



Strategies for Parents in Stressful Times

By Judith Kunst, Youth First, Inc.

Recently, Youth First offered a free workshop in Evansville called "Strategies for Parenting Stress." Now that I'm working remotely and stuck at home 24/7 with my three teenage sons, I'm so glad I was there that night.

The presenter was Canadian social worker and self-care expert Charlene (Char) Richard, founder of the Caring Safely© curriculum that provides education and training around compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma. The first thing she told me and the other sixty-plus parents in attendance that night was that self-care is not RETREAT to a bubble bath or a massage we can't afford but rather RESILIENCE in the face of adversity or struggle. Char said we can build our resilience, like a muscle, by learning and practicing some simple yet powerful mental health strategies. These strategies can reduce our stress and enable us as parents to react to tough or confusing family situations with loving confidence and even joy.

Strategy #1 - Learn your child's primary inner task

Char invited parents to remember that the project of growing from a baby to an adult requires a huge amount of work. She said that each stage of childhood has a set of primary tasks that a child is subconsciously driven to accomplish in order to grow. One task of a 3-year old, for example, is learning what it means to call something "mine;" one task of a 6-year old is learning that planning is part of successful activities; and one task of a 16-year old is learning to separate emotionally from their parent.

Char gave us a link to a researched list of kids' primary inner tasks by age, and as soon as I got home that night I started clicking and learning. Here it is: [Center for Parenting Education's list of development tasks](#).

If we as parents can understand our child's developmental task, Char said, we can approach behavioral issues in a new way. When you feel your stress or frustration rising, pause and think if your child's behavior is related to one of their developmental tasks. If so, label this, in your mind, as normal behavior that the child needs to do and see how you can guide them to do it in a way that works in the family environment. If this is a recurring behavior, think about ways to support it prior to it becoming an issue at an inconvenient time.

Strategy #2 – Find the pause

The thinking, adjusting, and deciding that are involved in learning your kids' primary inner tasks can't easily be done when you're in the middle of high stress or when you're super tired. We parents need a way to reduce our sense of being overwhelmed. Strategy #2 is all about "finding the pause" with specific in-the-moment stress reducers.

Char started this section of her presentation with a closer look at stress. She said that as humans we're hard wired to respond to threats to our well-being with a "fight or flight" response. Our heart rate speeds up, we sweat, our muscles tense, and blood drains away from our brain to provide more energy for our bodies to fight the threat or run away from it. This threat-response mode is great for short-term bursts—but horrible for long-term periods. Because our brains don't make a distinction between physical threats and emotional threats, parenting—even in normal times—can put us in what Char calls a state of chronic stress.

Two simple practices can help us get free of chronic or overwhelming stress. The first is to notice when the fight-or-flight response is beginning—recognize your early warning signs. We all know we're in stress mode when we're yelling, or crying, or slamming doors. But what if we pay attention to earlier signals that stress is ramping up? Those signals are very particular and different for everybody. I might pinch my lips together and push my sleeves up to my elbows, while you might start cracking your knuckles or compulsively tidying up. Char gave us a one-page worksheet to help us identify our personal early stress signals: you can find it [here](#).

Once we know how to recognize those signals, we can interrupt the rising stress and "find the pause" with belly breathing or another relaxation technique. Char gave us a lesson in deep belly breathing—described in [this handout](#)—and though I knew how to do this technique from yoga classes, I learned something new from Char. If you make your exhale last longer than your inhale, your body sheds a bunch of its stress. Six weeks into practicing this strategy, I can tell you that it works!

You can use the deep breathing strategy before, during, or after stressful parenting encounters. You can also teach your children how to use this technique to reduce their stress. (Try showing them [this video](#).) Learning to notice and interrupt our very understandable stress responses, then replace them with a personalized relaxation response, can set the stage for addressing kids' needs and our own needs more effectively and sustainably.

Strategy #3 - Solve problems as a family

I'd heard the words "fight or flight" to describe what we do in a high-stress state; Char's talk introduced me to words that capture what we do in a low-stress state:

“Rest and digest.” Regular practice of belly breathing can get us quickly to a state of rest, Char said, where we are much freer to think through or “digest” the information we need to solve parenting challenges and maximize family success.

Strategy #3 is Char’s five-step method to solving problems with your children.

- 1) ASK: On your own, ask yourself: is this your problem, your child’s problem, or a family problem?
- 2) IDENTIFY: In a family meeting, talk through the full scope of the problem and write that shared understanding of it in a place everyone can see and refer to.
- 3) BRAINSTORM: Have every member of the family write out or suggest possible solutions. No judgement! Every idea is welcomed and written down.
- 4) AGREE: As a family, find one solution that everyone can agree to try for a short, set period of time. Post this agreement in a visible place.
- 5) REVIEW: When the agreed time period has passed, review the solution and either keep it, add to it, adapt it, or change it completely.

Strategy #4 - Find the joy

I confess during Char’s description of Strategy #3, I felt a little cynical. *Easy to say, hard to do*, I thought. Perhaps that’s why Char ended with Strategy #4: Find the joy.

Research on gratitude has shown that focusing on what we are grateful for can improve our well-being. Parenting and caregiving take so much work that we can often slip into a negative mindset focusing on what we don't like or have. Intentionally reviewing our days and focusing on what we are grateful for can help us shift our thoughts to what we do have and what we do enjoy. Intentional gratitude.

At the beginning of the day think of three things you are grateful for and why you are grateful for them. Throughout the day take 3 mindful moments or mental snapshots of positive things you experienced as a parent. At the end of the day think of three things you are grateful for and why. You can choose to share something you are grateful for with someone else or you can keep it to yourself.

In conclusion

There it is, Char’s secret sauce. Four powerful strategies for parents to reduce our stress: Label stressful behavior as normal behavior, learn to interrupt our stress response, embrace the family problem solving model, and increase joy with gratitude.

Now we are all ready to be resilient parents, right? I have found that my answer is yes...on most days. On others, I might need that bubble bath or massage!

Support for Parents in Crisis

To the reader: At the end of this workshop, Youth First and Char Richard provided a list of local resources and supports for parents in crisis:

Ark Crisis Children's Center 812.423.9425

Community Partners 812.435.5287

Deaconess Cross Pointe 812.476.7200