

Caring for Your Family when a Child has Special Needs

The birth of a new baby is a happy but stressful event in any family. When that baby comes with developmental differences requiring extra attention, the stress is multiplied. For a family to be at its strongest, happiest and best, it's important to pay attention to how well it's working and where the edges might be fraying. Parents lead this effort by *taking care of themselves* and making family care a priority. This handout will give you some practical suggestions. Use it to take stock of your family's health, both as a whole and for each family member, now and again in the future. Parents and older children could discuss these topics at a family meeting.

Mind – Learning and Growing

This category is about wisdom and understanding. When you face a new situation in life, it can be helpful to learn about it. What does science have to contribute? What developmental milestones are coming up? Where might you need to be better equipped? What local resources are available? Which family members would enjoy looking into it?

- **Do your research.** The library, the internet, your doctors and national and local organizations can assist you greatly in learning about your particular challenges. You will receive a lot of unsolicited advice; you need to be able to separate fact from fiction. Ask your pediatrician about reputable organizations devoted to your child's special needs.
- **Talk with others.** If possible, find a local group of parents dealing with the same or similar issues. If there isn't one, look for an online support group or Facebook group.
- **Share what you learn.** Not everyone in your family needs to do the same research, but everyone needs some accurate information about your child's needs. How can each family member, from the smallest sibling to the oldest grandparent, grow in their understanding and ability to adapt? Keep everybody in the loop.
- **There is a time to say, "Enough!"** A constant search for knowledge can be a sign of anxiety. Consider when you might have *passed* the helpful learning stage and entered an unproductive cycle of worry.

Heart – Fill Your Family Tank

Every member of your family will face challenges which are different and sometimes more stressful than others around you. It is important to get filled back up when you feel empty and to build a culture of healthy emotions for everyone in your family.

- **Seek spiritual care.** This would be a good time to practice your faith or to find one. Circumstances like having a child with Down syndrome or other special needs are neutral by themselves, but a spiritual perspective can help you find purpose, strength and joy *within* those circumstances. A spiritual community can also be a strong support to your whole family.
- **Make and keep good friends.** Our hearts get both exercise and rest from our friendships. Husbands and wives each need same-sex friends to round out their support team. Kids need friends to help them develop socially and burn up physical and emotional energy. Cultivate individual friends and family friends. Create plenty of opportunities for laughter.
- **Allow everybody in the family to have their own feelings.** While children can be overwhelmed by intense, adult emotions, it is important for them to be exposed to *a healthy range* of emotions within the family. If they hear an argument, for example, be sure they also hear reconciliation. Labeling a child's emotions (e.g., "You seemed pretty mad when you came in just now. What's going on?") helps them learn. Be sure you also give them space to experience their natural feelings – safely and appropriately.
- **Model self-control.** One mark of adulthood is the ability to control your emotions. It's good to feel joy and grief, anger and compassion, but we learn to show those feelings within boundaries. You wouldn't laugh aloud during a funeral, and you wouldn't sob wildly at your best friend's wedding – even if you felt like it. We all experience frustration at times, but healthy adults express it in conversation or productive activity or journaling or prayer rather than in physical violence. You and your children can explore creative ways to express emotions together (e.g., art, music, sports or writing). A counselor or a school teacher could help you with ideas.

Will (Choices and Decisions) – Maintain Your Health and Energy

Twenty-first century life moves at a blistering pace. It is easy to become worn-out without even realizing it. Families need to make conscious, wise choices about how they use their time and energy. You can burn the candle at both ends for a short period of time, but a family needs to be able to *love for the long haul*.

- **Set intentional priorities.** Your whole family will benefit from discussing and adopting some overall priorities. For example, is family time or social time more important? How high does education rank on your scale? Fun? Respect? Honesty? Health? Talking about these things will keep you all on the same page and help with decision-making. You could develop a family slogan or a coat of arms. You can download a free handout about this called *Making a Family Covenant* at www.dearchristiancounselor.com/resources.
- **Become a flexible family.** While it's important to have priorities, it is equally important to be adaptable; one of the biggest risk factors for divorce is inflexibility. Marriage and family life is a blending of different individuals, so compromise is a necessary art. The ability to bend comes from a sense of love and trust in something bigger than you. This is a quality your children need to see.
- **Exercise.** Studies have shown that exercise is as effective in fighting depression as medication, perhaps more so. Encourage every member of your family to find their own favorite form of physical fitness. Consider developing a family hobby like biking or basketball or walking.
- **Eat well.** Fast food is a tempting stress reliever, but it will harm your family physically and emotionally as a steady diet. Teach your children to make good choices as you make them yourself. Cook together. Grow a tomato plant or an herb garden. Talk to your pediatrician about any dietary restrictions your child with special needs may have.
- **Sleep well.** The amount of sleep you get affects your health, your mood, your weight and your memory. It's important for an adult to get seven to eight hours of sleep per night. Children need more. There are things you can do to help with this. Go to bed at the same time each night. Maintain a relaxing bedtime routine. Stay away from bright screens near bedtime. Learn to meditate and relax (kids can do this, too). See the *Sleep Hygiene* handout at www.dearchristiancounselor.com/resources.

Your child has landed in a special place – your family. The strengths you have together will form a solid foundation for all your family members. The goal is to find ways of working together instead of growing apart in the stress and busyness of life. Review the categories above on a regular basis, *at least yearly*, and give your loved ones the grace of good family care.