

Parents of Children with Disabilities Need to Nurture Their Own Relationship

by Carolyn Anderson

No matter how much a family loves and accepts a child with a disability, the situation may change family dynamics. A family is like a mobile. If one person changes (moves), all the others will, too. As I change my reactions and myself, my spouse also adjusts or changes.

The struggle to rear a child with a disability can cause tremendous change—and growth—for each parent. In the family of a child with a disability, traditional roles for moms and dads are particularly vulnerable. A father may feel he should be the breadwinner, family protector, and leader. The mom may believe she should be the caregiver and nurturer.

When a family has a child with a disability, however, the family leader often cannot “control” or “protect” other family members in a traditional sense. The family leader may retreat. At the same time, the nurturer may become increasingly competent and assertive in dealing with special education and medical professionals. Sometimes the situation becomes a “sore” spot that needs to be addressed.

How can the retreating spouse be brought back into the family picture? If you are the person most involved with the child, the first step may be to examine your own actions.

Ask yourself, “What benefits do I receive since my behavior or role changed?” Answers could include feelings of fulfillment, power, reassurance, adequacy, control, accomplishment, competency, high self-esteem, and self-confidence. New friendships can develop. New knowledge and skills are learned. Ask yourself, “Am I being selfish? Am I keeping these benefits to myself?”

Think about what you really need or want. Tell your spouse; he or she is not a mind reader. Do you want “support?” What does

that mean to you—attendance at an IEP meeting or helping to fix dinner at home? In my home, for example, I felt at one point that my husband would not help me. He felt, however, that I would not let him help. There was truth in both positions.

Communicate with your spouse:

- “What do you want out of parenthood?”
- “Our kids need ____ now. What will you do?”
- “I have been doing _____. It’s too much for me. Please help with _____.”
- “This is where I’m at.”
- “I cannot take care of your relationship with this child.”

Encourage your spouse to take a larger role. Although change won’t happen overnight and isn’t necessarily easy, consider these tips:

- Don’t criticize.
- Start small. Take small steps to bring the spouse back into the child’s life.
- Involve the spouse in school projects and homework.
- Allow the spouse to help, even if the method is not exactly how you would do it.
- Don’t “fix” or “rescue.” Let your child and spouse work things out for themselves.
- Take time for regular “dates” with your spouse. (And don’t talk about the kids!)
- Consider receiving objective help, such as counseling.

Spousal and family relationships involve many feelings and challenges. If improving the relationships is a goal for you, set your family’s mobile in motion!

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