

SPECIAL Parenting Matters of Westchester

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“Our publication is dedicated to parents of children with special needs. We offer options, awareness and validation for the diverse feelings and voices parents have for their children and themselves.”

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Talking With Your Children About Their Special Needs
Jenny A. Frank, CSW

Parenting does not come with a roadmap. One concern, infrequently discussed, is how to talk with your child about her special needs/disability. The notion of explaining to your child her differences can feel scary, daunting and heartbreaking. If you're anxious about this you are not alone. This article provides some adaptable information and reduces the temptation **not** to talk with your child.

Regardless of how the moments present themselves, and they will, parents need to be ready to explain their child's special needs. Naturally, having a physical/medical condition initiates these discussions. For children with learning disabilities, the time may appear more haphazardly. Situations such as homework, being picked on, frustration with school work or deciding to try medication creates the opportunity for the conversation. Or, your child may suddenly just ask "why am I different?" Or say, "I can never get anything right".

So, how can you help your child become more understanding of her special needs while supporting her progress, self-esteem and adaptability to her differences? Before speaking with your child it is important to educate yourself which includes developing a working knowledge of your child's **abilities and limitations**. Equally important is giving yourself time to explore your own feelings. Working through the painful feelings enables you to move forward in supporting your child.

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Putting One Foot in Front of the Other: Helping Your Child Develop Social Skills
Roberta Rachel Omin, CSW-R

Children with special needs are often at a disadvantage when their level of social skills is limited and the environment offers incompatible opportunities. It is all too common for parents to rely on the school environment alone to advance their child's skills and self-esteem. Research shows, however, that everyday experience with parents fosters social development greatly.

Social interaction is critical for your child's development in order for him to experience pleasure, enjoy leisure, enhance self-esteem and acquire the skills needed for incrementally meeting increasing expectations. Inoculating your child's emotional immune system strengthens his resistance to the potential allergic effects of teasing, peer pressure and stigmatization.

Parents experiencing the wide range of disabilities - neurological, developmental or physical - find themselves having to support their children's social skills with more depth, skill and tolerance than the "average" parent. Frequently, children with learning disabilities and ADHD miss social cues, especially nonverbal cues. A child with language difficulties may shy away from other children because of the output required to "keep up". A child with a physical/medical handicap may be limited in any number of ways; a child with a developmental delay presents

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TALKING WITH YOUR CHILDREN

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Medical and Physical Conditions: In general, we all have a difficult time with our own physical vulnerabilities and limitations; and it is even more traumatic to have a child with a physical disability. Visible conditions may provide more opportunities to talk because it is a “seen” disability. An excellent beginning is to speak separately with your child’s team to discuss what is involved and how they would present the issues to your child. Pediatric specialists can be helpful to find age appropriate language to explain what the condition is about. Ask your child what questions she has ahead of time. This will encourage her to ask the doctor questions when you are all together. Additionally, saying to your child, “let me tell you what the doctor told me so you too can understand” is also a way to enter discussions. Metaphors (for instance, a balloon that doesn’t let the air in and out very well for respiratory conditions) and pictures explain invisible conditions.

Learning Disabilities: Unlike medical/physical conditions, learning disabilities are frequently not identified until a child is school-age and parents are faced with decisions such as having their child tested, being pulled out of class for services, providing private tutoring or beginning a course of medication. Opportunities to talk with your child can be whenever your child receives a service that is dissimilar from her classmates, such as resource room or speech therapy or other special accommodations.

Regardless of why you talk with your child, honesty can greatly help in destigmatizing your child’s concerns and fears. When explaining a learning disability and its treatment, language should be tailored to your child’s abilities. For example: “When people get sick, they see a doctor and may require medication to make them better. Extra help with organization and focusing would help you achieve your very best. It is not that you are less smart than anyone else; it simply means that it does not come as easily to you and the extra help will make things easier”. And, be sure to tell your child what a learning disability is “not”.

Developmental/Neurological Disorders: Explaining developmental and neurological disorders can be especially trying. A parent is, in all likelihood, not going to teach her child specific neurological or developmental terms such as autism or mental retardation. In discussing the spectrum of developmental and neurological disorders,

observe and speak about symptoms or behaviors with your child. For example, “sometimes, you have a hard time with certain social situations” or “it takes you a long time to learn new things and it helps to go over it and over it”. As with a medical or learning disorder, a parent needs to be clear about the problem areas while reinforcing areas of strength.

GENERAL GUIDELINES:

- ❖ Educate yourself as much as possible. Confer with others regarding helpful communication tools.
- ❖ Don’t be afraid to let other professionals know how you want something presented or to give you their ideas for how to explain this to your child.
- ❖ Set time aside time and minimize distractions when speaking with your child. It creates space for her to take in information and begin to digest it.
 - ❖ Be frank in emphasizing areas of strength and targeted areas of need. An integral part of your discussion should include not labeling your child or seeing the “label” as a reflection of her as a person.
 - ❖ Encourage feedback; allow your child’s questions to be your guide. Generally children will 1) ask what they really want to know and 2) think about a situation and ask more questions down the road. Feelings and concerns will resurface during times of testing, doctor’s visits, or just before going to bed. Listening carefully helps you better understand what your child wants to know and comprehends.
- ❖ Referring to famous and significant people who are positive role models is helpful.
- ❖ Like adults, expect your child to have her own reactions. As parents we have to try to read our child’s cues. They may shut down, display anxiety, anger, sadness, regression, or feel a sense of relief all at the same time. And then, there are your own reactions. The challenge here is to discern what your child is feeling from your own feelings.
- ❖ Prepare your child to handle questions and comments from others, especially peers. Allow your child to decide on how much and what to say.
- ❖ Most importantly, help your child see the commonalities she has with others. These include our universal desire for love, friendship, and a sense of belonging and acceptance. Parents can sometimes forget that their child with differences has more similarities with others than not.



Being a parent involves growing in unexpected ways. In having a child with special needs, there is the added dimension of navigating through a series of varied, intense, and irregular developmental and emotional stages. Sometimes we can forget that our child has a right to know about her special needs. Keeping your child's disabilities close to home could actually backfire in the long run, in that your child may sense her differences or not be prepared for self-managing at an age when she should be. Talking with your child about any difficult issue needs your compassion and straightforward communication. Balancing the amount of exposure and protectiveness that is grounded in your resourcefulness and acceptance will be key.

SPECIAL Parenting Matters
of Westchester

announces

**TWO PARENT SUPPORT
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FOR PARENTS OF ELEMENTARY-
AGED CHILDREN WITH EITHER

SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS
or
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MEDICAL CONDITIONS

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necessary**

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as less sophisticated or interested in the world around him. And some children have multiple and complex layers of disabilities. No one can help their child develop social skills like parents. It takes the willingness to accept that because of your child's disability you may need to spend an exorbitant amount of time explaining, modeling, training and reinforcing basic social concepts.

The following are general guidelines that have helped many parents already. Like any other child-related issue, they need to be kept in context of the reality of your child's developmental age, skill level, interests and capabilities.

- ❖ Observe your child in a variety of settings to gain the broadest understanding of how he views the world. Learn his strengths and what is unique about him.
- ❖ Pre-teach skills. This is especially useful for preschoolers and elementary age children. Through pre-teaching games, activities and toys, your child will be more comfortable and available for learning the ABCs of social interaction.
- ❖ Model and reinforce the management of transitions and endings. Many children have difficulty stopping an activity. Who hasn't experienced that with their child? Let your child know in advance what the plan is by giving specific details. Rehearsing with a catch phrase or a silent gesture will support the plan without embarrassing him.
- ❖ Start with helping your child develop one good friendship with another child (either through the school, recreational programs, neighborhood or relatives). Someone who is close in developmental age, common interests and similar capability to start with.
- ❖ Nurture his friendship with regular get-togethers. Children, like adults, benefit greatly when they are able to develop lasting relationships.
- ❖ Don't be embarrassed or too shy to supervise get-togethers so that you can be available to help your child through knotty issues by taking a problem-solving approach. While intervening is important in the beginning, it is equally important to allow your child to problem solve for himself as he is growing up.
- ❖ Encourage your child to think about relationships, styles of relating and personal values. Use everyday experiences as "how do you think that person is feeling?" "How else would you have handled it?" Make it into a game called "step into their shoes". Have two sets of shoes. Ask your child to step into the other person's shoes and then back to their own asking them questions like those above.

PUTTING ONE FOOT IN FRONT

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- ❖ Hear your child without offering solutions. Ask for his ideas only after thoroughly acknowledging feelings from his perspective. For example, "I hear you say you are sad about.... Is that right?" Inhibit your impulse to save, rescue, fix and solve in favor of activating your child's burgeoning ability to problem solve. Take the position of interested witness.
- ❖ Create a successful environment for his friendship by knowing your child's taste, tolerance and pace for social situations. For example, if your child has difficulty sharing, ask him which toys does he not want to share and put them away for the get-together or consider keeping the time-frame within your child's comfort zone. Afterwards, comment with casual animation on what went well specifically. Your child will want to continue that positive behavior.
- ❖ Help your child know his special need in age appropriate language so it can be understood in the context of how social interaction can be affected. For example, "you get very excited or frustrated when you have to wait your turn" or "even though you don't want to slow down, remember your body is telling you 'give me a rest'".
- ❖ Have your child participate in a social skills group in school or with a trained therapist specializing in children with special needs. She will target social skill development without the personalizing that affects parents. In turn, parents can make use of consultation with the professional to gain clarity, perspective and strategies they can utilize at home.



Parents are central to the development of their child's social skills. Know that patterns take time to change and often don't happen right away. You can anticipate joy, frustrating setbacks and gains as part of the learning process with children who do not easily learn social nuances and competencies. Enhancing your

child's social abilities takes hard work, flexibility, common sense, resiliency, and realistic goals. Being there for your child all the way, doing what it takes to help your child be all he can be begins with putting one foot in front of the other. Modeling perseverance, courage and faith mirror a belief in your child that will be reflected back to you again and again.

Let Us Know

A Column For Parents To Write In And Be Heard

Each of us has had the experience of discovering we've supported our children in ways we would not have planned or imagined. We'd like to hear about yours in regard to the topics presented in this issue.

We would also like to incorporate your ideas for other topics in the upcoming issues of *SPECIAL* Parenting Matters of Westchester. We welcome your emails at Specialparentingmatters@yahoo.com. Thank you.



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