

Recognizing Your Stress When Parenting A Child With a Disability

PARENTS EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL NEEDS

Parenting is hard, but it becomes even more difficult when children are diagnosed with a chronic illness or disability. Parents go through a wide range of emotions including denial, anger, frustration, guilt, resentment, depression, and fear. All of these feelings are natural. After the initial shock and disbelief, parents may feel alone and helpless. It is an unbelievably stressful time, like nothing parents have ever experienced before in their lives. When your child is first and foremost in your mind, parents must also learn how to cope with their own feelings and stressors. Parents will have days of wild emotional swings, with feelings of despair followed by moments of fulfillment. How you learn to take care of your own needs will determine how well you are able to effectively help your child. By pinpointing the sources of stress and setting up management strategies, you will be able to work through this inner turmoil while going through the process of building a relationship with your child.

INTERNAL STRESSORS

Unrealistic expectations: Your expectations of yourself often become one of your biggest stressors when you discover that your child has a chronic illness or disability. You may feel as though your child's success or failure depends

exclusively on you. You may believe that the only way for your child to function is for you to give up on your own life and take responsibility for every aspect of your child's life. By refusing to accept help from others, and by not letting your child take on some responsibilities themselves, you subject yourself to additional unnecessary stress and pressure.

Worry about the future: "What does the future hold for my child? Will he be a productive and independent individual? Will the manner in which I raise him affect his final outcome and placement in life?" These questions can haunt all parents, but they may seem especially pressing to those whose children are sick or have a disability.

Self-blame: Parents often feel guilt associated with the disability or chronic illness, especially when it is caused by genetic predisposition or when present at birth. You may wonder to what degree you are to blame for this illness and often shoulder blame and feelings of failure. When behavioral issues occur that parents do not approve of, they may be unable to discipline without feeling even more guilt.

Confusion and pain if they do not attain a loving relationship with the child: Some illnesses and disabilities are not conducive to warmth and closeness, and parents want so much to have this kind of relationship with their child. Depending on what condition the child has, it may be necessary to adjust your expectations of how your relationship will be framed.



Recognizing Your Stress When Parenting A Child With a Disability

EXTERNAL STRESSORS

Sibling resentment: Brothers and sisters of the child with chronic disability or illness may feel neglected and angry that mom and dad spend more time with their sibling. They may later feel shame for having these feelings.

Difficult behavior: Certain types of illness or disability are characterized by behavior that is not always what parents would want to see in their child. When you are unable to effectively discipline or correct this behavior, it may make the behavior worse.

Financial burden: Medical bills can quickly become too much to handle. Additional care and services for the child, doctor visits, and hospitalizations all add to what may be an already overburdened household budget.

Conflict between parents on how to care for the child: Some parents have differing ideas on how to handle and nurture the child in all aspects of his life. Some may even deny that a problem exists. It is a struggle for both as they try to understand and accept how their relationship is evolving because of the stresses of caregiving.

Trying to find and obtain professional services appropriate for the child: Who will be best suited to help with a child's particular illness? By understanding their own abilities and limitations, parents will be much better able to determine when they need support.

School placement: Where will the child have the best chance of becoming educated and independent? What services are offered in these schools for development and growth? Finding a school with appropriate facilities and staff can be a difficult process.

Educating other family members and outsiders about the child's disability: This education is crucial for others who may not understand exactly what your child is experiencing, or how to deal with the situation.

PHYSICAL STRESS

The physical demands of caring for a child can be tremendous, and this applies even more to those with sick or children with disabilities. Large amounts of energy are required on a day-to-day basis to care for your child with additional needs. You as the care provider need to take of yourself too. Specifically, parents should remember to:

- Get good sleep each night
- Eat balanced nutritious meals
- Get daily exercise
- Schedule time for relaxation, and a break from the daily demands.

SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

In order to keep stress at a level that is helpful rather than harmful, parents may benefit from knowing the common symptoms of stress. Stress levels are different for everyone and can



Recognizing Your Stress When Parenting A Child With a Disability

affect each person differently, but there are usually some similarities. Stress can be detected through symptoms in the body, mind and mood, and behavior. If these symptoms are recognized and treated when they first begin, it can often prevent larger health problems from developing. Stress can affect your physical health, so it is important to catch it early.

Physical Signs of Stress

- Headaches
- Fatigue or low energy
- Muscle aches and pains
- Chest pain
- Sleep difficulties
- Frequent colds or infections
- Drop in sex drive
- Upset stomach

Mind and Mood

- Becoming irritated or angered easily
- Anxiety and worry
- Feelings of low self-esteem, worthlessness, inappropriate guilt
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Lack of motivation
- Sadness or depression
- Difficulty relaxing
- Inability to focus, indecisiveness
- Being pessimistic

Behavioral Signs of Stress

- Changes in appetite
- Tobacco use
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Increased nervousness
- Avoiding responsibilities
- Social withdrawal

APEC IS HERE TO HELP

APEC provides free training, information, and consultation to families. Visit our training calendar for more information about learning opportunities at www.alabamaparentcenter.com or call our center.

The contents of this publication were developed in part under a grant from the **Alabama Department of Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention**. To help support the ADCANP mission visit www.ctf.alabama.gov. Parenting V.3



Alabama Parent Education Center 

PO Box 118 * Wetumpka AL, 36092 * 334-567-2252 * 866-532-7660

www.alabamaparentcenter.com