

Tips for Single Parents of Children with Special Needs

Parenting as a single parent is difficult enough in "normal" circumstances, but when your child has special needs, there's an even greater level of difficulty. The challenges seem to double, and if there is no support from the other parent, you're on your own to manage the care of your child with special needs, and sometimes your other children as well. It's a tremendous responsibility, and even though you want to do the best you can for your child, single parents face circumstances that could cause them to "burn out" at a faster pace than families with shared responsibility of the day to day demands of special needs parenting. The challenges may seem impossible, but there are ways that single parents can create a unique and pleasant lifestyle for themselves and their children.

Here are some suggestions:

- Create a schedule and try to be consistent. A schedule can help reduce many stressors. If your child knows what to expect, she will probably have fewer melt-downs, leaving you more time to handle other things, and decreasing your stress.
- If your child's other parent can be involved, work on co-parenting for the best interest of your child. Each of you will have ideas about how your child should be raised, but do your best to keep routines consistent in both households. Sharing ideas and meeting somewhere in the middle, as long as things are focused on the child and family's needs, can help to achieve a positive family environment and more stability for your child.
- Network with other single parents who have kids with special needs. Many parents feel the need to meet other parents who are going through similar challenges. Talking with other people who know what you are going through can help you feel more positive about your own situation. These days, there are so many ways to connect with other parents. Try a web search for special needs support groups, or even single parent support groups. To find these groups, you can search within your preferred social media outlet. You may find some that are diagnosis specific, and some that are for the whole spectrum of disabilities. Lots of parents are now using social media to gather and support each other online. Again, there will be groups that are for all disabilities, and some will be diagnosis specific. No matter how you choose to find support, other parents can be your best resource. Groups are a great way to share your experiences with other parents, listen to theirs, and exchange important information and tips learned along the way. You may discover a great healthcare provider, learn about new therapies you did not know about before, or even, in some cases, coordinate childcare efforts with another single parent.
- Create opportunities for family time. Even with a busy schedule, it is important to spend time together as a family. Take a look at the calendar and choose a day or night each week to have a family activity. Your child will enjoy having something to consistently look forward to in his weekly routine.
- Counseling can provide great relief. A professional therapist or counselor can offer an unbiased viewpoint, will listen to your thoughts and worries, and help you get through things. There are many programs that offer counseling on a sliding scale, and sometimes it can be covered by insurance.
- If you have other children who are old enough to help, let them help, but not too much. Siblings often assume the role of the "helper," and that is a natural and beautiful thing. But as we know, our kids with special needs require an awful lot of help sometimes, and we must be careful not to ask too much of our other children. They need time for themselves, for friends, for activities, and time alone with their parent now and then.
- Give yourself permission to accept help from family, friends, church, and neighbors. Many parents feel the need to "do it all" and that can lead to serious stress, anxiety, and exhaustion. If you have offers from friends or family to help, let them help. When they say, "Let me know how I can help," they are expressing that they truly want to help you, but may not know how they can be useful. It is fine to say, "Really? I could use a hand with..."
- If you need assistance with housing, food, healthcare, or childcare find assistance from your local social service agencies. Sometimes things are tough when there is only one income in the household, and you may struggle to meet all of your needs. Many agencies have assistance programs that qualify families by income and needs

- Take some time for yourself. As a single parent, this is the most important thing, but also may seem like the most impossible. Try to give yourself some time to do something just for you. This time can provide the fuel you need to be positive with our children. A good way to get in a few minutes for yourself here and there is by setting strict bedtimes for your children. Early bedtimes, around 7:30 or 8:00, are good for a child's routine and health, and give the parent time to wind down in the evening. Read a few chapters of a book, take a bath, or watch your favorite show. Of course there will be interruptions to your routine, but generally that time can be yours.

Finding supports and creating a schedule are important for both you and your child. Implement what works for you, and remember to seek support when you need it. You are not alone, there are many parents of children with special needs that enjoy caring for their child and are also addressing these same issues every day.

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