

INSIGHTS

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Raising Kids with a Disability

Parents with children with special needs often comment on the level of misunderstanding there is about their child's condition.

No one would claim that parenting is easy, but when you have a child with a disability, there is a whole new level of challenge involved. There are different issues with special needs kids depending on the kind of disability and their age, however there are also some issues common to all disabilities.

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, it is estimated that 1 in 12 Australian children have some kind of disability. Around half of this amount – that is 1 in 24, have a profound disability that effects their ability to engage in day-to-day activities. Almost all children of school age with a disability are attending school (97 per cent) and of that number 89 per cent attend mainstream schools with the rest attending special schools. Such statistics and the educational policy of integration highlight how important understanding of the issues around childhood disabilities is for not only the parents and teachers of children with special needs, but for the community as a whole.

What is a Disability?

Disability or special needs is an umbrella term that is used to refer to a whole range of conditions. These conditions may present themselves as: medical conditions – serious allergies, heart defect, dwarfism, diabetes, cerebral palsy and so on; behaviour issues – ADHD, ADD etc.; developmental issues – autism, Asperger's spectrum disorder, Down syndrome and so on; learning issues – such as dyslexia, central auditory processing disorder or mental health issues – anxiety, depression.

Different disabilities involve differing degrees of assistance and support. Depending on their individual condition, children with disabilities can fit anywhere on the spectrum between highly functioning to in need of a lot of support to fulfil basic needs.

What's going on with your child?

Parents with children with special needs often comment on the level of misunderstanding there is about their child's condition. Unfortunately, many people simply do not understand your child's disability and when you are faced with ignorant comments or stares it can be hard to stay calm.

Communicating well with the school

Developing an open and communicative relationship with teachers is a key element to helping your child feel happy and learn effectively at school. There is sometimes a tension between the parent and the teacher of a child with special needs. This tension can arise when the parent perceives ignorance or indifference on the teacher's part and from the teacher's perspective there can be a feeling that the parent is over-protective. If such a tension arises, then no one involved wins, least of all your child. To avoid such a situation, it is important to foster a strong, communicative relationship with the teacher.

Teachers want the best for their students, but they may not have had experience with your child's particular condition before and may feel a little overwhelmed or conversely, not fully realise the seriousness of the condition. In contrast, parents of a Special Needs child can be so tightly wound from negative experiences that they can be a little defensive. Recognise that you are both on the same side and foster a positive relationship, so your child has the best opportunity for school success. In order to successfully foster a strong relationship with the school, it is important that you meet with your child's teachers at the beginning of the year. Consider providing the teacher with an informative book that they can read at their leisure. Use the time with the teacher in the interview to explain what techniques of managing their condition work for you, or have worked with other teachers in the past. In most cases, children with a disability will have an individual education plan (IEP) drawn up by the school – so parent input is essential to making this plan work. Make sure you keep lines of communication open through emails or notes in the school diary.

Avoid feeling guilty

It's common for parents of a special needs child to feel guilty if there are other children in the family as they tend to receive less attention. Children generally learn to adapt to the needs of the special situation they are in. From my experience they generally become very nurturing, caring adults. It helps if they link up with other children in a similar situation through sibling workshops, camps and activities that are often organised by disability groups.

Relieve the constant stress

Parenting a disabled child usually involves a great deal of patience and can be very time-consuming. It's important then to resist the temptation to do everything for a disabled child. By allowing them to have some level of independence we also increase their self-esteem as well as lightening parental load.

If you have a child with a disability it's important to take time out for yourself too. You cannot be a good parent if you are exhausted and stressed – both you and your child will benefit from you taking a little "me" time every now and again. It helps then to use your support mechanisms such as family and friends who will fill the gap while you take a break. Often couple relationships suffer when there is a child with a disability in the family. That's why it's important that you spend some time as a couple away from the children. Sole parents have a greater need to spend time alone to recharge the batteries. Respite services play an important role in giving parents in all situations a break.

Parenting children with disabilities is undoubtedly the toughest parenting job there is. They need all the genuine help there is. For them the notion of 'it takes a village to raise a child' takes on a whole new meaning.

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