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Parents Network

WINTER 2018 ISSUE

PARENT TO PARENT

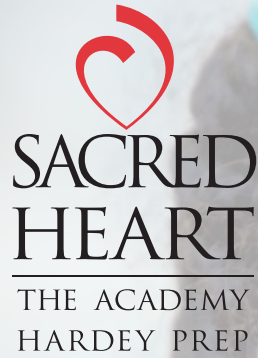


How to Deal with Snow Days

Family-Friendly Winter Walks

#REALTALK: Kids' Birthday Parties

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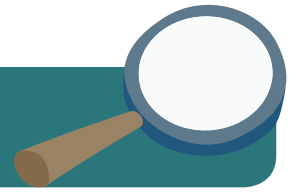
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OUR MISSION

Connecting a diverse community of families with the resources they need to navigate parenting in the city

PARENT TO PARENT

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Parent to Parent contains articles and information straight from our NPN member community.

For information about editorial submissions, email: newsletter@nnpnparents.org

For advertising, email: advertising@nnpnparents.org.

We look forward to hearing from you!

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From the Executive Director

Dear Members,

For some reason, winter always surprises me. It comes every year, yet when it does I'm scrambling to find matching mittens (then getting to the point where just two mittens, any two mittens, will do!), hats, and warm clothes. It's a process that is made even more difficult now that my daughter picks out her own clothes in the morning—meaning, I really need to clear out summer options from her drawers and closet to avoid having to attempt to logically explain to a 6-year-old why she can't wear a summer dress and capri pants to school on a 30-degree day...which makes me think I can really use the advice in this issue on embracing the January purge!

Also in this issue are tips from two NPN parents on finding the best CPS path for your child and your family. Thinking back to last winter, this was the time of year that my family was going through the CPS testing process with our oldest as she approached kindergarten. I felt lucky to be a part of NPN at that time, and took advantage of all of our resources and parent-to-parent feedback, as others were in the same boat. We ultimately found a school that's been a great fit for my daughter and our family—but we know that high school is right around the corner (and academic centers even earlier than that!). Thinking about long-term goals, as our parent-authors suggest, helps to keep it all in perspective.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Knutson, *Executive Director*



Photo courtesy Liz Knutson

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FIRST WORDS

What's new with NPN and our members

OVERHEARD ON THE FORUM



When are kids ready for an allowance, and how much?

"I would say no matter the age, if your child is interested, go for it. Why not start teaching them some money management?"

"We started our son when he was 5. We give him \$5/week. Of that, \$1 he gives back to me to give to charity, and \$1 goes in his piggy bank. The remaining \$3 goes in his wallet, which he can do with as he pleases."

"My kids are 4 and 6, and they get \$4 and \$6 per week, respectively. Of that, they keep half to spend, a fourth to save, and a fourth to go to charity. About once per quarter, we research a charity to send money to."

"There's a book called *The Opposite of Spoiled* that has some great ideas for teaching kids about money."

"We just started this with our 8-year-old and twin 5-year-olds. Oldest gets \$5/week and twins \$3/week. They have to do 'special chores' other than things we expect them to do daily. For example, oldest walks the dog and picks all the mulch out of grass. My daughter has to clear out the van of all water bottles, garbage, etc."



MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Samantha Goodman, NPN member since 2015
Co-Chair of the Moms Book Club



What are your favorite NPN events and why? When my baby was young, I loved my New Moms Group; it was a real lifeline during such a confusing and exciting time. Now I love the Moms Book Club, of course! We have great discussions and polite disagreements and a lot of fun talking about books, as well as our kids.

What is the best advice you'd give to new parents? Not every decision

requires hours of online research. Instead, spend that time relaxing or doing something that you love.

What's the best thing about caring for toddlers in the winter? What's the worst? The best is more time for snuggles on the couch, making crafts or baking in the kitchen. The worst is getting out the door! So many layers and accessories are needed to keep everyone warm.

What's the funniest thing your kid has done in recent memory? My son is 2 and likes to run around the house wearing my husband's (clean) undies on his head like a hat.

UPCOMING EVENTS



Visit nnpnparents.org/calendar for more great events!

JANUARY

21

NPN Member Mingle

St. Josaphat School, 2245 N. Southport Ave.

Free for members! Escape the January gloom with a fun play date. We'll provide dinner and snacks for everyone!

MARCH

11

Developmental Differences Resource Fair

DePaul College Prep,
3633 N. California Ave., Chicago

Our free 7th annual fair is dedicated to providing Chicago families with school options, service providers and other resources that focus on serving parents of children with developmental differences.

APRIL

18-22

NPN Online Silent Auction

Get a deal on the things your family wants and needs, including kids' classes, restaurants, birthday party packages, theater tickets and more! All proceeds benefit NPN, a 501(c)3 non-profit.

ASK AN EXPERT

WINTER ECZEMA HELP

Payal Patel, NPN member since 2014

STICK TO SOAPS, MOISTURIZERS, AND DETERGENTS THAT DO NOT CONTAIN FRAGRANCES OR PERFUMES.

As if winter didn't present enough challenges, it's tough on sensitive skin — especially the 10 to 20 percent of children affected with eczema, also known as atopic dermatitis. It is an inflammatory skin condition that often causes severe itching and red, scaly rashes, and for many children, the winter season only makes it worse. The cold, dry air makes it harder to retain moisture in the skin. Keeping the heat turned up in the home can also make the air that much drier. Additionally, bundling up in coarse wool clothing can leave the skin very irritated and itchy.

Following the tips below will ensure a great starting point in getting through winter comfortably.

Daily soaking baths

Take a 10-15 minute lukewarm soaking bath every day. This helps replenish water back into the skin. Bring toys, play games, make it fun! This will ensure kids will get as much soaking time as possible.

Moisturize, moisturize, moisturize

After each soaking bath, gently pat dry the skin and apply a thick layer of moisturizer onto the skin. The key is to lock that replenished water into the skin and prevent it from evaporating. This is best done by applying the moisturizer within 3 minutes of getting out of the bath, and using thick emollients. The preferred agents for very dry skin are ointment-based moisturizers.

Fragrance-free products

Children with eczema often have very sensitive skin. Stick to soaps, moisturizers, and detergents that do not contain fragrances or perfumes.

Comfortable clothing

Try to avoid direct skin contact with rough articles of clothing such as wool-based sweaters. These are known to irritate the skin even more.



Photo courtesy Payal Patel

Identifying triggers

Various allergies are known to trigger or worsen eczema. These include pollens, dust mites, animal dander, and molds. Even foods can make eczema flare up. Each child has different triggers so it is important to identify what triggers your child's eczema by talking to your child's healthcare provider.

The good news is that most kids will grow out of their eczema as they get older. Although there is no way to determine who will retain their eczema into adulthood, these tips will provide a solid foundation to achieving good skin care for the cold winter months.

Payal Patel is a board-certified Pediatric Allergy physician practicing in Lakeview. She lives in Southport Corridor with her husband, Anil; their two daughters, Sejal and Priyanka; and their dog Fraggie. As a recent transplant to Chicago, she enjoys exploring all of the wonderful things that the city has to offer, and dedicating every Sunday to the Bears!



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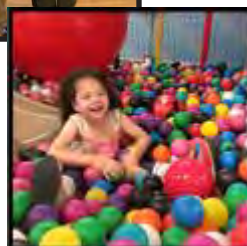
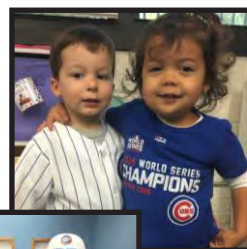
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SNOW DAYS

By Nicole Walker, NPN member since 2011

WHILE FUN FOR KIDS, SNOW DAYS CAN BE PHYSICALLY AND MENTALLY TAXING FOR PARENTS.

Do you remember unexpected snow days from your childhood? No school, TV binging, playing in the backyard making snow angels and snowmen, then being greeted with hot chocolate when it was time to come in to warm-up. All fond memories your my childhood. Right? From our perspective as children, having a snow day was just as good Christmas break. Now that I'm a parent, I must confess that I do not view snow days with the same fondness. While fun for kids, snow days can be physically and mentally taxing for parents. Not only does the agenda you may have set for the day get derailed, but you also have to combat the "I'm boreds" from your children.

Employ one or all of these tips to help you find the joy in the inevitable snow day:

Book a play date.

What better way to enjoy an unexpected snow day with the kids than to invite another parent and their kids over? Your kids will have some playmates and be distracted from telling you that they are bored every 10 minutes, while you can enjoy some adult conversation for a couple of hours.

Create a "cooking school."

Turn the kitchen into a cooking school! If you can run to the store before your partner leaves for work, grab a box of cake mix or brownie mix and some decorations and get to baking. Not only will it give you a solid pre- or post-lunchtime activity, but you can use it as a math lesson opportunity (given their age). The icing on top (literally and figuratively) is that you can use their desire to want to eat the whole batch you've baked as leverage for good behavior.

Keep a sitter/nanny on standby.

I recognize that every parent is not mentally equipped to stay home all day during a snow day. That's ok. Have grace with yourself. If you need a break, have a sitter on standby that can give you a couple of hours to run errands, or to just enjoy a cup of coffee and a good book at a cafe.



Photo courtesy Nicole Walker

Do a purge surge.

Do the kids have clothes that are too small and out-of-season? Does the playroom include toys that are no longer age-appropriate? Snow days are the perfect days to purge. Start spring cleaning early and let the kids help you purge out-of-date items. You can create a teachable moment for the kids by sharing that it's good to donate things to people in need.

Netflix and chill.

Letting your kids binge in front of the TV for day will not cause permanent brain damage. Let the kids have a movie marathon with popcorn for a few hours while you focus on tackling something on your to-do list.

Although unexpected snow days can make for long days, find peace in knowing that they are temporary and create a great opportunity to connect with your kids.

.....

Nicole Walker is a working mom living in the big city with her two beautiful children and husband. She recently added the title "mommy blogger" with the launch of her blog, *The Mommy Break Project*. Her mission is to be intentional about putting herself first for an entire year, at least once a week (that's 52 mommy breaks) so that she can achieve the perpetual state of "happy mommy." She hopes that her journey inspires moms to do whatever they need to do to be their best mommy! When she is not busy being a mom, wife, and blogger, she enjoys entertaining, reading and knitting.

HOW TO DEAL EXPANDING YOUR FAMILY

By Gertrude Lyons, NPN member since 1998

ONCE YOU HAVE A VISION, YOU CAN THEN EXPLORE AND PLAN FOR THE CHALLENGES THAT ADDING A SECOND, OR THIRD CHILD WILL BRING.

So you're thinking about a second child. Does the thought thrill you? Scare you? Send you into a panic? If you have let the thought of a second child into your consciousness, you have likely had some level of all three emotions. Wherever you find yourself at this point, know you are joining millions of families who have done the same. Even though you join the multitudes, your process will be — and should be — your very own thoughtful, discerning, and emotional journey.

For my husband and me, deciding to have our first child was a very conscious decision. We looked deeply at our intent and purpose of adding a child to our family. (Yes, individuals and couples are families, too.) We created a conception mandala, prayed, formally invited the child, and engaged in a honest internal exploration on what it meant to have a child. Our second, on the other hand, "just happened." We knew we wanted at least one more child, and since we had challenges with conceiving the first time, we figured we had time to answer some of the deeper questions while we got started. But this time, the challenge was that we got pregnant right away!

For us, it really wasn't until it came time to think about a third child that we engaged in a process of discernment around expanding our family. From that journey I share a few "Don'ts" and the "Dos" for you to consider:

Don't fall prey to cultural myths and beliefs.

The most common? Only children are sad, spoiled, lonely... so we need to have another one. Understand the pros and cons of any family constellation and be proactive about addressing them.

Don't project your upbringing onto the child.

If you did or didn't like being an only child or having a sibling, it doesn't mean your current child feels the same way. These internal, often unconscious, drivers are great topics for conversations with your spouse or other support.



Photo courtesy Gertrude Lyons

Do be content with your family as it is.

Whether you end up adding to your family or not, enjoy your current family. After our second child was born, I distinctly remember regretting not having appreciated our time as a threesome enough.

Do create a vision for your family.

A vision gives a heartfelt, expanded picture of the quality and principles you intend to create. Use all of your senses as you create snapshots of your family over the years. How do you want to feel? How do you want to experience family life? Once you have a vision, you can then explore and plan for the challenges that adding a second, or third child will bring.

The whole idea here is to use this opportunity to deepen and enrich your experience of your current family situation as you explore the possibility of expanding it. After an engaging and thoughtful process around a third child, we decided not to expand. Rather than let the pressure of passing time make the decision for us, it felt empowering to make it a conscious choice.

Dr. Gertrude Lyons is a Senior Life Coach and Director of Family Programs at the Wright Foundation for the Realization of Human Potential. Gertrude and her husband have loved raising their daughters in Andersonville and are now enjoying their recent "empty nest" status.

KIDS' BIRTHDAY PARTIES

By *Nilmari Donate-Melendez*, NPN member since 2016

YES, PARTIES ARE HARD TO PLAN. BUT THE SMILE OF YOUR CHILD THAT SAYS "THIS WAS THE BEST PARTY EVER!" IS WORTH THE EFFORT.

You've been there: the "best party ever." There are games, music, characters and an entertainer taking pictures and playing with your children. But now, it's your turn to plan the birthday party for your child and you want the same or better experience. Before you jump to hire the first company you find in your Facebook's mommy group, it's important to consider who — and what — you're dealing with. As the president of a kids' entertainment company, I can shed some light on the subject.

Are you calling a legit/legal company?

There are tons of people advertising themselves as "entertainment companies for children," and most of them are not legit companies. You'll recognize them because they want you to pay in cash, they don't have a website, or their social media pages are poorly done or non-existent. Check the small print: Real companies should have an LLC or Inc. after their name.

Who works for this company?

You wouldn't invite a stranger into your home, right? Make sure you ask: Are background checks and drug tests regularly required of employees? Many companies (especially the ones that aren't legal) send whoever is available to work, and many times they don't even know the performer. I once heard a mom saying that the person she hired came intoxicated and the kids could smell the alcohol.

Is the company insured?

Did you know that even face painters should carry insurance? Always ask. Why is insurance so important? Let's say the kids are having a lot of fun and while dancing, someone bumps into a speaker and it falls and injures a child. I'm sure you don't want to deal with a lawsuit. Insurance means the company is liable, so you're not.

Is the show age-appropriate for your child and guests?

We've all seen those characters twerking on Facebook. Ask what kind of music the entertainer plans to use during the show. You can even ask about the type of games they will be playing.

Have you checked the reviews?

It's common sense: Before hiring a company, shop around. If you see a company with a high number of likes on Facebook and tons of great reviews, go for it! Read the reviews, privately contact the company, and ask questions. Usually companies with low number of likes and no reviews are a red flag.

Yes, parties are hard to plan. But the smile of your child that says "This was the best party ever!" is worth the effort of asking a few questions and doing your research.

Nilmari Donate-Melendez is the founder of HKC Parenting and School Consulting Services and the president of Happy Kids Chicago, Inc. For the past 12 years, she has been consulting communities on parent involvement in schools, bonding, discipline and other essential parenting skills. Currently she is raising and nurturing three school-aged children.



Photo courtesy Nilmari Donate-Melendez

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THIS IS NOT THE CHILDHOOD I KNEW — AND THAT'S A GOOD THING

By *Rebekah Pajak*, NPN member since 2017

Parenting in Chicago is hard. Two recent events reminded me of this. The first, running our two daughters out to the car parked in front of our house in what seemed like biblical rains — no attached garage to keep us dry. And the second, wading into the Chicago Public Schools application process. After reading about three different ways to apply to preschool, I realized this was the first step in a nebulous 18-year plus journey.

These are surface examples of a subtler thought that has gnawed at me for the last couple of years: This is not how I grew up.

In many ways, my childhood was idyllic. I grew up in a nice suburb and have fond memories of it. That's why I always planned to raise my children in one. If the suburbs worked for me, why wouldn't I raise a family in the same way?

Marrying a Chicago native changed things. And while we're committed to living in the city, a review of the news headlines on any given day makes Chicago seem like the least family-friendly place to be.

I'm slowly, sometimes reluctantly, learning the city is a great place for a family. What I know now is that the childhood my two daughters experience is not going to be the one that I had — and that's okay. In fact, I'm glad.



Photo courtesy Rebekah Pajak

WHAT I KNOW NOW IS THAT THE CHILDHOOD MY TWO DAUGHTERS EXPERIENCE IS NOT GOING TO BE THE ONE THAT I HAD — AND THAT'S OKAY.

Here's why:

Empowerment

My daughters will not be intimidated by the "big city" things that scared me. They will know how to get from point A to point B and all the way to Z. And they'll do it by understanding the CTA routes and schedules. This ability will open up the city to them and make so many experiences instantly accessible: visiting other neighborhoods, biking by the lake, enjoying countless festivals and museums, and soaking in the world-class culture Chicago offers.

Diversity

The diversity of cultures, learning and day-to-day experiences my children will encounter will provide a perspective — and, I hope, understanding — that's hard to come by in the suburbs. From trying elotes at the park to neighbors who speak a different language, their close proximity to others different from them raises an opportunity to know people and their cultures better.

Social Justice

My girls will have a chance to see and respond to the challenges of the city. They can be part of making Chicago not just the place where they live, but the community where they thrive. For us right now it looks messy. We cart our girls to homeless shelters and imperfectly prepare meals for guests once or twice a month. But our hope is that one day they'll lead us to the problems they seek to fix in our city and commit to serving our community.

Chicago reminds me on an almost-daily basis that the things that are worthwhile are often challenging. Raising a family in Chicago is a worthwhile challenge, and one that will leave me thankful that my daughters experience a different childhood than my own.

Rebekah Pajak lives in Belmont Cragin with her husband, Dan, and their two girls, Anna and Josefina. A sometimes reluctant Chicagoan, Rebekah insists that ketchup is a hot dog condiment and that thin crust pizza is good for the family every once in awhile.

SAY CHEESE LET IT SNOW



Credit: Carrie Pagitt-Reinoso



Credit: Crystal Claire-DeBacker



Credit: Cari Zaguirre



Credit: Denise Holmgren



Credit: Darci Woodson



Credit: Michelle Holder



Credit: Traci Starkovich Moes



Credit: LaChula

FEATURE

FAMILY-FRIENDLY TRAILS TO EXPLORE THIS WINTER

By **Jasmine Jafferli**, NPN member since 2010

IF YOU'RE WILLING TO TAKE AN HOUR'S DRIVE OUTSIDE THE CITY, THERE ARE SOME HIDDEN GEMS YOU'LL FIND TO GET THE KIDS' ENERGY OUT AND INTO NATURE.

Yes, winter is freezing. But if we're lucky, there may be a handful of mild, sunny days perfect for bundling up to explore the winter landscape. If you're willing to take an hour's drive outside the city, there are some hidden gems you'll find to get the kids' energy out and into nature.

Head west into St. Charles and you will find **Pottawatomie Park** along the east edge of the Fox River, within walking distance of downtown St. Charles. Go sledding for the little ones, or really get your body working with some cross-country skiing or snowshoeing. Walk a few blocks to Muscle Maker Grill for healthy wraps, salads and shakes, or check out Sweet Natalie's Gluten Free Bakery and grab some unbelievably good gluten-free desserts. www.stcparks.org

Northwest of the city, the **Volo Bog State Natural Area** is the state's only quaking bog. Take a day to hike, learn about conservation and wildlife, and even cross-country ski. This unique National Natural Landmark was purchased to help preserve and keep the land in its original state. Be sure to check out the nearby Volo Auto Museum, and then go warm up at Brunch Cafe and take home some sticky buns from Riverside Bakeshop. www.dnr.illinois.gov/parks/pages/volobog.aspx

If you dare to cross the state line, head about an hour east of Chicago to **Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore** for amazing trails, cross-country skiing and sledding. Check out the Ly-co-ki-we Trail System in Chesteron, Indiana. It's a hidden treasure in itself. The main trail is open to hikers, horseback riders and cross-country skiing (snow permitting). When you're done walking the long trails, head on over to Barlett's Fish Camp or Fiddlehead's Restaurant for farm-to-table fare, both in Michigan City. www.indianatrails.com/?q=content%2Fly-co-ki-we-trail-system



Photo courtesy Jasmine Jafferli

For a more kid-friendly stroll, find your way to **Coffee Creek Watershed Preserve** where more than 400 native plant species have been found. About an hour east of the Loop, Coffee Creek is home to one of the healthiest streams in southern Lake Michigan watershed, and there are guided tours and scheduled nature hikes, weather permitting. When you're done bird watching, sledding or strolling along the long trails, head on over to locally owned Third Coast Cafe in Chesterton to refuel. www.coffeecreekwc.org

Among the many, many trails in the Indiana Dunes is **Cowles Bog** right at the entrance of Dune Acres, Indiana. Cowles Bog is one of the few remaining, pristine fens around the Great Lakes and is still undergoing restoration. It's a great place to bird watch and learn more about nature, the duneland and the origins of Lake Michigan and the region's ecosystem. All trails lead to quiet beaches, where you can really experience Lake Michigan at its finest. www.savethedunes.org

Jasmine Jafferli, MPH, is a lifestyle and wellness expert. She lives in the West Loop with her husband and two kids, Lilly (10 years-old) and Luke (7 years-old). When she's not busy helping others feel well, Jasmine enjoys reading, being with her family and drinking a good glass of pinot noir.

YOUR MAP TO FINDING YOUR CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOL

By Candice Blansett-Cummins and Rob Cummins, NPN members since 2008

NWEA. OAE. OMG. We just want the best education for our kids, right? There are many ways to define “best” and there are choices — they just require thoughtfulness and planning, sometimes years in advance. With another wave of testing around the corner, now’s as good a time as any to do a deep dive. Online CPS resources define which options are available for your student. What you won’t find at CPS.edu are guidelines to help you decide which path is right for your student and family.

What’s your family’s tolerance for pressure?

The stress associated with testing and applications varies with each family and student. For students who test well and organized parents with time to commit to the process, it’s not that hard (full disclosure: our children attended Neighborhood Elementary through 8th grade and then Selective Enrollment High School a quarter-mile from home). The hurry-up-and-wait pipeline for Selective Enrollment is long: for example, test* in Winter of Grade 3, apply Fall of Grade 4, wait by mailbox for decision letter in the Spring to begin Fall of Grade 5. Just remember: it’s a choice.

**Students enrolled in a non-CPS school must register for NWEA MAP testing before they intend to apply as the test scores are used to qualify students for Selective Enrollment.*

How many school-age children do you have?

Consider if one school will meet the needs of all your children; coordinating drop-offs and pick-ups at multiple

campuses is a challenge. If you have young children, get involved with your neighborhood school before you need it: support the parent organization, attend Local School Council (LSC) meetings (or run for a Community Member seat on the Council), subscribe to the school’s newsletter, visit the website and school often. Neighborhood schools become great schools when families, communities, teachers and administration work together, and you’ll get the inside view before you need to choose.

Does your student want to attend college?

It’s believed more prestigious high schools lead to more prestigious colleges and universities. Truth is, your student can attend various CPS schools and get into college. One student may thrive with a heavy AP or IB load, while another’s GPA suffers under strain, impacting their credentials. One student may thrive in a program in which they can work hard, earn a great GPA and get a little more sleep or family time, while another loses interest for lack of a challenge. The only right answer is the answer right for your child alone.

Consider these additional questions and go forth — you have some homework to do.

- Does your community have resources to support your neighborhood school?
- Will your child feel safe both inside and outside the school? “Safe” is subjective and includes considerations like enrollment size.
- What makes your child tick? Schools, even of the same type, can have widely differing programs.
- What does diversity mean to your family? Some schools are quite homogenous while others attract students from across the city.
- What importance do you give to social-emotional learning? Many schools use the words, but some schools really work this into practice.
- If prestige is one of your considerations, understand why. Getting in isn’t reason alone to attend. It may play a role in your student’s plan, or you may find another school characteristic that has longer-term impact.

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Candice Blansett-Cummins and Rob Cummins are parents to a college student off in California, a CPS high-school-student and a naughty rescue mutt. Find their Wishcraft Workshop art and academic programs at wishcraftworkshop.com.



Photo courtesy Rob Cummins

FEATURE

LET IT BE: THOUGHTS ON CONTENTMENT VS. HAPPINESS

By *Crystal Clair*, NPN member since 2015

SEARCHING FOR HAPPINESS CAN BE EXHAUSTING. ENJOYING IT WHEN IT HAPPENS IS THE BEST THING EVER.

I'm sitting here writing this article at 10:15 p.m., holding my restless nine-month-old who's still awake from teething and recovering from an ear infection. Oh, and it was 9:25 p.m. before my 3.5-year-old fell asleep tonight...a full hour-and-a-half after I started the bedtime routine.

After three books, water, five minutes of Dr. Squish on YouTube, and another 30 minutes of him telling me a story, my little dude finally looked up and said, "Mommy, I need a meditation to help me sleep." I clicked the Insight Timer meditation app on my phone to a kid's track. A minute later, he was out. Sigh. If only I had thought to try that first.

Did I mention that I am now eating Jeni's Brambleberry Crisp ice cream to stay awake?

All of this is to say that I definitely don't have this whole parenting/working/being-full-of-joy-and-sunshine gig figured out. However, something interesting happened after I had my second child.

I felt content.

It was a peace very different from what I felt as a first-time mom. Back then, I was anxious about his sleeping. Was it too much or too little? My husband and I must have talked about poop at least ten times a day, wondering, "Is this normal?" The constant googling and calling on validation from friends, family, and/or doctors. It all seemed wonderful and overwhelming at the same time.



Photo courtesy Crystal Clair

There were moments of happiness, of course, like when he first smiled at us or, even better, laughed for the first time. We were in Buy Buy Baby (where we lived for the first four weeks, buying whatever invention promised to induce sleep), changing his diaper when he started to giggle. My husband and I were so happy in the moment, we laughed, too, and then high-fived.

By the time baby number two arrived, I was looking forward to my maternity leave. I took the time to bond and re-adjust to this new type of motherhood. I would play cars with my oldest while feeding my daughter and stole away special time with him while she slept. I began to listen to meditations while breastfeeding, which relaxed both of us.

The word that kept coming to mind was *content*, more so than I had ever been. Ten months later, I still find myself just staring at my daughter, locking in memories like postcards. Look how her eyelashes are so long and perfect! See how she starts to wave when she wakes up and pats me on the back when I pick her up!

I haven't made any photo books yet and her baby book is far from complete, but I don't really care. I suspect some of the contentment comes from being present in the moment — and knowing that this will likely be our last baby.

So, how is contentment different than happiness?

Contentment is a way of being and happiness is found in moments. Contentment feels like a deep, relaxing breath; happiness is an emotional high. Happiness is found in the milestones, the emotional ecstasy of seeing your little one walk for the first time or say that first word. Contentment is when your little ones make each other laugh and enjoy each other's presence so often it becomes the norm.

Put another way, happiness is fitting into my old jeans; contentment is knowing that I will someday. Happiness is a freshly cleaned house with military corners on my sheets; contentment is knowing that our toy-strewn home is a safe place for fun and sleep.

Some might say that focusing on contentment over happiness is lowering my expectations, but it's bigger than that. It's trying to let go with intention. "Let it Be" has always been a favorite song of mine. My birthing playlist had seven versions of it. Today, it remains my theme song and ringtone.

Particularly as a mom, the more I look for contentment, the more I find a peace within me that is accessible at anytime, whenever I remember to choose it. Searching for happiness can be exhausting. Enjoying it when it happens is the best thing ever.

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Crystal Clair is a new mom of two and the owner of CFC Therapy Group in Lincoln Park. She likes to adventure around the city with kids in tow making small things fun. When she is not with the kiddos she is empowering individuals and couples to overcome hurdles and live a more authentic life.

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FEATURE

NEW YEAR, NEW YOU: MOVING YOUR FAMILY TOWARD CHANGE

By Erica Hornthal, NPN member since 2015

FOCUSING ON THE POSITIVE, FINDING A SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY, AND TAKING RESPONSIBILITY WILL ENSURE A GREATER CHANCE OF MAKING A PERMANENT CHANGE.



Photo courtesy Erica Hornthal

The new year is a natural time for reflection, introspection and the will to make positive changes. In my practice as a dance/movement therapist and clinical counselor, I am often asked by busy parents how they can adopt healthy habits and establish new routines for not only themselves, but for their children as well. I encourage them to consider how their own bodies can help alleviate fears and anxieties, facilitate change and encourage healthy habits and routines.

Create some breathing room.

Harnessing the power of your breath not only creates opportunity for new habits, but it also makes the ability to deal with challenges, fears, and worries around change more manageable. Tapping into and becoming more aware of your breath can allow for less impulsive decisions, room for new perspectives, and control over intrusive or self-sabotaging thoughts and behaviors. Practice taking deep breaths in through the nose and out through the mouth. Focus on the air going to your abdomen rather than your chest. This method of breathing slows down your heart rate and resets the nervous system allowing for greater relaxation and focus.

Learn to be more flexible.

This does not refer to doing the splits or placing your leg behind your head; however, flexibility in moderation does create greater mobility of the mind. Consider psychologically what being a “flexible” person means in terms of work, social life and family planning. This often correlates to an ability to “roll with the punches” or “go with the flow.” Rigidity in routines and schedules can lead to more uptight, tense individuals. If we as parents are tense, our children

will pick up on that as well. Incorporating stretches into your daily life will quickly lead to greater physical flexibility and allow you to let go of things that you can’t control, while leaving more time for the little things that really matter.

Replace a “bad” habit with a good one.

The best way to change or break a bad habit is to replace it with a good one. This could be substituting a sweet treat for a healthier snack, replacing couch time with a walk around the block, or turning off your technology and tuning in to family game night. Whatever habits you choose, know that focusing on the positive, finding a supportive community, and taking responsibility will ensure a greater chance of making a permanent change.

Erica Hornthal, a licensed clinical counselor and board-certified dance/movement therapist, is the founder and CEO of Chicago Dance Therapy. As a psychotherapist in private practice, Erica is devoted to using movement in conjunction with traditional talk therapy to facilitate awareness, empathy, enhanced quality of life, and greater mental health for individuals and families.

I AM, BECAUSE WE ARE

Lincoln Park Preschool & Kindergarten in Zambia

In January, four members of the Lincoln Park Preschool & Kindergarten leadership team traveled to Ndola, Zambia with Spark Ventures. LPP joining Spark in their impact travel initiative was just the beginning of a lasting partnership LPP is forming with the local Hope Community School, located in one of Ndola's most vulnerable neighborhoods. Hope and the team from LPP worked to create the first early childhood classroom at Hope Community School, adding to the existing first through seventh grade classrooms. LPP brought much needed supplies and resources, and worked with newly hired early childhood teachers at the school to develop a culturally sensitive curriculum, activities, and lessons. LPP and Hope agree that early childhood education is critical to the success of any student, and this first step forward will make a huge impact on the community.

Sharon Kozek, founder and owner of LPP said the following upon returning from Zambia, "We strive to be leaders in our community here in Chicago as well as our global community. We believe deeply that every child deserves the opportunity to achieve their potential and I am so invigorated by the incredible work we are doing together with Spark Ventures in Zambia."



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HOW TO SURVIVE (AND EVEN ENJOY) THE JANUARY PURGE

By *Fiona Royer*, NPN member since 2013

Chicagoans don't need to wait for spring cleaning time to come around. With months of cold, inhospitable weather, there's plenty of time to fit in a January purge beforehand. After the abundance of the holidays and the resolutions of the New Year, this is the perfect time to clear out the old.

I enjoy this enforced home time to reassess what our family has and needs, and to get organized. However, while clearing out can seem like a great idea when you start, it can quickly become overwhelming. To prevent being left with heaps of random objects and fraught family members, I implement these steps to keep the project under control — and even enjoyable.

Involve the whole family.

I use these purges as an opportunity to speak to my children about giving. This is the perfect opportunity to highlight how lucky we are and to emphasize the positive qualities of generosity and empathy. Ensuring all members of the household have a say in what is donated and where, there is ownership and a willingness to participate.

Set aside some time.

Find a time to embark upon your purge when you're not going to be rushed. Fitting something in between appointments is asking for trouble. Things do not always go

to plan and your younger helpers might not work as quickly as you'd like. Allocating a longer stretch on the calendar keeps everyone relaxed. Then if you have some time to spare, you can reward your team with a well-earned snack.

Gather bags and boxes.

When you've set a date, the next step is to ensure that you have enough bags and boxes to sort unwanted items into. Especially now that stores aren't giving out bags so readily, these may not be on hand. You don't want to be left with piles of stuff that you need to deal with later.

Assign tasks.

Determine which areas to be purged can involve children and which might be best dealt with alone. Clothes could be an easy one to enlist help with. Little ones can understand the concept of giving away pieces that don't fit. Toys you might to sort through yourself, to avoid emotional outbursts.

Divide your donations.

As you go, divide things into separate bags or boxes depending upon type. Having all books together, toys together and clothes together makes it easier to donate things to the right place. You don't want to have to re-sort later.

Determine where to donate.

Think ahead about where you want to send your chosen items, and be sure to check that they're accepting donations. Some places only take seasonal items or are already heavily stocked in certain areas. Another crucial thing to keep in mind is drop-off hours. Loading up your car to find that your preferred destination is closed is a waste of precious time.

I keep a list of resources to donate to. The schools and church we belong to have donation drives throughout the calendar year, so we store items specifically for those. We also know which charities take clothing, toys and books, and which places we can make year-round donations to when we're ready. Resale stores can provide another outlet for higher-end items. Then there are of course resources where you can post and sell items online. For the more creative, organizing a swap social for friends can be fun and a great bonding opportunity, too. As they say, one person's trash is another person's treasure!

Fiona Royer lives in Lincoln Park with her husband, Randall, their two young daughters and a new baby boy. Originally from the U.K., she works in the philanthropic world and believes that giving is the key to living a fulfilling life.



Photo courtesy Fiona Royer

FEATURE

BEST PLAY SPACES TO BEAT THE SNOWPOCALYPSE

By **Jasmina Durakovic**, NPN member since 2017

When winter is at its worst, not only do we worry about runny noses and the flu, we worry about the inevitable: cabin fever. Yes, it's real. And it's not just the kids, but the parents as well. Whether you are a stay-at-home raising the kids or are a working parent on the run, there is always the difficult task of how to keep the kids entertained, busy and having fun...without cleaning up slime from the kitchen floor on a daily basis. Take a look at some of these go-to spots for busy parents.

Pickle's Playroom 2315 W. Lawrence Ave.

Sit back and watch the kids play while having a cup of coffee, and get a haircut for both you and the kids. Pickle's Playroom in Chicago is one of my favorite spots to lounge and let my boy have a blast — after the dreaded haircut, of course. This spot ensures you'll have snacks for the kids as well, so you don't have to worry about packing much.

Little Beans Cafe 430 Asbury Ave., Evanston

A great spot where you can get delicious food, pastries and coffee, where kids of all ages enjoy the indoors. Little Beans is a large location that allows for many different activities to keep the kids busy. There is room for parents to interact with the kids, or sit back and catch up with a fellow parent. Bonus: free parking is available.

Jump!Zone 6374 W. Howard St., Niles

This spot's large indoor area is full of themed inflatables that will have you laughing, jumping, and having a great time. It's a fantastic place to gather a bunch of friends and their kids for a huge playdate. Parking is also free.

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Jasmina Durakovic and her husband are parents to a beautiful two-year-old who is full of energy and personality. She enjoys cooking and sharing meals with friends, and making her home a cozy, nurturing place for her family to grow into.



Photo courtesy Jasmina Durakovic



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FEATURE

READY TO LEARN: FAMILY ENGAGEMENT'S ROLE IN SCHOOL

By **Maura Daly**, NPN member since 2015

It's that time of the year — when the snow keeps falling, the temperatures are dropping further and cabin fever starts to set in, especially for families with young children. As you explore ways to keep your child mentally and physically active indoors, consider taking a more proactive approach to ensuring he or she is ready to arrive at kindergarten and learn.

Evidence increasingly suggests that the areas most critical to young children's long-term educational success are approaches to learning and self-regulation, language and literacy, math and social and emotional development. While early childhood education is instrumental in supporting a child's learning and development, family engagement may even be paramount. In 2017, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) released the Kindergarten Individual Development Survey (KIDS) which is a new tool that teachers in Illinois are required to use to observe and document students' "kindergarten readiness" based on these areas of development. Following are suggested activities and examples for how families can support their children in becoming ready-to-learn.

Approaches to Learning and Self-Regulation

There is a strong connection between these two areas of development. The approaches to learning skills include engagement and persistence and curiosity and initiative. The self-regulation skills include self-control of feelings and behavior and shared use of space and materials.

Young children sometimes have a tough time sticking to a task that is hard to do. You can encourage your child to complete tasks by breaking one big task into smaller steps, like suggesting, "Let's clean up the toys one at a time." If your child feels overwhelmed by tasks, you can set a timer and suggest, "Let's clean up the toys in the next five minutes, and then you can go color." And, tasks may seem easier to the child with team work, such as, "Let's work with your brother or sister to clean up the toys."



Photo courtesy Maura Daly

Young children also are learning how to express their feelings through words and actions. You can help your child learn that feelings have words — happy, sad, jealous and angry. Describe the behavior you want to see: "It's nice you are petting the dog so gently." Express your feelings back to your child, for example, "I was frustrated when..." And, help your child learn that everyone has feelings by pointing out others' expressions such as, "Look at the smile on that little boy's face."

Language and Literacy Development

Language and literacy skills are the foundation for learning English and can be demonstrated in any form of communication. Among the best ways to help children develop in this area are to listen, talk more and learn.

Start out your day by talking through the activities you will do: "First, we're going to eat breakfast, then we'll get dressed." As you read with your children, encourage them to describe what they see and develop new ideas. As you move throughout the day, ask your child, "What do you see?" and help them expand his or her vocabulary by adding descriptions, such as, "This apple is crunchy."

Math

The math learning domain includes knowledge or skills in classification, number sense of quantity, number sense of math operations, measurement, patterning and shapes. Sorting, organizing and classifying objects, ideas, smells and like items are important skills for young children to develop.

Ask your child to help you unload the silverware from the dishwasher and sort the knives, forks and spoon in the right place. Use egg cartons to create an activity where children can sort like objects like coins, crayons or sticks. Or, ask them to help you cook and sort food by fruits and vegetables or colors.

You can also help your child make sense of numbers and discover how they can be added, subtracted, multiplied and divided by bringing numbers into conversation. For example, ask your child to count how many crackers or grapes they start with. After eating some, count again. You can talk about how many animals you see, such as "three birds" that have "six wings." And, you can ask your child to help you set up an activity for a playdate with siblings or friends and create equal amounts of materials for each person participating.

Social and Emotional Development

Social and emotional development includes a child's abilities to understand and interact with others and to form positive relationships with nurturing adults and their peers. At an early age, it is important for children make friends, to work and play with other children who have different ideas, experiences and to simply get along.

You can support your child in working and playing well with other by setting a good example — most notably, by treating others kindly and with respect. Encourage your child to play with others and foster engagement with kids by pretending, building or talking together. Teach your children about the importance of sharing and positively reinforce them by saying, "You did such a great job sharing with your friends today." And, help your child talk through his or her feelings and how other children may feel different about a situation.

These are just a few ideas about how to engage with your children in the most important areas of development. You can access more tools and resources at www.isbe.net/kids.

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Maura Daly is a nonprofit strategy consultant working with the Robert R. McCormick Foundation. She lives in Chicago with her family and is an active member of NPN.

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Interested? We'd love to hear from you! Write to Meredith Marzano: mmarzano@nnpnparents.org

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