

You Are Not Alone

When parents learn about any difficulty or problem in their child's development, this information comes as a tremendous blow.

The day my child was diagnosed as having a disability, I was devastated — and so confused that I recall little else about those first days other than the heartbreak.

It was like having a knife stuck in my heart.

While these descriptions may sound dramatic, they may not fully describe the many emotions that parents have when they receive any bad news about their child.

It is normal for parents to have many different feelings at this time.

Denial, anger, fear, guilt, and confusion are common reactions. Because you are feeling so many emotions at one time, it may be hard to know what you may be feeling.

Give yourself time to honestly deal with these emotions. Help yourself to do this by responding to this new challenge in positive ways.

Seek the help of another parent.

Try to find another parent of a child with a disability. The Parent Information Center of Delaware will try to connect you with families of children with disabilities who have volunteered to support others. The Delaware Parent Information Center can be reached at (302) 366-0152,

TDD: (302) 366-0178. Their Wilmington office can be reached at (302) 764-3252

<http://www.picofdel.org>.

Talk with your spouse, family, and relatives.

The more a family can talk at these difficult times, the more strength they are likely to have. Understand that each of you will have different feelings.



Try to explain to each other how you feel. Try to understand when you don't see things the same way.

Rely on people who are a source of strength for you.

These people might be a good friend, or a minister, priest, or rabbi. Go to those who have been a source of strength to you before. You may also need to find new sources now.

When your feelings are painful, reach out and contact someone who will share the pain with you. One mother of a mentally retarded child realized, *pain divided is not nearly so hard to bear as pain in isolation.*

It may be useful to have some professional counseling. Many families find it a helpful way to learn the skills it takes to positively respond to the situations they face.

Take one day at a time.

Fear of the future can cause you to "freeze up" and use energy that you need for concerns to be handled now. Look for the good things about each day.

Seek information.

Learn about your child's condition. Understand the words that professionals use to describe your child. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Asking questions will be your first step in beginning to understand more about your child.

Get written copies of all the tests and reports that are done for your child. Organize these reports in a notebook or file.

On the Internet, go to SchwabLearning.org for

- Help in managing issues that arise from having a child with a disability
- Connecting with others to gain knowledge and support
- Finding other resources that can help you and your child

A positive attitude will be one of your most valuable tools in dealing with your challenges.

Focusing on the positives helps to reduce the negatives. It makes life easier to deal with.

Learn to deal with the common feelings of bitterness and anger.

While it is natural to feel angry and bitter, it is very important to learn to recognize it and to learn how to let go of it. You may need the help of a counselor to learn how to do this.

Stay in touch with reality.

Accept life the way it is. To stay in touch with reality is to recognize that there are some things that we cannot change.

Family stress researchers conclude that some of the best advice for dealing with challenges is summed up with the Serenity Prayer - *God, grant me the serenity to **accept** the things I cannot change, the **courage** to change the things I can, and the **wisdom** to know the difference.*

Time is on your side.

Time heals many wounds. This does not mean that living with and raising a child who has problems will be easy. It is fair to say that as time passes, a great deal can and will be done to make your situation better than it is now. You will be touched with the coverage and resilience you see in your child and in those around you.

Get involved in programs for you and your child.

These programs help your child develop new skills and have experiences with other children. It also provides an opportunity for you to meet other parents.

Take care of yourself.

In times of stress, it is important to get enough rest, eat as healthy as you can, take time for yourself, and

reach out to others for emotional support.

Decide how you will deal with others.

During this period, you may feel sad or angry about the way people are reacting to you and your child. Understand that many people do not know how to react when they see a child with differences.

Think about and decide how you want to deal with stares or questions. Try not to spend too much energy being concerned about this -- just long enough to come up with a response that feels comfortable to you.

Keep your daily routine as normal as possible.

Having a routine helps to keep life feeling "normal," even when life gets hectic.

Remember that this is your child.

Love and enjoy your child. The child comes first, the disability comes second.

If you can relax and take the positive steps described here, one at a time, you will be doing the best you can. Your child will benefit from your efforts.

Visit us on the web at

<http://aq.udel.edu/extension/fam/>

Updated with the assistance of Brooksie Pruden, Extension Assistant, and La'Shawn Waters, student in the Department of Individual and Family Studies, University of Delaware. This material is adapted from *You Are Not Alone: For Parents When They Learn That Their Child Has A Disability*, by Patricia McGill Smith, Executive Director, National Parent Network on Disabilities. The article was published in the **NICHYC News Digest**, Vol. III, Number 1. **NICHYC News Digest**

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