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Caring for Your Marriage When Your Child Has Disabilities

by Meghan Cawley

In 2005, my mother discovered she was pregnant with identical twin boys. Not long after, she was diagnosed with twin-to-twin transfusion syndrome (TTS). The shock of the diagnosis was soon followed by the miscarriage of one of the twins, and doctors warned my parents that their remaining son may suffer from permanent neurological injury if he survived to birth.

For the first six months of his life, my brother showed no signs of neurological injury. However, following his diagnosis of right hemiplegia, a form of cerebral palsy, my parents realized that their experience raising their youngest son would look different from what they'd expected.

What can couples do to take care of their marriage when their child has disabilities?

Parents of children with disabilities often find themselves taking on responsibilities they weren't otherwise expecting.¹ In struggling to balance new responsibilities with preexisting ones, couples may find the health of their marriage at risk. So, this raises the question, what can couples do to take care of their marriage when their child has disabilities? Here are a few suggestions to help you and your partner get started!

Develop a Co-Parenting Alliance

Dr. Liz Matheis, a clinical psychologist who specializes in working with families, defines the co-parenting alliance as the way parents agree to divide parenting responsibilities.² Children with disabilities often require more care than other children, resulting in additional parenting responsibilities.

Take time to discuss parenting responsibilities with your partner and decide together how to divide them.

There is no right or wrong way to divide responsibilities if both partners agree on the division.

If you are feeling dissatisfied with the distribution of responsibilities in

your relationship but don't know how to broach the subject of a co-parenting alliance, try writing down your thoughts and feelings before talking to your partner. You may also find it helpful to talk to your partner after spending quality time together, such as after a family dinner or

romantic outing. That way both of you will be in a good mood.

Practice Daily Self-Care

Neglecting self-care while parenting a child with disabilities can increase your chances of developing "caregiver burnout," which can pose a serious risk not only to yourself, but also to your marriage. According to the Cleveland Clinic website, caregiver burnout can occur when parents "neglect their own emotional, physical, and spir-

itual health . . . [leading] to fatigue, hopelessness, and ultimately burnout."³

Striving to practice self-care every day, even if for only an hour or two, can help parents avoid caregiver burnout. Aim to have your self-care

address both your physical and mental needs. You may devote time to one of your favorite hobbies or explore new activities. Not only can making time for self-care empower you as an individual, but it can empower you to make time for your marriage as well!

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Make Time for Your Relationship

Caring for your child can—understandably—be time consuming. You may find yourself with limited free time as you attempt to balance responsibilities both in and outside the home. While you may feel that skipping weekly date night is inevitable given childcare demands, research shows that making time for your relationship at least once a week can increase marital happiness!⁴

An effective way to make time for your relationship is to schedule a weekly date night. Set aside a specific time for you and your spouse to get out of the house to focus on just the two of you. Spending uninterrupted time together can help to renew your marital commitment as well as reignite the love you share for one another.

Be sure to schedule date nights in advance so you can arrange appropriate accommodations for your child. If you need help finding childcare for your son or daughter, there are several online

services you can contact to determine which caretaker will best fit your child's needs. Enjoy the time you can spend together and use it to take a break from the demands of parenting!

Maintain Effective Communication

Maintaining effective communication is key to a healthy marriage. Communication is especially important for parents of children with disabilities because caregiving-related stress

can increase marital tension. When couples communicate daily with one another, they can promote feelings of openness and safety—alleviating even the most difficult situations.

If you and your partner spend a lot of time apart, remember that communication over the phone or through text messaging can also be effective.

Another way to maintain effective communication is to listen to your partner. When your partner is talking, to listen attentively to what they

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have to say so you can understand their unique perspective.⁵ Failing to listen to your partner can lead to otherwise avoidable disagreements and leave you or your partner feeling hurt or misunderstood. Disagreements in marriage are inevitable; however, as you and your partner strive to communicate regularly and listen to each other, you can avoid disagreements that may ultimately harm your relationship.

Final Thoughts

Parents can feel overwhelmed when the responsibilities of being a wife or husband are com-

pounded with the responsibility of caring for a child with disabilities. My parents didn't know how their son's quality of life would change after his diagnosis—much less the quality of their marriage. However, they turned toward each other and intentionally invested in the health of their marriage. Today, my parents have a happy marriage and a thriving 16-year-old son. While it may take time for couples to determine how to best meet the needs of their individual relationship, all efforts are worthwhile and can benefit both parents and children.

Endnotes

1. *Parenting children with special needs*. (n.d.). Psychology Today. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/parenting/parenting-children-special-needs>
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