

## Being a Good Parent

### BE CREATIVE

Play is important, both for children and their parents. If your disability prevents you from playing with your children, as most parents do, be creative. Work with your children in adapting activities. You can play catch from a chair, you will still be able to tell stories, fish, pick a good program out on TV, or go to a museum or the movies. Your children will work with you in adapting their play activities to include you if you will work with them. Use your imagination and will power.

My first encounter with "can a person with a disability be a good parent" occurred when I was in college. I had been dating a young woman for a number of months and had met her family. We both considered the relationship "serious". After one of our visits to her parents home she confided in me that her mother had questioned her about my disability. Her mother had expressed concerns that I might not be able to be as good a parent with a child as someone with two hands since my lack of a left hand might impair my ability to care for and play with a child. The woman I was dating didn't seem very concerned about the issue and thought it odd that her mother would raise it. We laughed about it but I realized that it brought up some questions for me about my ability to meet other peoples and my own expectations about parenting. Since no one really knew whether my birth defect was "genetic" and could or could not be inherited, I always had concerns about having a biological child. Perhaps that played some role in my waiting a long time to attempt to have children. My wife became pregnant but miscarried. Since she was in her early 40's we decided to adopt.

Having been a parent now for the past ten years, I still feel some embarrassment and some irritation at times when the other children in my child's school see the hook and ask questions. My daughter often handles it better than I do, answering their questions for me. My daughter is ten and is becoming an avid swimmer. She is frustrated with my lack of interest in the water. I realize that my failure to learn how to swim when I was a child had a lot to do with the difficulties I had trying to swim with one hand. As an adult I have been hesitant to take lessons, although I have made a promise to my daughter to do so.

What is clear from my own experience and from working with many families with a member who has a disability, is that the disability can certainly limit and restrict the physical act of parenting. I have been impressed, however, with the efforts by many of the individuals I have worked with in the disability community, who have found ways to overcome and compensate for these physical limitations. The director of one of the local centers for independent living that I have worked with is quadriplegic. She has had two more children since her accident and provides much of the physical care for these children, taking them to school, meeting with their teachers, and physically caring for them. Her ability to compensate for her physical limitations have amazed many. The best advice is to try. You may be surprised at what you are able to do.

It is equally clear that a physical disability does not have to impair your ability to be an emotional and psychological parent to your children. Research has suggested that even with a severe emotional disorder, such as schizophrenia, a parent can still function adequately with support and treatment. You are your child's parent. You are an important part of their life and always will be. Having a disability does

not have to change this. Stay involved with your children. You may not be able to do all the physical things that you could before, or that other people may feel that you should be able to do. As the old saying goes, "It is the quality of what you provide, not the quantity". You may have to find other ways to relate to your children. Men may find this especially hard since they may be more likely to relate to their children, through activities such as sports that they may no longer be able to play. They have to find other substitute activities. They may even have to talk to their children.

In my work as a psychologist, I have had the opportunity to talk with hundreds of kids and their parents over the years. When there were problems, no matter what the issue or the age of the child, I have always tried to hear and understand both the parent's and the child's point of view. I have thereby become convinced that being a parent or a child are two of the most stressful roles that human beings ever attempt to perform.

The nine principles outlined below apply to the parent with a disability, as well as the parent without a disability.

Show your love to be unconditional. Kids need to know that you love them no matter what they do. This is a theme that needs to be played again and again in your interactions with your child. You can be furious with them and what they have done and provide the strictest of limits but at the same time, let them know that you love them very much. This means being able to say it in words, even if your child appears not to want to hear it. It also means being able to say it in action by being "grown up" enough to step back from potential shouting and yelling matches, to not say things that will be hard to take back at some later point, and to not threaten things that you have no intention of doing, etc.

Provide one-to-one time with your child. All children, no matter what their age, need some special time with their parents. It does not have to be long. As children grow into adolescence, it does not have to be as regular but it needs to be one-on-one time, not time spent with the entire family or time with both parents together but time between you and your child. Time to talk. Time to play a game. Time to go out for a walk in the Mall.

Set limits and provide structure. Parents need to set the parameters for kids. Kids need to be involved in the rule making process and parents need to be consistent in the rules that they set and the consequences they provide. Kids need to know where their parents stand on issues. Parents need to play the role of an anchor and buffer - someone their children can bump up against, argue with and rebel against without getting seriously hurt in the process.

Be realistic in your expectations. It is only human but parents quite often expect their children to go from one extreme to the other. For example, from doing very poorly in school to doing very well, simply because you talked with the teacher or have worked some things out at home. It may be human to expect such changes, but most humans are not able to make such changes, at least not that fast.

Be a parent, not a friend. You will have many opportunities to try the role of friend out when your children are grown. Don't confuse the issue and the child.

Communicate and teach, don't lecture. A complaint I hear repeatedly from kids is that their parents talk too much. Parents need to learn ways of drawing their children out and really listening to what the child has to say. For most of us this is hard because we have a tendency, again, being human, to become defensive and to try to justify the rules and decisions we make. Effective teaching generally does not

involve lecturing, at least not for long periods of time. It involves actively engaging the student in the learning process. Parenting is much the same. Scolding and shaming are not effective teaching techniques nor are they effective parenting techniques.

Ask for help when you need it. Parents need to learn to be supports and resources to each other rather than competitors and adversaries in the parenting process. We all make mistakes as parents and we all reach points where we simply do not know what to do. Being able to ask for help from each other, from friends and from child care professionals is important. And there is much help to be found. Some of the books that I have recommended to parents include: Patterson's *Living with Children and the York's, Tough Love*. I have also frequently suggested that parents get involved in parenting classes. These are often offered through the local Y, community center or school system. Some of the eldest and best known courses frequently offered in the community are Parent Effectiveness Training, Systematic Training for Effective Parenting, and Tough Love. And of course there are folks like me, psychologists, social workers and counselors. Contrary to popular belief, we don't ask you to lie on a couch when you come to see us, even though we know you could probably use the rest. And we don't think that you are a bad parent or that you are crazy because you are in our office. In general, we are not a bad lot. We can frequently help because we often can be more objective than other family members or friends. We also frequently have ideas about how to deal with problems in ways that you may not have thought about. After all, most of us have been doing this kind of work for many years and may have dealt with hundreds of situations similar to the one that you are encountering. You can find us by looking in the yellow pages under psychologist or marriage, family, or child counseling. You also can get information about us from other parents who have used us or from your physician, guidance counselor, minister or employee assistance coordinator. Depending on the nature of the problem and the type of license the person helping you holds, 50% - 80% of the cost of these services may be paid by your insurance plan. When you think of all the money that you spend on your child, the cost of counseling may be one of the smallest but one of the wisest investments you'll ever make.

A crisis with a child can also be an opportunity. All crises are stressful. How stressful depends on how we perceive the situation and how many changes are required of us. Crisis situations with children frequently make important demands on us, which we feel we must meet. But since the world provides us with little real training about how to be an effective parent, we may have real questions about our ability to come through. These are the situations that we may feel most trying and most stressful. Unfortunately we may frequently focus only on the stress of the situation and not on the opportunity that the situation presents. Crisis situations, in general, afford us an opportunity to make significant changes in our lives and in the lives of others. They often force us to change our assumptions about ourselves or those closest to us, to find new ways of thinking and dealing with situations, and to develop new coping skills. The Chinese were aware of this thousands of years ago. Their symbol for Crisis is also their symbol for opportunity.

Keep your sense of humor. Some day you will look back on all this and say...Well, who knows what you'll say?

Good luck. As parents who are also human beings, we always need it.