

# Parenting the Preschooler

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 **Working for Wisconsin Families**

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## The Support Network

Parenting a preschool child is a **big** job. Parents need family and friends to help them.

There is an old African saying: It takes an entire village to raise a child. In our world, to raise a child **well**, it takes parents who have relatives and friends, neighbors, community and religious groups they can count on to support them. Friends, family, and other people you turn to for comfort, advice, or help are your "support system."

Social support is especially important to parents of young children. One reason is learning. You see how someone else gets their child to put away the blocks before lunch. It is even more helpful to see how they get **your** child to do this! Another is child care help. Sometimes you need someone to watch your child for a few minutes, or all day on Saturday. Sometimes you are at your wit's end, and it helps to have someone you can call for emergency child care help: "Mary, if I don't get away from these kids for an hour I think I'm going to explode." And sometimes it is just a relief to get together with another parent, to let your kids play with each other while you two have time to chat together.

There are five main kinds of help you can get from your support system.

**1. Help with Belonging.** People like to feel they are part of a group--that they belong. It feels good to know you belong to a group. The group could be "the Bowman family," or "members of the Methodist Church," or "the Parent Support Group." Belonging means that the group is not complete without you. Belonging means that people know you. They care about you and will not forget about you.

**2. Help with Feelings.** Often people want to share their feelings with someone else. A support system can help. You can share your angry or sad feelings. People will listen to you and help you to feel better. A support system is also good for sharing happy feelings. Bad feelings get better if you can talk to someone about them. Good feelings get better when you talk about them, too. People in your support system like to talk to you, too. You can share the good feelings of your friends. And they come to you for help when they feel bad, too. That makes you feel needed.

**3. Help with Things.** Some people work and make enough money. They can buy many of the things they need. But some people do not have jobs or do not have enough money. They cannot buy the things they need. Even people who do have money like to have help with things. And most people like to share the things they have with others. "Things" can be food, children's clothes, a ride to the doctor's office, help moving a refrigerator, or holding a ladder.

**4. Help with Information.** People need to know many things in this world. They need to know how to get a job and how to do a job. Shoppers and voters need information to make choices. Parents need to learn about children. Your support system can help you with information about many things, including how to be a better parent. Who can give you tips on getting children to bed peacefully? Who can you call about a child's earache? Classes, books, TV, newspapers, and publications like this one help you get information, too.

**5. Help with Finding Help.** Sometimes your support system can't help you. But it can help you find another support system. Friends or family may help you decide which doctor to call or how to locate a babysitter.

## Your Support System

To help you identify your support system, answer the following questions. Write in the names of the people who give you support.

- ▶ Who listens to you when you need someone to talk to?
- ▶ With whom do you share good or bad news?
- ▶ Who appreciates you?
- ▶ Who appreciates you for what you do?
- ▶ Who stands up for you, even when they might not totally agree with what you're doing?
- ▶ When you need advice, to whom do you turn?
- ▶ When you have a problem, to whom do you turn?
- ▶ Who helps you make decisions when you need to think through options and consequences?
- ▶ Who can you learn from, by watching how they do things with children?

The people you named for each of these questions are an important part of your life. You depend on them. They form your informal support network. In turn, you also give them support.

As you look over the people you named, ask yourself these questions:

- ▶ Are there one or two people whose name shows up often? Are you leaning too heavily on these members of your support network?
- ▶ Are there needs you have that are not being met? Which of these needs are most important to you now?
- ▶ Who else could fill the needs you have?
- ▶ Who could help you meet your needs if you were to take the risk of asking?
- ▶ In what ways do these people benefit by knowing you? How do you enrich their lives? For what can they count on you?
- ▶ What specific steps could you take to expand your support network? What things can you do this week? Next week?

### Building a Support Network

Part of your goal of being a good parent is to make and find friends. Friendships go through three steps. The first is awareness. That means that you know that the other person is alive. The second step is contact.

That means you and the other person start to talk. You may talk about the weather, sports, how many children you have, or other things. The third step is sharing. At this step you tell the other person about yourself. You help each other out. You become friends.

After you make friends you need to keep them. It can be hard work. But it is important work. To keep friends:

- ▶ Let them know you care about them.
- ▶ Listen to them.
- ▶ Help them when you can.
- ▶ Ask for help when you need it.
- ▶ Thank them after they help you.
- ▶ Learn to deal with problems.
- ▶ Have fun together, find joint activities that you both enjoy.

Building a support network is like making a patchwork quilt: a variety of different pieces are added over the years. Sometimes an unusual piece adds some special quality that you had not expected. (A special friend might be that unusual piece.) Sometimes, too, you'll need to patch over places where the material has faded or worn thin. (A friend may move away.)

Supportive friendships often come about indirectly from working and socializing with others. In order for this to happen, it is often necessary to first reach out to others. You can do this by:

- ▶ Volunteering your time to community groups or organizations.
- ▶ Visiting your neighbors.
- ▶ Joining a parent support group or other organization.

Your support system can help you be a better parent. You get a sense of belonging, share feelings, and get or give help.

Sources:

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