How to Reduce Stress and Beat Burnout

Our early childhood program opens at 6 a.m. and closes at 6 p.m. One day, everything went wrong. A child tried to put a shoe down the toilet. The keys to the kitchen were lost. The milk was sour. The sprinklers went off while the children were playing on the lawn, and there weren’t enough dry clothes for everyone. It was just a rotten day.

One mother called and said she would be late. The teacher who usually closed was ill, so another teacher had to stay. It had been a 12-hour day and she was tired. She held the child in her lap in a rocking chair to wait. When the mother finally arrived, she looked at the teacher and said, “Oh, what I wouldn’t give for a job like yours where I could sit all day and rock.”

Preschool teachers face many stresses in their daily work, including long hours, physical demands, and unpredictable situations. But you can take steps to stay emotionally healthy. Here are 10 strategies for reducing stress and beating burnout so you can continue to enjoy teaching.

1. **Do something you enjoy.** Make time for a favorite activity or hobby, like gardening, cooking, painting, carpentry, or listening to music. These simple pleasures can help you relax and recharge.

2. **Get support from other teachers.** Connect, share ideas, solve problems, and benefit from the experience of others by starting a preschool teacher support group. All you need are a few teachers and a regular meeting place. The group can set some ground rules for working together at the first meeting. Don’t have time to meet face-to-face? Connect with teachers in other ways. You can find or become a mentor teacher, sign up for an early childhood e-mail Listserv, or join an online community like the one for Teaching Young Children readers (go to www.naeyc.org/tyc and click on Discussion Boards to join).

3. **Exercise regularly.** Exercise can improve your mood, prevent disease, boost your energy level, help you manage your weight, and promote better sleep. Do you struggle to find time to work out? Incorporate exercise into the day. Go for a brisk walk during your break; run, skip, or hop with the children on the playground; add some movement exercises to circle time; park your car at the far end of the mall or grocery store parking lot; and take the stairs instead of the elevator.

—Docia Zavitkovsky, Listen to the Children
Eat a healthy diet. Coffee, soft drinks, and sugary snacks provide a temporary boost but often lead to a crash in your mood and energy level. Instead, eat nutritious foods that are low in sugar, salt, and fat, like fresh fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans, and nonfat yogurt and cheese. Be sure to stay hydrated by drinking water throughout the day.

Get enough sleep. A good night’s sleep supports physical and emotional health. While everyone’s needs are different, adults do best when they get seven to eight hours of sleep each night.

Adjust expectations. If you often feel overwhelmed, you may be trying to do too much. Prioritize your “to do” list and focus on the most important tasks. Ask for help from your family, friends, supervisor, or colleagues. If you are asked to take on a responsibility you can’t handle, decline politely.

Put yourself first. Preschool teachers often put others’ needs before their own. Avoid a regular pattern of working late or coming in on weekends. Make time for yourself each day so you can be your best when working with the children.

Ask for support when you need it. Recognize times when you need help in the classroom. Perhaps you feel overwhelmed or have temporarily lost control of your emotions. Ask a colleague to step in for a minute to assist you or to let you take a break. Just a short time away can allow you to regroup and return to address challenges calmly and effectively.

Practice stress-relief techniques. Write in a journal; talk to a counselor, family member, or close friend; pray; breathe deeply; practice yoga; meditate; use guided imagery—these are all techniques to relax the mind and body. Find one or two stress-relief techniques that work for you. Use them to prevent and cope with stress.

Get inspired! Create an inspiration album. Include thank-you notes from families, children’s artwork, photographs, inspiring quotes and stories about teaching, kudos from colleagues and your supervisor, and a list of the reasons you are a preschool teacher. When you need a boost, spend a few minutes reviewing the contents of your album to stay motivated and ready for a challenge.

SUPPORTING DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Finding time to learn children’s home languages can be a challenge. Download songs and children’s stories in a language you are learning and play these when walking or working out. This stress-free way of learning a language makes the time pass more quickly and lets you gain a new skill that will help you be a more effective teacher for the dual language learners in the classroom.