

When You Have a Child with ASD: Looking After the Rest of the Family

No. 16, August 2012

By: Susan Day Fragiadakis, M.A. Sc., ASD Consultant

Adapted from an article originally published in Autism Matters, Summer 2008, with quotes from Cindy Alves, Lisa Foxcroft, Anne-Marie Pap and Melanie Coulter.

When you have a child with special needs it is not uncommon for his or her needs to overshadow those of the rest of the family. It is essential to remember that every family member has needs and to find ways to meet these needs.

Hobbies

- You were a person with interests before you had a child with ASD and you need to find that part of yourself again
- It is good for you and your family to realize they can survive without you for a few hours
- You will be a better parent if you are happy and fulfilled

"I have been lucky enough to have the opportunity to act in our local community theatre. Taking on the personality of a totally different character has quite often given me a wonderful perspective on my own life. It is the classic example of 'And I thought I had problems!'"

Keeping a Journal

- A place to write your thoughts (ones you share with others, and ones that are just for you)
- Your dreams, needs, wishes, hopes as a person
- What you are thankful for, proud about from the day

It is not being marked so if you miss a day, don't sweat it!

"Having a diagnosis of autism for my son has been a 'blessing in disguise'. It has truly changed my outlook on life. I had considered seeing a counsellor to help sort out issues with my personal life and the stressors of having a child with autism. Instead, I decided to compile a journal about me and my thoughts."

Sibling Needs

- All family members should have their needs met, not just the child with ASD
- Siblings often feel guilty asking for undivided attention, but they need it and should have it
- Many siblings become major supports for their sibling with ASD in adulthood, so it is important that they feel their needs were also met in childhood
- Your other children can provide you with wonderful parenting experiences you do not want to miss!

“My daughter’s siblings have giant hearts and the patience of saints but they all need to have a day of what we call “special time” with one or both parents. Each year we take each child on an outing separately.”

Support from Other Parents

- Professionals can be a great source of information, but other parents have real life experience 24 hours a day
- Other parents can listen without judging since they have been there too
- Parents can share positive experiences and honest opinions about services and professionals
- You have someone who understands it is as important to celebrate the small victories as the large ones

“My suggestion to moms and dads would be don’t be shy. Find a friend who also has a child with autism and share your dreams, fears and hopes because we all have aspirations for our children. Let’s help them achieve their goals!”

Maintaining Your Partnership as a Couple

- Two heads (or set of hands) can make life easier - so if you have a partner it is important to keep your relationship intact!
- You were a couple before children and autism entered your life, and you can be a couple still, you may have to sometimes make the relationship the top priority
- If you are supported and happy it will help with the ups and downs of everyday life in navigating the world of autism

“As difficult as it is to not talk autism, the topic is off limits when my husband and I go out for dinner or an overnight stay.”

Health and wellness are also important considerations. While it may be a challenge, making an effort to get enough sleep, eat well, exercise and find ways to relax and de-stress are important for everyone’s well-being.

DISCLAIMER: This document reflects the views of the author. It is Autism Ontario’s intent to inform and educate. Every situation is unique and while we hope this information is useful, it should be used in the context of broader considerations for each person. Please contact Autism Ontario at info@autismontario.com or 416-246-9592 for permission to reproduce this material for any purpose other than personal use. © 2012 Autism Ontario 416.246.9592 www.autismontario.com