

# Marriage and Special Needs

Having special needs children can be very stressful on a marriage. Sometimes just being married can be stressful, but the difficulties in raising and advocating for a special needs child can significantly increase those stressors.

Common problems that add stress to the special needs family include:

- Lack of diagnosis
- Information overload
- Financial issues
- Time constraints
- Mental and physical fatigue

So how do we apply practical solutions to these problems?

## *Lack of Diagnosis*

Getting a proper diagnosis can be a lengthy process. The first key is to honor your instincts and follow your gut feelings. Doctors and family members may say things like, "You're just exaggerating" or "He'll grow out of it." These comments can cause parents to question their own parenting abilities, but more often than not there is a reason for concern.

- Read about the symptoms and possible causes
- Contact organizations that specialize in early development
- Talk to parents - especially those who may have had to search for answers
- Contact your local Child Find office

It is important to keep open communication with your spouse. If the spouse is the one downplaying your concerns, ask them for support. What would they recommend? Be open to their suggestions and remember that their denial often stems from fear of their own failure. Be supportive.

## *Managing Information Overload*

Too much information is too much even if it is relevant. Take charge of the pace with which you are expected to absorb it. Rather than miss important information, tell the information givers that you need to take time to process what they are telling you.

- Two heads are better than one. If it is possible for both parents to attend meetings with medical or educational meetings, both of you get the same information at the same time.
- Get prior permission to tape the meeting so you can play it back and share it with your spouse.
- If neither of these are possible ask a friend or family member to come with you. Sometimes having an objective person helps you summarize it better than you can on your own.
- Don't be afraid to ask others to repeat information or to clarify terms and phrases

## *Handling Financial Issues*

The complications of financial issues caused by a disability can snowball into actions and situations that affect aspects of a solid marriage like trust, honesty, love and understanding. While there are extreme examples of thinking outside of the box to pay for medical expenses, we're going to focus on some basics:

- Prioritize and examine expenses. Deciding which expenses are most critical is sometimes necessary. Good spending practices include paying major bills like rent and utilities first, restricting credit card use and paying off debts to avoid penalties and planning meals around sale items. Cutting little expenses can add up over time. For example, going to Starbucks on weekdays for a year is almost \$1,000 and that's assuming you just get basic coffee!
- Find ways to share expenses with others. Use co-ops to share child care costs by rotating child care. Ridesharing can cut

transportation costs. Trade expertise such as home or computer repair rather than hiring a repair guy.

- Taking second jobs, changing jobs or relocating. While this may seem like a possibility just keep in mind that this can affect the marriage in having less time to spend with each other. Also, sometimes the cost of relocating may be more expensive than just staying where you are. When considering this option, don't just look at how much money it will bring in, but also how it may affect your ability to be available to each other and to your children.

### *Managing Time Constraints*

We aren't just talking about time to do extras like play tennis or get our nails done. We're talking about time to pay bills, cook meals, talk to teachers, help with homework, get to therapy and most importantly, talk to each other.

- First and most important: rely on each other. Do not expect your spouse to automatically know how to support or help you. Do what we tell our children, "use your words!"
- Take advantage of opportunities such as carpools or neighbors who are going to the store anyway. Shopping online and picking up at the store can save a lot of time. Save more time by taking turns with other families picking up the groceries for the week.
- Maintain a routine. Everyday cannot look the same, however if every Monday can be fairly consistent it allows you to plan your time better and gives structure to the kids.
- Take advantage of modern technology. Using this suggestion with the idea of maintaining a routine, you can schedule times of the day to read emails and text messages and respond. Use technology to your advantage, don't let it decide your schedule.

### *Dealing with Physical and Mental Fatigue*

- Take turns being tired. Assign nights or days when one is “off duty” and can get a full rest while the other is “on call”
- Find respite care. There are organizations that offer assistance, but they may not be convenient to you because of location or timing. Find other families that would be willing to do a rotating respite. One family is caregiver for a couple of hours one week, then switch.
- Teach them to fish. You may have heard, “if you give a person a fish, he will eat for a day, but if you teach a person to fish, he will eat for a lifetime.” It will take longer to teach someone to “fish” than to just give it to them, but taking the time to teach even a child with a disability to pick up after themselves or help with basic chores it will help you and develop a new level of independence for your child.

All marriages have problems, but the stress of a special need can increase the pressure. The most important thing you can do is communicate with each other. Share your fears and concerns as well as your hopes.

For more information and ideas on remaining **married with Special Needs Children**, check out “*Married with Special Needs Children*” by Laura E Marshak, Ph.D. and Fran Pollock Prezant, M.Ed., CCC-SLP in the Lending Library at FISD’s Early Childhood School (10330 Red Cedar Dr, Frisco).

*The Lending Library is open to all families from 9a.m.-2p.m. on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday during the school year (if school is in session).*