signal" would be given and our body would relax and return to its normal state.

In our modern existence, our mind is often bothered by many things. We call this stress. Constant mental stress keeps our body in constant tension which itself becomes a form of stress. We can handle stress by learning to cope with thoughts and events so they no longer are stressful. We can also learn to relax. When we practice relaxation, we are giving the "all clear signal." As we become better at giving the signal we are able to trigger the relaxation response so our body will return to its normal state.

Chronic tension affects each of us differently. Depending on the person it can cause sleep disturbance, increased or decreased appetite, headaches, stomach aches, poor concentration or irritability. Some diseases may be caused by or made worse by chronic tension. Also, our immune system can be weakened. Thus, making us more susceptible to colds and other infections.

### **If Mom Ain't Happy, Noboy's Happy**

Unrelieved stress can affect your child and family. If the basic needs of the care taker are not met, than it is difficult to meet the needs of others. As a parent, you are constantly giving; if your giving well is not constantly replenished you will eventually run out of things to give. Taking care of yourself physically, mentally, and emotionally is an important factor in caring for others. If you are worried about whether an activity for yourself is too selfish or not, a good measure is to ask yourself what the intention of the activity is. Is this something that will help you become a better parent in the immediate or long run? Will it replenish your energy to keep you going throughout the day?

### **Preventing and Reducing Stress**

- 1.) **Lower Unrealistic Expectations** – Whether they are your own or someone else's, let go of fantasized images. Growth comes from altering the expectations or your attitude toward living up to them.
- 2.) **Take some time for yourself** – Don't feel guilty about scheduling in some alone time. Find something that calms your nerves - a walk to the park, regular exercise time, or locking the bedroom door for a 10 minute rest. If it keeps you sane, it is not selfish; rather it can benefit the whole family.
- 3.) **Set priorities** – Realize that not everything will get done, but put the most essential things first. Not everything is equally important.
- 4.) **Maintain a supportive network** – Feeling nurtured and supported can be a huge buffer against parenting stress. Keep in contact with others who are in your similar situation. Keep your spouse involved in and informed about your day. Sometimes a listening ear can go a long ways.



## **Activity**

This activity will help you learn Three Proven Ways to Relax. They are: (1) Progressive Relaxation, (2) Deep Breathing, and (3) Pleasant Images. Briefly try each way with the mothers. Have them pair off to discuss which works best for you individually and why. Have the mothers set a goal to implement at least one of the relaxation tips into their daily lives. Inform them that they can also do these activities with their children at home and it will also help their kids to prevent stress as well.

### **1) Progressive Relaxation**

We will start with your feet and lower legs. Tighten those muscles just as hard as you can. Feel the tension. Then gradually release the tension. Let your feet and lower leg muscles relax just a little bit at a time. Repeat this with your upper leg and hip muscles. Again, experience first the tension and then the gradual relaxation as you slowly release all the tension.

Next, tense the muscles in your hands and lower arms. Make a fist. Tighten them as tight as you can. Then gradually let them relax. With each muscle group, the relaxation feels good. As you relax one group at a time your whole being will begin to feel relaxed, calm and peaceful. Repeat the tension and then gradual relaxation with your upper arms and shoulders. Remember to tense and hold before relaxing.

Next, tighten your stomach muscles. Hold the tension and then gradually release. Then, move to your chest muscles. Take a deep breath. Hold it while tensing your chest muscles. Gradually let out your breath while gradually letting go of the tension in your chest muscles.

As you have now progressively relaxed most of your major muscle groups, you may feel a tingling sensation. You will find that your breathing has become slower and deeper. You are now relaxed.

Try to practice on a daily basis. When you have followed the above for about 10 to 15 sessions, try it without tensing the muscles. See if you can just relax one muscle group at a time while breathing slowly and deeply.

### **2) Deep Breathing**

When we are tense, our breathing is often shallow and rapid. In fact, most of us do not breathe properly, tense or not. Improper breathing robs us of oxygen which purifies our body as well as helps our body produce energy. Fortunately, learning to breathe properly is not difficult. Find a comfortable place to lie down. Place your hands on your abdomen just below your ribs. Begin breathing slowly and deeply. If you are breathing properly, you will feel the expansion in the abdominal area before your rib cage expands. Spend 5 to 10 minutes several times a day practicing your deep breathing. You will notice that as you become more proficient, your breathing will improve during your normal activities.

### **3) How to take a mental vacation.**

When we think about things that are upsetting, our body tenses up. This is because the lower centers of our brain, which regulate body functions, does not distinguish between real images and those which are imagined. If you think about being in an uncomfortable situation, your body will begin to respond as if you were in that situation. Since you have probably had lots of experience thinking about things that cause tension, you actually have all the skills necessary to do just the opposite. Imagine something that makes you feel good.

To prepare for your mental vacation, relax your muscles and take a few deep breaths. Then close your eyes and imagine you are someplace you enjoy. It could be the beach or the mountains or enjoying a favorite activity. Try to fully experience this imagined event. See the sights. Hear the sounds. Feel the air. Smell the smells. Tune in to the sense of well-being. At first, you should allow 10 to 15 minutes for this exercise. As you become more adept you will find that you can feel like you have been on a long vacation or just come back from a good time in just a few moments.

#### **A Few More Tips**

- Listening to music is very relaxing.
- Reading can be rewarding for many.
- Enjoying a hobby can make life more fun.
- Research has shown that exercising several times a week (even just a walk) can reduce stress and tension.
- Research has also found that regular church attendance and daily prayer result in lower blood pressure and better coping.
- Avoid too much caffeine or alcohol.
- Both of these are thought to be relaxing but they can actually make things worse.
- Avoid watching the news before going to bed.
- Look for the good things that happen each day and be thankful.
- Reach out and touch someone. Giving IS better than receiving.
- Be forgiving. As you forgive others, remember forgiving yourself is extremely important too.
- Don't hold grudges.
- Keep in mind that no one is perfect, we all make mistakes.
- Try to take one day at a time and remember tomorrow is another day.

#### **References**

Stress Management for Parents <http://www.childdevelopmentinfo.com/parenting/stress.shtml>.

Stress Management Tools for Parents - <http://about.com>

Tannenhauser, Carol. (1985) Motherhood Stress.