

# Solutions Newsletter

December 2021



Effective School  
Solutions

*Solutions* is a newsletter published by ESS for parents, guardians, and caretakers. Each issue highlights an important topic related to children's mental health and provides practical applications for parents in the home environment.

## Self-Care for Parents During this Holiday Season

It is common during the holiday season to be reminded about the need to take care of oneself and to find ways to cope with the inevitable stressors. This year, however, the usual holiday stress is complicated by the economic, psychological, and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Over the last 20 months, we have been bombarded with news about infection rates and death counts, lost jobs and closed businesses, children's learning loss and developmental setbacks, conflicts over vaccination and mask mandates, supply chain issues, and sometimes conflicting advice from health care experts. Amidst all the bad news, we have also been showered with lists of suggestions for self-care.

We have all seen enough lists of seemingly simple strategies for self-care to last a lifetime. And, not surprisingly, they are not always helpful. It's not that mindfulness and breathing exercises and physical activity and eating right and getting enough sleep and taking time for oneself are bad ideas. It's that the reality of parents' lives can keep these actions out of reach.

Studies by the American Psychological Association have shown that parents of school-age children are reporting amongst the highest rates of mental distress since the beginning of the pandemic. Juggling work and/or other responsibilities while at the same time overseeing their children's at-home schooling have left many parents in a state of physical and mental exhaustion.

The concept of "burnout" is most often associated with helping professions like health care workers and first responders, but researchers are finding that burnout can occur in other roles, including parenting. The simplest description of burnout is too much stress and too few resources to cope with it. This imbalance can lead to one or more of the four common aspects of parental burnout:

- Chronic exhaustion
- Feelings of guilt and shame because of frequent comparisons with one's previous parenting self
- No longer finding fulfillment in one's parenting role
- Emotional distancing from one's children to preserve energy

Burnt out parents report constant worries about how they'll get everything done, along with disrupted sleep, excessive anxiety, and irritability. In its most severe form, parental burnout can lead to punitive parenting practices, neglect, or abuse.

Even under the best of circumstances the holiday season can cause stress, but this year we remain in the grips of the pandemic. ESS wishes you a bright 2021 holiday season, and encourages you to:

- Talk about your stress, with nonjudgmental family members and friends, with other parents, with a therapist, and/or within virtual communities. You are not alone - parental burnout is more common than you think.
- Protect your time and energy: Remind yourself that it is OK to say "no" and ask for help.
- Take micro-breaks: e.g., take 5 minutes in your car after grocery shopping to listen to a guided meditation or call a friend.
- Schedule medical appointments that you've put off all year.
- Resist the urge to "come back stronger than ever" this holiday season with gift buying and other activities that might only deepen a state of exhaustion. Create changes within your own circle of friends and family members: discuss ways to lessen work (e.g., potluck dinners, fewer guests) and limit expenses (e.g., decide that each other's company is gift enough and eliminate or limit typical gift giving traditions).
- Avoid "Toxic Positivity" that accentuates the positive ("everything will be OK", "look on the bright side") while ignoring the very real pain that you may be experiencing. Denying painful emotions only makes them worse. Leave space and time to grieve the losses you've experienced over the last year and a half.
- Avoid using the word "should" and let go of perfectionistic standards and expectations.
- Acknowledge and grieve the racial trauma that may affect you and your children.
- Practice loving kindness toward yourself rather than focusing on perceived short-comings and imperfections.

### Resource:

[The impact of parental burnout \(apa.org\)](https://www.apa.org)