



Why “ME® Time” Matters: Being the Moms Our Children Need, the Women We Want To Be

As moms, many of us feel guilty when we take time for ourselves. We feel selfish and irresponsible if we go out with friends, have a date night with our partner, take time to go to a class, take a nap, exercise or relax in a hot bath. We may think we should be devoting all our time and energy to our children, waiting until they are grown up to have time to ourselves. But, for many reasons, taking time for ourselves can help us be better mothers and help our children be healthier, happier people, now and later. In this brief presentation at “A Night Out for ME®,” Marti & Erin Erickson, co-hosts of “Mom Enough®,” presented **the “what,” the “so what” and the “now what”** of why “ME Time” for mom is a gift for the whole family.

THE WHAT: What do we mean by “ME Time”?

- Anything that strengthens your physical and mental health, advances your personal growth and feeds your soul
- Being active, taking a break, having fun, learning something new, reflecting on your life, sustaining and strengthening your support system
- “ME Time” may be three days long, 30 minutes, or even 30 seconds. Small things make a difference!

THE SO WHAT: Why does “ME Time” matter for you and your children?

Benefits for you when you take time out:

- The primary benefit of ME time is that it decreases stress! Stress triggers the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system – think flight or fight response.

The autonomic nervous system is responsible for “automatic” functions like your heartbeat and breathing. The sympathetic nervous system is the gas pedal – it gets you going when there is stress. The parasympathetic nervous system is the brake – it slows you down. When the sympathetic nervous system is activated, our bodies prepare to fight or flee. In our brains, the amygdala, which is a pair of

almond-shaped structures, serves as a security guard or a gate to higher-level thinking. It assesses threats. When we're stressed, the gate to higher-level thinking is closed because we need to react to the situation. There's no time for thinking. For example, if you're about to get hit by a ball, you just duck.

- Relaxation triggers the parasympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system – the relaxation response. The relaxation response has long-term health benefits.

The parasympathetic branch – think p for peace – is the branch that calms you down. When this branch is activated, you are able to think clearly and rationally and respond to situations as they arise. This is because the amygdala – the brain's security guard – is in a positive state, which means an open gate to higher level thinking. There are many health benefits associated with decreased stress. Decreased stress is also good for relationships. When the parasympathetic branch is activated – positive state, open gate – and we're thinking clearly, we're able to respond in effective ways to challenging situations with our children, partners, bosses and friends. In this way, relaxation is also good for our relationships. And that is good for us!

Benefits for your children when you take time out:

- Your emotional availability and sensitivity to your children's needs are enhanced

Although we moms often feel guilty when we take time to care for ourselves and replenish our energy, when we do so we are more able to be emotionally available to our children, responding more warmly and sensitively to their needs. In contrast, when we are stressed, anxious or depressed, we often are impatient, harsh or unresponsive. We also view our children's ordinary behavior in a more negative way. A wealth of research has demonstrated how important emotional availability and sensitive responsiveness are to the development of parent-child attachment in the early months of life and to strong, healthy parent-child relationships at every stage.

- Your children learn from your example

Our children learn even more from what we do than what we say. They are watching us from day one, learning what it means to be an adult, for better or worse. What a powerful lesson it can be for them to watch their mom live a healthy, happy, balanced life. What a beautiful example we set when we make time to play, relax, learn new things and build positive relationships that will support us during our childrearing years and well beyond.

- There is a spillover effect of your positive emotions (“If mama ain’t happy...”)

As moms, our emotional states can set the tone for our families. If we are highly stressed, our children are likely to feel stressed. Also, research shows that our warm and sensitive presence is an important buffer for our children when they experience unavoidable stress, preventing stress from reaching toxic levels in our children’s bodies and brains. For example, the presence of a caring, supportive parent is associated with lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol, as measured in a child’s saliva, when the child undergoes a painful medical procedure or encounters some other stressful experience. There’s truth in the old saying, “If mama ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy!”

NOW WHAT: How can we build “ME Time” into our daily lives?

Tips Erin has found to be helpful:

- Stop and take three deep breaths or just pay attention to your breath for five breaths
- At a recent training for healthcare providers, I learned this one from Matthew Sanford, founder of Mind Body Solutions and a guest on an upcoming Mom Enough® show. Simply soften your mouth. Try this now. As you soften your mouth, did you notice how you had been tightening your mouth or jaw and carrying tension there?
- Next time your children are driving you up the wall and you feel like yelling, take a moment and, rather than yell, just lower your voice and respond in a slow, deep quiet voice. You might wonder why I’m suggesting this as a tip for “me time.” The reason is that when you yell and get stressed, that stress carries forward. The effects of that stress don’t end when you stop yelling. So, to rally some me time after a frustrating moment with your children, make that moment less frustrating. My children always look a bit surprised when I have that crazy face on and instead of yelling or getting extremely frustrated, I just lower my voice and talk really slow and low. And I feel less stressed.
- Schedule ME time in advance. I go on a writing retreat every year – okay, well now it’s 3 times a year. Thank you Kate Hopper, my writing instructor who hosts these retreats! Planning ahead and scheduling ME Time is one way to make it happen.

Marti's favorite tips for building "ME Time" into your life:

- Put even the small things on your calendar a week or a month in advance – things like workouts, walks, 15 minutes to sit outside and read or just breathe. When my kids were young, I even put “take a shower” or “go to bed when baby sleeps” on my daily calendar to make sure I took those basic selfcare steps!
- Build small spontaneous breaks into your daily life by being prepared. For example, I always keep a folding canvas chair, walking shoes, and a good book in my car. That way I'm ready to seize the opportunity if I have an unexpected 15 minutes free to take a walk, find a grassy place to sit outside, or even just sit in my car and read a chapter in a good novel.
- Think outside the box about ways to incorporate healthy activity into your work. For example, since the 1980s my professional colleagues have come to know that, whenever possible, our meetings with each other will be “walking meetings.” We will walk around a city lake or along the Mississippi River for 45 minutes, then sit down for a few minutes to write notes on the things we discussed. Similarly, a majority of my get-togethers with friends include a walk, combining fresh air, exercise and a great conversation without interruption.
- Treat yourself to learning something new – a language, an instrument, a craft, dancing, cooking, whatever ignites your passion. You will keep you brain healthy and alert and, for your children, you will set a great example of lifelong learning.
- Build and sustain your support system. Many studies highlight the importance of a strong support system for a mother's health and wellbeing, as well as effective parenting. It's been important to me to be very intentional about maintaining good support systems. So, when my first child was born in 1973, I started a monthly book group that still meets more than 41 years later. I also have a group of neighbor women with whom I have walked around Lake Harriet for decades.

And, of course...

- Listen to our weekly Mom Enough shows

Think about forming a “Mom Enough Group” in your neighborhood or workplace, meeting for coffee or lunch once a week to talk about that week’s Mom Enough show

- Come to “A Night Out for ME” every spring
- Share *your* tips for integrating “ME Time” into your daily life by posting your ideas on our website, www.momenough.com or the Mom Enough Facebook page, www.facebook.com/MomEnough

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