

new babies in the house can be a time of both joy and transition. This transition is intensified when a child is born with a difference, such as a craniofacial anomaly. Parents are often thrown into a period of intense grief as they struggle with their fears of what the future will be like for their child and anger about why their child is different. How parents get through the challenges of parenting a child with differences depends on many factors.

Gender differences can create tension as mothers and fathers sometimes have different ways of coping and communicating. Women typically reach out to others for help and want to process feelings by talking about their fears and frustrations. Men often look for solutions to problems and tend to avoid sharing feelings that make them feel vulnerable. This can lead to frustrations if one partner throws themselves into research, therapies and support groups while the other wants to downplay any challenges.

Parents can get frustrated and feel the other parent does not understand them. It is sometimes too easy to think that the other person is the problem rather than the stress and vulnerability that is at the heart of the issue. It is important for parents to realize that there are limits to how many therapies and treatment in which they can participate and that they need to make the time for other relationships and other activities.

A common dynamic that often arises is the desire for parents to protect their child from teasing or other social challenges. All parents desire that their children are loved and accepted. Parents will sometimes avoid social situations or limit social situations to try to protect their child. This can often lead to conflicts as one parent wants the child to learn how to cope with social difficulties while the other parent believes that protecting their child from teasing is the way to help the child's self-esteem.

Another dynamic that is challenging for parents is dealing with anger and frustration about their child's issues and some of the demands it places on the family, such as surgeries, support groups and therapies. There can be increased financial pressures and difficulties at work because of excessive time off. Parents often feel very guilty about being angry at their child or at the situation, and

this leads to conflicted emotions that parents try to deny. Parents worry about the impact of abnormality on siblings and worry that other siblings are getting less attention. This can lead to feelings of isolation since sharing these perceived negative emotions could create a sense of embarrassment and shame.

Despite the challenges of raising a child with craniofacial abnormalities, most couples are not more likely to divorce. However, having such a child may highlight pre-existing tensions and poor coping within the family. "It is not the child's disability that handicaps and disintegrates families, it is the way they react to it and to each other" (Dickman and Gordon, *One Miracle at a Time*, p109).

Relationships within family systems with a child with a disability typically need extra work to thrive. Good communication and honesty about feelings, even painful ones, are essential in addressing these strains. Therapy and support groups can help families sort out their feelings and create a safe environment, but it is important to remember that it can take time to develop positive coping skills.

Parents also need to find a balance between the needs of their child and their own needs. Spending more time together as partners, not just as parents, can be helpful in restoring relationships. As Dr. Laura Marshak wrote in an article on the website Disaboom, "One of the first things couples can do is make a decision to protect their marriage, they must understand that they are entitled to a decent marriage no matter how many needs their children have."

Raising a child with a craniofacial anomaly can often be both challenging and rewarding. Fortunately, time and emotional support helps with the grieving process as families learn ways to cope with the "new normal" of their lives.

Here is a list of helpful books that address marital issues as well as the challenges of raising a child with a difference:

- *Married with Special Needs Children* by Dr. Laura Marshak
- *The Special Needs Child* by Dr. Stanley Greenspan
- *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* by John Gottman