

The Cutting Edge by the Oklahoma Autism Network

Parents and caregivers know all too well the stress that can go along with caring for a child or adult with autism. Research supports this and has demonstrated that caring for a child with autism results in significantly higher stress levels than parenting a child with other neurodevelopmental disabilities or a child without disabilities. A recent study from Virginia Commonwealth University provides some insight into strategies that parents can use to most effectively manage the daily stress that can come with parenting their child with autism. The study included data gathered from 93 parents of children between 4 and 12 years of age with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. Participants were asked to complete daily measures that included stress and coping strategies, daily mood, autism symptomology, and parent personality factors. The results indicated that on average, improved daily mood was associated with coping responses that included:

- problem solving or taking action to deal with the stressful situation,
- seeking support and reaching out to others,
- positive reframing or changing one's view of the situation to see it in a more positive way,
- expressing emotions in a constructive way, and
- working out the best way for dealing with the needs of the child given the limits of the situation.

Coping strategies that were found to result in a more negative mood included:

- blaming or directing anger at another person,
- withdrawal from the situation, and
- feelings of helplessness or giving up on the situation.

Some examples of positive coping responses that parents may find helpful include:

- Seeking support from other parents who have had similar experiences, either through a parent group or a one-on-one friendship
- Learning more about strategies to help their child by reading or attending a training. The Oklahoma Autism Network and other local organizations offer some great trainings that can help families take a pro-active approach to supporting their child.
- Identifying things that are meaningful to the family and finding ways to engage in those activities when possible. For example, if your family enjoys going to the zoo, access support to develop strategies so that you can go to the zoo and feel successful in doing so. This may mean talking to your child's therapist about strategies that will help make the trip a success.
- And last but not least, whenever possible parents should find time to do things they enjoy, even if it means only for a short period of time (reading a book or magazine for 15 minutes a day) or once a month (going to lunch with a friend).

Overall parents have a greater impact on their child over their lifetime than any other professional or person. It is important that parents find time to take care of themselves so they are equipped to support their child in becoming the best that he can be.

Pottie, C.G. & Ingram, K.M. (2008). Daily stress, coping, and well-being in parents of children with autism: A multilevel modeling approach. *Journal of Family Psychology, 22* (6), 855-864.