

WASHINGTON STATE FATHERS NETWORK PRESENTS DADS OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL HEALTH CARE NEEDS

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

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.

Do you feel that no one understands what you're going through?

Stereotypically speaking, men are not as likely as women to reach out to their social network for support (emotional, logistical, or otherwise). As a dad who has a child with special health care needs, especially when the diagnosis is new, getting support can be very important. But, if your male mindset makes it difficult to reach out you can begin to feel isolated. This isolation can intensify if you withdraw from conversations about children with other male friends, neighbors, and co-workers because you feel that your child isn't doing or can't do what the other kids are doing. This lack of seeking support and withdrawing from talking about your child can lead to a feeling that no one understands what you're going through and that you're in this by yourself.

Connect with other dads

If you feel that "you're in this by yourself," it can be a powerful experience to find other dads who "get it." Whether it's in a support group setting or through social activities, making a connection to other dads offers the opportunity to get advice, learn about resources, ask questions, express frustrations, and share moments of joy. An internet search might help, or ask the organizations that are providing services for your child if they have a fathers group or know of one.

Learn to be an advocate

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. Let people know that you want to share your experience and look for opportunities to tell it. Telling your story not only helps others to understand what it's like to raise a child with special health care needs, it can benefit you to be able to share that experience.

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 during the day or the week for yourself, for the relationship you have with mom, and the relationship you have with friends is crucially important. It may be difficult to do, but giving your life some balance will help you be a better dad.

Continue reading on reverse...



WASHINGTON STATE FATHERS NETWORK

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

Since 1978, the Washington State Fathers Network (WSFN) has supported, informed, educated, and learned from the fathers of children with disabilities and special health care needs across Washington. The WSFN is a program of Kindering. Learn more at fathersnetwork.org or call 425-653-4286.



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...Continued from reverse

Help your service providers understand any culturally-significant aspects of your family dynamics

Most service providers try very hard to understand the culture of the families they support and to provide services in a way that is culturally appropriate. But, providing them information about why you see things a certain way or want things done a certain way will help them provide better service and make the experience better for you and your family.

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. Take the time to ask for and find resources or referrals that will help you and your family no matter the age of your child. This is another advantage of finding other dads who “get it.” You can share your experiences and resources, learn what questions to ask, and find out what’s coming up that you need to prepare for.

Be strong, be vulnerable

Many men are still raised to and feel the social pressure of being the “man” of the house. Have a job, make sure there’s money for the bills, fix what’s broken, and don’t unburden yourself on the woman in the relationship. All this isn’t necessarily bad but can create an environment where you don’t feel that you can express a need that you have. It’s important to be able to express your needs, to be strong for your family but vulnerable enough to ask for help.

Find out what Mom knows

Although things are shifting a bit, it’s still the norm for mom to be the one taking the kids to school and therapy and doctor appointments. And, it’s in those environments that a lot of helpful information is shared. If this is your situation, take the time to talk to mom and find out what she’s learning from the service providers. You’ll feel more informed and you may learn, for example, that one of the service providers has a dads group that you can join.

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 full posts at www.fatherhood.org/fatherhood/author/louis-mendoza