

Time for Us Facing the Future Together

By Lisa Lieberman, LCSW and Deborah Seldner

Raising children can challenge any relationship. How do you find time together, just the two of you? Couples parenting a child with a disability may seem at even greater risk. As a counseling professional and an “exceptional spouse” in my own right, I find that most such couples have stronger – not shakier – commitments to one another simply because they must intentionally create time together and “make it work.”

Following are some basic approaches for building a foundation for an intimate, meaningful connection with your partner.

All Feelings Are Allowed

My friend Ann, whose second child has a heart ailment and developmental delay, is recently divorced. That experience taught her a great deal about keeping connections strong. Ann firmly believes that more open communication of feelings with her spouse could have strengthened their commitment to one another. She recalls the closest times in her marriage as those when her husband was able to express his pain, as well as hear her sadness.

It’s normal for sadness to surface from time to time. Not resisting it allows it to pass more quickly. Curb the tendency to jump in and “fix it” for your spouse. Often the greatest gift you can give is just listening without passing judgment. The concept that all feelings are allowed establishes an essential foundation for intimacy.

Intimacy embraces differences

Differences can be a source of strength for a relationship. One couple I know, John and Jen, whose child has autism, have the proverbial contrasting views of glass-half full and glass-half-empty. John sees every small step his child takes as

progress. For Jen, each step is a reminder of how slowly their son is progressing. Yet both understand the value of respecting each other’s different perspectives. An agreed-upon vision is required only when choosing a course of action.

Couples must understand that they, as individuals, do not have to be identical as parents. A major roadblock for relationships occurs when one assumes they already know what his or her partner is feeling or thinking. When a situation arises, describe how you see or hear any situation, ask questions with curiosity and let your partner tell you his or her perspective.

Understand gender differences

My friend Ann groans when people say her ex-husband’s inability to express his emotions is a “guy thing.” Yet in my counseling practice, I repeatedly see issues arise between a couple simply because one is a man and the other a woman.

While society gives women “permission” to grieve and immerse themselves in their children’s needs, men are expected to be stoic and “in control.” Dads frequently, and most often unconsciously, shut down

emotionally. Men have told me that they feel compelled to “hold it together for my wife.” Meanwhile, even in dual-career relationships, it is the wife who is often expected to hold down the home front, dealing with daily child-care arrangements, scheduling, chauffeuring, as well as gathering information and identifying resources. Overwhelmed and fatigued, she may misconstrue her partner’s “family-guardian” posture as uncaring. If feelings are not clarified, these misinterpretations can begin a cycle of resentment and polarization that can eventually poison a relationship.

At a father’s workshop I attended, a dad eloquently described his sense of exclusion: “When my child was diagnosed, I watched everyone nurturing my wife and baby. I felt like a wolf circling the perimeter of the den, not knowing how to enter and get support for myself. Only a man could have invited me into the circle!”

Some men wisely recommend that dads can avoid feeling left out by defining a key role for themselves with their child whether bedtime rituals, homework duty, or regular outings, to name only a few. When a dad does create

special time with a child, mom needs to “back off” and let him do it *his* way.

Don't expect all your needs to be met in the relationship

In any relationship, even without the presence of a disability, it is unrealistic to expect one partner to meet all the other's emotional needs. Both dads and moms may need to have and pursue interests independent of each other.

Don't sacrifice your needs as an adult

Many parents feel they can never do enough for their child. Too often, they put their own needs on hold. Such sacrifices don't win medals. Your child will benefit more if you and your partner include your needs, both as a couple, and as individuals, in family priorities.

Schedule a weekly date with your spouse, if only by creating enjoyable rituals – such as a walk, or sharing a cup of coffee and the newspaper in bed on a weekend.

Ask yourself, “Who was I before my child was born – what really mattered to me?” Then find someone to help you figure out how to bring that back into your life. And support your partner in doing the same.

Find ways to keep humor in your life

Humor can be the most pain free route through difficult situations. At other times, it is a natural outgrowth of seeing the world from an unusual perspective – the eyes of a child with a disability. In my own marriage, our son's antics create special intimacy for my husband and me.

Seek the company of other special needs parents

Find others who can share your concerns, experiences, sorrow and joy. “Veteran” parents can help new initiates over the hurdles of finding information, working with health care or education professionals, or simply coping with distressing news. “Newcomer” parents can provide each other with “me-too” support that may simply mean, “I understand, I'm here.” You don't need to go it alone, either individually or as a couple.

Check with your child's pediatrician for support-groups, or call one of the national organizations listed her for local contacts.

Don't wait too long to seek help

As parents and as a couple committed to one another, you are each other's closest ally. If that alliance becomes strained, treat it before it becomes irreparably damaged.

Check with your child's pediatrician, your own physician, a clergyman, or members of a support group to identify a therapist who can help you as an individual and you and your partner as a couple.

Reaping rewards

Couples who intentionally build intimacy into their lives reap many rewards. Allowing for feelings, understanding the inherent differences between individuals, putting a priority on adult play time, and finding humor in everyday life, provide couples with a solid foundation for facing the challenges that can arise when parenting a child with a disability.



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