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### ***Model for Teaching Effective Coping Strategies to Parents of Children with Learning Disabilities***

All families experience normative and transitional life event stressors such as birth, death, and moving. In addition, parents are subject to the inherent chronic stressors of parenting. Parental psychological stressors are related to the worries that parents have about the physical safety and the growth and development of their children. Parents generally take pride in their children's accomplishments and are hurt by their children's failures.

Parenting is particularly difficult and stressful when children do not measure up to family or community expectations. When a child is diagnosed with learning disabilities, all of the attention is focused on helping the child. But parents also need assistance in coping with their own feelings and frustrations.

The results of my doctoral dissertation revealed that parents of children with learning disabilities had very elevated scores on the Parenting Stress Index, signifying that they perceived far more stress in their role as parents than did parents of children without learning problems. Therefore, a workshop model for teaching parents how to cope with the stress associated with raising children with learning disabilities was developed. The basic premise of the model is that by increasing coping skills, parents can reduce their own stress and can become effective mediators in reducing stress in their children.

The first step in the study was to ask parents to list specific stressors they associated with raising their children with learning disabilities. Some of the most frequently mentioned were: parent guilt; worry about the future; parents' perception that other people think they may be the cause of the problem; difficult behaviour of children with learning disabilities; feeling a need to protect their child; disagreement between parents about dealing with the child; disagreement between parents about the existence of a problem; increased financial burden; finding competent professional services; and sibling resentment of attention given the child with learning disabilities. All of the stressors identified by parents in the initial study were compiled into a Learning Disability Stress Index to be used with workshop participants. At the beginning of the workshop session, participants complete the index in order to identify their own specific stressors, and to determine if their stress is primarily internal, external, or physiological.

## Internal Stress

Internal stress factors come from within the individual and include attitudes, perceptions, assumptions, and expectations. Expectations of parents about their child lie at the root of burnout. When expectations about parenting are not met, the first thought is What did I do wrong? Therefore, parents must learn how to develop realistic expectations and how to recognize when negative self-talk defeats effective coping. Parents should identify their own self-defeating assumptions and think of alternative messages. They must be kind to themselves, to accept themselves and their child as fallible, and to boost their own self-confidence by noting and using personal strengths and talents.

### Beliefs that Lead to Internal Stress

- 1 Giving 100% every day is what every parent is expected to do.
- 2 The success or failure of my children depends entirely on me.
- 3 I will never be bored as a parent.
- 4 I will be seen by society as a good and honourable person because of the effort I put into being a good parent.
- 5 I refuse to let anyone else care for or influence my children.
- 6 I should always deny my own needs for rest and recreation in order to help my children.
- 7 I should do everything for my children and not require that they take on the responsibilities that they are old enough to handle.
- 8 I should spend every possible moment with my children.
- 9 I should feel guilty if I need a break or want some attention for myself.
- 10 One role in my life can satisfy all my needs and can support all my dreams.
- 11 My children should appreciate everything I do for them.
- 12 My children must like me.
- 13 Other people must see me as a good parent, able to handle everything.

### Management Strategies

- 1 Renounce love, affection and approval from children as needs, rather than bonuses.
- 2 Boost your own self-confidence.
- 3 See the positive side of stress.
- 4 Understand anger and use it constructively. Control anger by controlling wishes.
- 5 Practice positive thinking by daily affirmations. Repeat positive messages to yourself over and over.
- 6 Write them out and put them around the house.
- 7 Develop a support system by sharing honestly your feelings of frustration, anger, and concern.
- 8 Learn to tolerate change because children change often. You and the children both change moods and feelings.
- 9 Be able to live in the presence of imperfection.

- 10 Learn to catch yourself when you say negative statements to yourself and challenge them.
- 11 Develop the positive belief that you can control destiny. Be healthily selfish, free yourself from needing outside approval.

## **External Stress**

External forces also impinge upon parents of youngsters with learning disabilities. Neighbours, friends, and relatives don't understand why such a normal-acting child is having academic problems. Teachers frequently don't fully understand the ramifications of a child's problem. Parents are called upon by the school to help make decisions about the child's academic program but often feel helpless as the child's advocate because of their own lack of understanding. Because external stressors are those that are situational, and often involve relationships with others, parents are encouraged to develop assertiveness skills. Problem-solving techniques, time management, and goal setting are helpful when dealing with stressors associated with raising children and running a household. Because coping with a child with learning disabilities is so emotionally draining, parents also are encouraged to develop intimacy skills and a support system.

## **External Stress Factors**

- 1 Dealing with school about child's placement or program.
- 2 Coping with difficult child behaviours.
- 3 Educating neighbours and relatives about the child's problems.
- 4 Helping siblings understand the problems associated with learning disabilities.
- 5 Getting child in right school.
- 6 Helping child with homework.
- 7 Financial pressures.
- 8 Working with spouse on child management.
- 9 Carpools.

## **Managing External Stressors**

### **Analyze Problems Thoroughly**

- 1 Describe the problem with a specific statement.
- 2 State how it could be worse and how it could be better.
- 3 Determine what is keeping it from getting better. Propose solutions for the things over which you have control.
- 4 Plan action.

### ***Use Time Management***

- 1 List priorities both short and long term.
- 2 Do a time use audit.
- 3 Compare time use with priority of goals.

## ***Develop Assertiveness***

Know your limits and be realistic about what you can accomplish. Say no to unreasonable demands. Learn about your child's problems and needs so that you can be an active participant in meetings with school personnel and can offer suggestions to coaches, neighbours, and relatives.

## ***Physiological Stress***

The final type of stress is physiological stress. Parents of children with learning disabilities need to recognize that children with learning disabilities require exceptional amounts of energy. In order to replenish energy, parents need to be sure they get sufficient rest, eat well balanced meals, and exercise vigorously. During the workshop, parents learn meditation or relaxation techniques to use when they feel stressed, anxious, or fatigued.

## **Physiological Stressors**

- 1 Diet
- 2 Exercise
- 3 Rest
- 4 Recreation

## **Management Strategies: Everyone knows what to do, but doesn't always do it**

- 1 Make a plan and stick to it. Make sure you include all of the elements necessary for a healthy life.
- 2 Follow your physician's advice.
- 3 Team up with a spouse or friend for time off.
- 4 Use relaxation tapes or exercises to calm down after a hectic day.
- 5 Find a place of retreat (the bathroom or the car, for instance), and go there for cooling off when the tension is very great.
- 6 Make recreation and relaxation a priority, so that you have some time off during the week. Studies have shown that psychologically healthy families have less-than-perfect housekeeping.
- 7 Hire out or trade off chores that are time consuming and distasteful. Sometimes it is well worth paying someone else to do those chores so that you have more time and energy to devote to yourself and your family.

Parenting children with learning disabilities presents special challenges. Professionals working with parents need to recognize the difficulty parents face when dealing not only with the child's everyday problems but also the associated social and emotional problems of school failure. Parents are eager to learn better coping strategies and parent groups can provide both skill training and emotional support for parents of children with learning disabilities.

## ***Developmental Milestones***

We've compiled this list of developmental milestones from a variety of sources (see Resources) as a quick reference guide. Although the behaviours listed below represent typical activities and achievements for the corresponding developmental ages, these time frames are averages only. Every child is unique and may achieve these milestones earlier or later than the average, and still be within the normal range.

### ***Birth to eight months***

The newborn infant learns about herself: she moves her arms and legs and sucks her fingers; she learns to trust her parents and expect them to come when she cries; she learns she can cause things to happen, like create noise by shaking a rattle. She also learns about her feelings and expresses them to her parents: pleasure, joy, sadness, fear, anger, and excitement. She recognizes familiar and unfamiliar faces: she can identify her parents' voices from others; and feels most comfortable with familiar people. She learns to intentionally move her body. And she learns to communicate through gestures and babbling sounds.

### ***Eight to eighteen months***

The developing child learns to feel differently about himself based on how his parents interact with him; if they listen to him, praise him, ask him to help, or allow him to try new things, he feels proud, valued, confident. His expression of his feelings becomes stronger. His attachment to his parents grows, too. He develops favourite toys, and likes to play with other children, but does not know how to share yet. He imitates his parents' actions. He learns to sit, crawl, and walk. He makes eye contact and points to what he wants. He makes long babble sentences and can say one or two words, but can understand more than he can say.

### ***Eighteen months to three years***

Now the child feels powerful and independent, but still needs parents to set clear and consistent limits. Sometimes she still vacillates between acting like a baby and an independent toddler. She begins to have some self-control. She learns that others have feelings and learns to use language to express her own feelings. She can turn pages of a book, and kick and throw a ball. She enjoys listening to stories and music and playing with sounds of words.

### ***Three to four years***

The child can run and skip, and even balance on one leg. He can put on his shoes and button his shirts. He tells simple stories and enjoys playing with other children. He can draw recognizable simple objects. He asks lots of questions and begins to generalize.

***Five to seven years***

Now the child can completely dress herself. She has good balance on her scooter and can print simple letters. She enjoys playing with her favourite friend, and they take turns and follow the rules of simple games. She enjoys having some level of responsibility and likes to follow the rules. She enjoys home life but is also interested in learning about her neighbourhood.

***Seven to nine years***

At this stage, the child can build model airplanes and complete puzzles. He can play simple musical instruments and enjoys arts and crafts. He can ride a two-wheel bike, walk backwards, and tie knots.

***Nine to twelve years***

The child often becomes proficient in a sport, in constructing things, in working math problems, in self-expression, or in all of these. These skills might influence her later in her development as she chooses her vocational path. Her imagination still flourishes, but she begins to become more logical.

***Early Adolescence (12-14 years)***

Now the young adolescent begins the move towards independence. He struggles with his sense of identity and can be moody. He can successfully use speech to express himself but is more likely to express feelings by action than by words. His close friendships become more important and so he pays less attention to parents and family. He realizes that parents are not perfect and can identify their faults. He sometimes returns to childish behaviour and begins to test rules and limits. His peers influence his choices about hobbies and clothing.

***Middle Adolescence (14-16)***

The youth is now quite self-involved, and alternates between unrealistically high expectations and poor self-image. He is extremely concerned with appearance and with his own body. He complains that parents interfere with his independence and often withdraws emotions from them. His peer group influences him, and he often becomes concerned with popularity and being part of a select group. He begins to examine his inner experiences, which may include writing a journal. Intellectual interests emerge, and he develops his sense of ideals and chooses role models.

### ***Late Adolescence (17-19 years)***

The young adult has a firmer sense of her own identity. She is able to plan ahead, think ideas through, set and meet goals, compromise, and accept delayed gratification. She has an overall greater emotional stability and has a more developed sense of humour. She can make independent decisions and takes pride in her work. She develops a greater concern for others, and for the future.

***Good Luck***