



Dads Who Have Children with Special Health Care Needs How to be of Help

This content was adapted from a series of blog posts from the Washington State Fathers Network. For the sake of simplicity, the language below leans more toward the traditional family model. In most cases, these tips will apply to dads in other family structures.

Be aware that dad may feel that no one understands what he's going through

Stereotypically speaking, men are not as likely as women to reach out to their social network for support (emotional, logistical, or otherwise). When a dad has a child with special health care needs, especially when the diagnosis is new, getting support can be very important. But, if their male mindset makes it difficult to reach out, the dad can begin to feel isolated, which can lead to a feeling that no one understands what he's going through and that he's in this by himself.

Help him connect with other dads

Making a connection to other dads offers the opportunity to get advice, learn about resources, ask questions, express frustrations, and share moments of joy. Help them find father-driven support groups, and if there aren't any locally, consider starting one.

You may need to be extra patient

Men often hold in their emotions, so it can be difficult to understand how they're feeling about or coping with having a child with special health care needs. As a practitioner, teacher, or service provider, this situation may require some additional patience on your part to learn what, if any, issues need to be addressed and how best to proceed with any given dad.

Objectively evaluate the services you provide to determine how welcoming you are of dads

Most programs and services that assist families of children with special health care needs tend to be female driven and centered. So, look at how welcoming you are of dads by looking at things like program names, wording in communications, who communications go to, etc.

Keep individual and cultural differences in mind

There is a broad spectrum of acceptance among men regarding their child with special health care needs. Additionally, acceptance will vary among communities of color and immigrant communities. Always question whether your perspective on the situation and the needs of the dad and/or child agree with how the dad sees things.

(see more on reverse)



Read the full blog posts on the National Fatherhood Initiative website
www.fatherhood.org/fatherhood/author/louis-mendoza

Help dads to be advocates

It's not unusual for those who work with families who have children with special health care needs to seek input from family members on many issues related to the work they do. Often the father's voice isn't sought out, but the male perspective is frequently different and communicated in a different way. It's important for that voice and that perspective to be heard. Help the dads that you work with to be prepared and trained to tell their story, to advocate for their family and for other families. Then, help them find opportunities to tell that story.

Needs and questions change as children get older

The needs and questions of a dad of a newborn will naturally be different from a dad whose child is now an adult. Have resources or referrals available to help dads wherever their children are on that age continuum.

Self-care

Having a child with special health care needs can be a wonderful experience but can also be time-consuming, tiring, and stressful. Carving out time for himself, for the relationship that he has with mom, and the relationship he has with friends is crucially important. Help dad to understand the importance of finding time for himself and his relationships, and how it will help him be a better dad.

Be strong, be vulnerable

Many men are still raised to and feel the social pressure of being the "man" of the house. This isn't necessarily bad, but can create an environment where dad doesn't feel that he can express a need that he has. Help dad and the family to understand the benefits of dad being able to express his needs, of being vulnerable enough to ask for help.

Don't forget the importance of moms in encouraging dads to seek support

As was mentioned, dads are often not very good at seeking support. Often it is at the encouragement of the mom that dads will attend a support group meeting, attend a conference or workshop, or go to a social gathering. So, consider including moms in communications (e.g. newsletters, emails, social media postings) to dads.

Read Further

This resource was adapted from a series of blog posts by Louis Mendoza of the Washington State Fathers Network, which were published in full on the National Fatherhood Initiative website. Access the posts at: www.fatherhood.org/fatherhood/author/louis-mendoza.

Washington State Fathers Network

A Powerful Voice for Fathers and Families of Children with Special Needs

Since 1978, the Washington State Fathers Network has supported, informed, educated, and learned from the fathers of children with disabilities and special health care needs across Washington.

Contact the Washington State Fathers Network
Visit fathersnetwork.org or call (425) 653-4286

