Having a child with a disability or chronic health condition is a significant life event. It can be a mixed blessing, a joy as well as a challenge. Some of the more stressful issues involve emotions coupled with the reality and cost of daily special circumstances. Parents wonder how to find time for other children in the family and for themselves. Any of these issues can contribute to individual and family stress and a decline in coping and resilience.

In a research study conducted in Finland, parents who demonstrated strong coping abilities had accepted the situation quickly and held optimistic attitudes toward the future. These parents also thought family values had changed for the better, kept their individual activities or developed new ones, shared household chores and child care, and had an extensive social support network. These findings suggest that certain coping strategies promote family wellness and may decrease the likelihood of debilitating stress.

**Take Care of Yourself First**

The Finnish research found that “high-coping” parents considered their own needs as well as those of their children. The tendency of most parents is to consider themselves last or not at all. Think of an airplane emergency in which in order to help their children, parents must be able to breathe, so they are instructed to put on their own oxygen masks first. This allows parents a chance to think and act logically, rather than just react. Caring for your own needs requires familial and social support and cooperation, though it is often the most difficult task.

**Rest, Relaxation and Recuperation**

Roadblocks to caring for yourself include limited time, no sitter and no money. Parents have the tendency to think that other family members come first or that they don’t deserve to do something for themselves. It is important to take the time for regular, planned opportunities to do something fun; activities don’t have to be expensive. Having an event to look forward to makes it possible to cope more easily with what comes up every day. To make this possible, make sure everyone understands how important down time is, make plans and keep them. Remember that nurturing important relationships and developing hobbies is part of caring for oneself.

**Practice Resilient Behaviors**

Resilience can be defined as, “the capacity to confront and make the best of a difficult situation and to develop methods to reduce stress.” Parents can promote resilience in themselves and their families by:

- Promoting developmentally appropriate activities.
- Promoting independent thinking and action in children so that they learn to monitor and control themselves.
- Encouraging the entire family to anticipate future needs.
- Practicing family rituals such as meals, celebrations, vacations and conversations.
- Using positive and logical coping strategies.
Dealing with Anger and Guilt

Anger and guilt make the coping process difficult. Although common and understandable, these feelings interfere with relationships, work and the ability to think logically. Negative emotions use up precious energy that could be used more productively. Persistent guilt may lead parents to treat the child with a disability, as well as siblings, in ways that are detrimental such as excessive pampering or setting few behavioral limits. To prevent this, talk with trusted friends, family or clergy. Finding a parental support group may also ease tensions. (See www.mnasap.org for parent support groups.) If these things do not help, see a mental health professional.

Coping with Differences

Parents, the child with special needs and siblings must cope with the stigma of being different. The parents’ ability to cope with their own feelings and the reactions of society in a constructive way will make it easier for children to do so. Normalize your family in your mind. You have more things in common with other parents and families than differences. Communicate this optimistic idea to your children daily. For example, in any family one child will always require more attention than the other children. Help the child with the disability as well as their siblings to understand the condition and talk about it with others. This will give them a sense of confidence because they are gaining the tools to deal with their sibling’s disability independent of their parents. Try to spend time as a family with friends and relatives who are comfortable with the child who has special needs.

Siblings

Try to put your child who has special needs into perspective among all your children. Give them normal responsibilities for their age and development, including, when possible, the child who has special needs. Make sure that siblings know that you take pride in their accomplishments. Set aside time for them and their individual activities. Involve them in the care of the child with the disability in small ways.

Take their cues for information. Be prepared to listen and answer their questions. Occasionally, take them to doctor and therapy appointments so they can learn appropriate information directly and ask questions, but don’t force them to go. Always take their concerns and feelings seriously, and try to see situations from their point of view. Allow them to have their own feelings about their family, including the child with special needs.

Stress Inventory

Another proactive practice involves taking an inventory of your stress triggers. Keep a journal of your positive and negative experiences. Identify your own personal warning signals, those physical, emotional and behavior symptoms that let you know you’re under high stress alert. You’ll have to accept some situations, but others you can change. Fighting unchangeable circumstances uses a lot of energy. Pick the stressor that bothers you most, identify what would make you feel better, and see what you can do to make it a reality. If you are having a hard time, ask a trusted family member or a friend to help you look at things objectively.

Finally, Humor

Humor is an important tool in reducing stress and promoting family wellness. Try to see a circumstance as funny whenever possible. For example, if whining is a trigger for you, give your children the opportunity to whine without parental judgment for two minutes. Make it a game. Who can whine the longest and loudest? Join them. There are probably things you’d like to whine about too.

As parents, you have many options available to you to assist in parenting your child with special needs. The suggestions discussed here have been found by many to be beneficial. Hopefully you will find them to be so too.

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