HFF Curriculum Meeting the Challenge of Teaching Self Care to Your Children

This is Carla Atherton, Director of the Lotus Health Project and the Healthy Family Formula, healthyfamilyformula.com, and welcome to the Healthy Family Formula Program, where we revolutionize modern health, one empowered family at a time.

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In other words, I am here to empower you with information, and it is up to you to make the decisions that are right for your family.

Meeting the Challenge of Teaching Self Care to Your Children

Remember when you were an adolescent or a child? When you were unbreakable and thought that 50 was OLD (and now that you are 50, you feel like you’ve only just begun!)? When you were a child, you thought that you could jump off of a cliff and not think about the consequences, and when you became a teenager, you could jump off a cliff and not care about the consequences. Children are carefree. And teens are not quite carefree but perhaps a little careless? A little reckless, rebellious, saying “bring it on! I’m not afraid,” even when they are, just a little.

Our children challenge themselves, and they challenge us in every way. Our little ones follow behind their parents, imprinting and relying on the food and shelter and love we provide, and although the older ones say they don’t want our help, they still need us. They demand our attention, want for us to be there when they want us, but not be in their faces when they want to be on their own.

And in this quest for independence (because this is what we want them to do, right, become capable, self-reliant people?), they don’t always do the things we want them to do. Sometimes they don’t take care of themselves the way we would take care of them or understand the expectations or limitations we adults can place on them.
So, in my house, for example, my kids know that they need to eat right and get enough sleep and lay off of the electronics and get some exercise. They know that, but do you think they always do it?! Heck no! This is why we parents have honest conversations like this to problem solve, to find ways to encourage and guide our children while letting them become themselves, independent of us.

Yeah. Good luck, right?

Well, being the optimist that I am, I know that it is possible to make it through childhood and the teen years with both parent and child alive and intact. I know that the best success I have ever had with my own kids and with other families just like ours is to remember a few key points and to act on what we find.

What’s the Problem?

As you are starting to hear from more and more people concerned about children’s and teen health, our kids are not that well. They are often tired and sick and stressed and have sleep problems, skin problems, mental health issues, digestion problems, and are even succumbing to bigger issues such as cancers, diabetes, autoimmunity, autism, and ADHD in increasing numbers. Poor health directly relates to learning difficulties, low self-esteem, stressful relationships, and lack of happiness and satisfaction with life. This is alarming. And parents want to know how to stop it.

If you are a parent of a teen, a kid who is no longer a child but is not yet an adult, you know that gone are the days when you have your little gaggle of ducklings waddling behind you, imprinting, following, and doing everything you lead them to do. You are now in the business of herding cats, each one deciding to go their own way, sometimes indifferent to your efforts, sometimes hiding from you, and sometimes outright running away. But when you have what they need and want, they are right at your side.

Like cats, it is all about free will with teenagers, and rightly so.

So, keeping your children healthy involves teaching them how to care for themselves. Right from the get-go. Right from the time they are little. And teens need to be guided and encouraged to practice self-care.
When your kids are not always making the best decisions regarding their health or if they make mistakes (but everyone else was eating pizza, mom, and I am sick of being different), make sure that you tell them that:

- You don’t think that they are doing anything wrong.

AND, more importantly,

- They are not broken.

They need to know that there is nothing wrong with them if they have health issues, weaknesses, wants and desires that are not healthy. We all do. The practice is to learn to value what elevates their health and devalue what takes away from what they want in life. For a child, that may be less tummy aches, and for a teenager, that may be clear skin or a healthy weight. That may be strength, energy, or good performance in their sports or studies keeping in mind the child’s goals, interests, and desires.

When giving your children some guidance about their own self-care, know:

- When less is more. This is when they are not open to your old people opinions and want to figure things out on their own, or when they simply don’t care to hear about what you may want to share. Sometimes they are too young for the information and don’t need any explanation at all. Be respectful of this. And whatever you do, don’t take it personally! Think about what it might be like if someone was always telling you what they thought you should do (even if they were right). You would tell them to blow it out their old wazoo! Unsolicited advice is never received well.

- When you need to listen. Ask them what they think they need, not always talking about what you think they need. Sometimes talking less and listening more will help your children to figure out what you want them to discover for themselves.

- When more is more. This is when they need more information and are asking and open to receiving it. The best mentoring happens when a child seeks you out for help. Notice when those moments are happening, drop whatever it is you are doing, and take those opportunities every single time they come. Every single time.
- That every child and teen is the center of their own attention, especially the teens. And that's OK. They are in a very important time of profound change and should be focusing in. They might be selfish. They might be self-absorbed. But it isn’t because they are morally bankrupt or that you haven’t done a good job at encouraging good values, it is because they are just in a different headspace than we adults are. And that will change as they mature.

- That the here and now and what is important to them today is what is at the forefront of their minds. If depressed, your teens won’t care about math, if struggling with their weight, they won’t give two hoots about planning for their future. If your 8 year old didn’t get invited to a birthday party because they are not liked in their school for ill behavior, what does it matter if they get their reading done? It is your job to be concerned with these things while they are not and to be ok if they are not full-on enthusiastic every day about everything. It is quite the act, but we parents need to balance what is important to our teens now with what you think is important for their future. Know when to encourage them and when to know that today isn’t the day to push.

It is key to see when math is not in the cards for today and to be able to abandon it for a walk with your teen, playing some fun games with your 6-year-old, or having a good chat over a special supper. They will be better connected to you in the end, will feel heard and respected, and will learn much more about life and themselves and you than they would have learned stewing over an open book from an argument you had about how finishing their math will give them a future they may not even want.

- That slow integration is the key, especially if it is about self-esteem. They are growing into themselves and will feel awkward and confused and insecure sometimes. Again, remember when you were a child? It was the end of the world if that ex-boyfriend or girlfriend saw you with a big zit on your nose or when you couldn’t keep up with the rest of the soccer team. Children put importance on different things than we adults tend to do. And teens don’t always yet know their place in the world or their own value. So, I remind you to connect, be gentle with them and yourself, and don’t tell them everything. This is their time for discovery (within limits, of course – again, it is our job to keep them from jumping from that cliff!). But do not steal that experience from them. We have had our childhoods, now step aside.
Connecting the Dots

But there is a trick to making those moments happen, for those teens to come to you, and this involves connection. If you and your teens are disconnected, there is nothing that you can say or do that they will even remotely want to follow. If they don’t think you understand them, then they won’t want you to guide them. They won’t believe that you will know how if you can’t see them, if you don’t take the time to get to know them and to listen.

More often than not, it is not them who need to listen to us, it is we who need to listen to them.

And from this connection comes trust. They trust you and your opinions more, and if they are listening, you can let go and trust that they will make the right decisions.

The Developing Brain

It is also important to note that they can only do what they are developmentally capable of. Children’s brains are at a different stage of development than a teen’s, and they both differ than that of an adults. It is important to recognize this and know what to expect so that we are never blaming them for their limitations and always recognizing their strengths.

Expect the impulsive limbic system to be in change much of the time. Expect them to do before thinking. But also expect them to be creative, innovative, and capable of anything!

Self-Direction

The time of adolescence is the best time to encourage a self-directed life. This way of being reinforces learning and life habits that are forming right now. And it is also very challenging because when you encourage autonomy, you will forever have thinking children, people who are not always in agreement but always sure of themselves! Again, back to herding cats! (Can no one agree on what restaurant we go to today?!) But when they are empowered in this way, they will be more inclined to practice self-care no mater what their friends or the people they see on TV do. They have the opportunity to live a truly autonomous life. A healthful life. And that might mean that we need to let go a little, too.
What You Can Teach Your Children About Self-Care:

Just like adults, young people are multi-layered, multi-faceted individuals. Teach your kids to take care of every aspect of themselves: mind, body, and soul.

Physical Self-Care

- teach them how to eat right.
- encourage them to sleep enough and well.
- give ample opportunity for exercise.
- set some guidelines and house rules to have them lay off of the electronics.
- give them tools to reduce physical stress.

Mental/Emotional Self-Care

- let them be with friends.
- encourage them and give them the time to have fun.
- allow them to explore their world and environment.
- help them to take care of their emotions by first recognizing and acknowledging them and finding ways to calm, think differently, and de-stress.
- schedule less stuff to do and more time to just be.
- help them to stay connected to family by doing things like having regular family meals at the table and all being responsible for cooking together.
Mindset and Motivation

- encourage them to consider advice and external opinions, but to always think for themselves, question, and try things on.

- teach them to look in, not out; by this I mean that children and teens can be encouraged to unplug from tv, electronics, insanely busy schedules, and other distractions when in need of some centering or connection with family and/or themselves. Walks in nature are highly beneficial, as are family game nights; space and even boredom leave time for creativity and self-discovery. When children and teens are taught not to rely on distraction to get through their strong emotions or the opposite of this, their boredom, they are less likely to rely on unhealthy quick fixes that can lead to lack of happiness, depression, and addictions.

- Teach them techniques and healthy lifestyle practices designed to reduce stress so that it does not control them. Kids are stressed these days, and why? They are fearful of failure and are pressured to perform and make life decisions they may not have the answers to such as career choice and future plans. So many of the stressors that come from their outside world profoundly affect your children’s health. Be mindful of the stress you add to this mounting force placed on them. Ask yourself where you are adding to their stressload and be gentle, patient, and have a good look at what is really important both for you and to your children and what is stuff that is not important or necessary. Observe what you have been told is important and what actually is important. Take the pressure off of yourself and your kids.

- teach them to nurture themselves in this fast-paced world they were born into through meditation, yoga, chi gong, gratitude, and mindfulness.

- give them opportunity for expressive outlets like active sports, creative art classes, whatever floats their boat. Just be careful not to overdo their schedules and avoid having any expectations whatsoever for how they should perform. It is up to them to decide what they want to get out of their activities and to challenge themselves. These activities are not to set them up for failure or judgment but to explore themselves and enjoy their lives. These experiences are for them, not their coaches or their parents.
So, how do we become more confident in the decisions we make regarding our children?

How do we guide without dictating, lead without forcing? How do we encourage our children and teens to take care of themselves and each other so that they can live healthier lives?

1. Encourage them to get to know themselves through space and time and exploration. Our children don’t learn how to be simply from advice and books but from experience.

2. Consider the opinions and expertise of your own mentors, elders, and the experts and professionals, but always live by your own core values. You will never be content if you do not live by your own values and if you don’t trust yourself to be in charge of your own life. You will never be satisfied with your parenting if you don’t act on what you know is right for you and your children. Your teens need to grow into that sense of responsibility, that sense of empowerment, as well.

3. We are all taught to fear something at some point in our lives; don’t let it get you (or your children). Although we develop fears through experience (like burning ourselves on a hot stove), the media, our cultures, our families all pass fears on to us that are not necessarily useful. Whatever you do, try not to pass on your fear to your teens.

4. Most importantly, walk the talk. Take care of yourself. Take good care of yourself. Deep down, you know what is best for you and your children. You can lead by example, guide, and learn from them, as well. And in those dark days when you feel frustrated and ineffectual and that your kids aren’t listening, when you are afraid that you have made mistakes, that your precious kids are not healthy, not happy, not thriving, know that if you are taking care of yourself and are present and are listening, you will have more good days than challenging ones.

Be patient with the process and with yourself and your children, and your children will do what is right for them. They will choose health over suboptimal existence. They will be healthy, whole, and happy, not in a blissful way every moment of every day, but in a deeper sense of the word, a sense that they are nurturing their authentic selves and that they care enough about that self to sift through all of the demands placed on their focus and attention and put health at the front of the pack. They will thrive, not because you told them to, but because they want to.
RECAP:

Children and teens need to be respected in order to learn from you.

Children’s and teen brains are at a very different developmental stage than that of adults, as are their needs, wants, desires, and interests.

Lead by example.

Trust the process. Health is a marathon, not a sprint.

Trust that they will be just fine.