

Finding Out Your Child Has A Disability: It's Not The End of the World

By Dr. Mark Nagler, Ph.D. © 2003

Finding out that a child has been born with a disability, or that a previously healthy child has suffered an injury or disease that causes a disability can be the most traumatic moment in a parent's life. Shock is usually the first thing people experience. It can temporarily paralyze you, preventing you from taking action, or even making rational decisions. In this difficult first period it is always wise to take the counsel of professionals and family members with experience or others whom you trust, while always maintaining the right to make the final decision yourselves.

After coming to grips with the shock of their situation, many parents come to feel that their expectations have been dashed, that they are failures as parents or that their family has been destroyed. Uncertainty, blame or jealousy may arise. Parents may worry about hundreds of questions that have few immediate answers which can lead to an unbalanced and overly bleak view of the opportunities, potential, and joy that can be found in raising a child with a disability.

These emotions however are normal; part of a "mourning" process that many parents of children with disabilities go through. If you have these feelings, remember that you are not the only ones who feel this way, and that you will get over them. You can adjust more quickly by obtaining accurate information, sharing your feelings openly with others, seeking professional counseling, and, most importantly, having open discussions with all members of your immediate family. With time, love, and support, any negative emotions you feel can be replaced by positive ones leading to productive actions that will benefit your child.

It is not the end of the world, and many families have become stronger, more loving, and more closely knit because of a disability in the family. The disability gave them the opportunity to work together to help out their loved one, and the entire family shares in the gains that are made by the child. Many of the negatives that parents imagine that go along with having a child who has a disability simply do not occur. While you will have to make some sacrifices, you will still have time for your friends, family, and hobbies. After awhile, many of the activities you once viewed as sacrifices will come to be seen as part of every life, rather than an exceptional burden.

Developing a positive attitude is very important, and although children with disabilities will inevitably become aware of their limitations, they should always be encouraged to take on new challenges. This is sometimes difficult as children with physical limitations may be reluctant to participate in physical activities out of fear of failure. Despite these fears, both the child's and the parent's perspective should be "have fun, and do your best."

Some parents of children with disabilities are unable to have their special child live at home with them, but the vast majority is able to successfully manage within the home.

If you are finding you cannot cope, there are alternatives available that will allow you to maintain a loving relationship with your child while maximizing appropriate care.

The most important factor in a family's success is the motivation to succeed. If a child realizes that his parents always encourage success and will not be satisfied with anything less than his best effort, he will be motivated to succeed. Never settling for failure becomes part of his character, and his self-esteem will be enhanced and maintained.

There is a wide range of disabilities that affect children but the constant emphasis on always trying your best, reinforced in an atmosphere of warmth and support, will help any child with a disability triumph over the challenge that he will face. Instilling this confidence will help him have faith in himself and work on his own behalf throughout the course of his entire life.

RESOURCE BOX:

Dr. Mark Nagler is an acknowledged expert for people with disabilities. He was born with Cerebral Palsy and has triumphed over his disability by becoming an expert in the Disability Studies field. He has a B.A. from the University of British Columbia, a Masters degree from the University of Chicago and a Ph.D. from Stirling University in Britain. Dr. Nagler approaches disability from a different perspective than that offered by most experts and, although he has never been able to write, he was able to achieve his impressive array of degrees. He taught at Hamilton's McMaster University and the University of Waterloo and he has lectured across Canada, the United States, Britain, Sweden, Hungary and Israel. He has used his cerebral palsy to empower students, parents and anyone else with whom he comes in contact. His book, "**Yes You Can**", illustrates his own experience in over coming disability and his other work, "**What's Stopping You?**", conveys strategies that adults can successfully use in living with disability. www.marknagler.com