



The Special Needs Family: A Pediatrician's Perspective

According to the US Department of Justice, an individual is considered to have a disability if they have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities such as: seeing, hearing, speaking, walking, breathing, performing manual tasks, learning, caring for oneself, and working. A child with a disability can include a child suffering from a variety of different illnesses —asthma, attention deficit disorder, cerebral palsy and developmental delay to name a few.

From my perspective as a pediatrician, the family of a special needs child is extraordinary and extremely special. The family has to deal with the physical, emotional, economic and social challenges of raising a child with complicated medical needs while at the same time dealing with the needs of the other members in the family unit. Remaining cohesive and fostering strong, healthy relationships with each other is often difficult because the needs of the family may be put on the back burner to attend to the more pressing needs of the challenged child.

As a pediatrician, I not only take care of the child with special needs but I also take care of her siblings as well. The siblings of a child with special needs often require attention that their parents have neither the time nor the energy to give. The sibling may become extremely self-sufficient because of this, or there is the potential for them to act out, rebel, or get caught up in the wrong crowd.

Siblings of special needs children often have trouble coping. They may have many different and conflicting feelings. For example, they may feel worried about their sibling, jealous of the attention their brother/sister receives, or resentful of having to explain, support, and/or take care of their brother or sister. They may also feel resentful that they are not able to do things or go places because of their sibling.

As parents, paying attention to the moods of family members is important. If you notice signs of depression or other changes such as hanging out with the wrong crowd, get them help. I highly recommend counseling for the entire family in order to equip family members with coping strategies to manage the inevitable stressors that will come their way. Support groups are also invaluable.

It's important for parents to acknowledge how frustrating and challenging life must be for all members of the family. It's often easy to get caught up in managing the day to day challenges of a child with special needs. As parents, you should remember to praise your other children for their ability to succeed despite the difficult circumstances and acknowledge them for some of their positive attributes. A word of recognition, a caring touch, a hug, an hour alone with mom and/or dad will make a world of difference.

When you first learn that your child has a disability or chronic illness and needs special care throughout life, you can be emotionally overwhelmed. You will feel stressed in all areas of life, including your marriage, finances, and relationships with friends and family. You may experience feelings of sadness, worry, denial, anger, embarrassment, and resentment. You must find time for yourself. It's essential to take care of your physical and mental well being so you have the strength to deal with everything else.

Communication is paramount. Being fully self-expressed is important because it brings everything out into the open. Bringing things out in the open gives everyone an opportunity to deal effectively with the issues at hand. Having a child with medical issues is challenging, but dealing with these challenges together as a family is essential in restoring stability and in creating a healthy, nurturing, and cohesive family unit. ■

About Dr. Liz

Dr. Elizabeth Robinson Henry (Dr. Liz) has dedicated her life to providing youth with the knowledge and confidence to lead healthy and productive lives. She is the founder of Dr. Liz Consulting, a practice focused on making a difference in the lives of adolescents by addressing their physical, emotional, and mental needs. Teens, tweens and their parents can find resources on how to build self-confidence, manage anger and stress, and overcome issues such as bullying, emotions, fitting-in, and obesity at www.drlizforyouth.com.

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