

Being a Friend to Someone with Special Needs

Being a person with special needs is tough today. Being a parent of a challenged child is even more difficult. A parent, grandparents, friends of a person with special concerns needs all the support and understanding we can give.

Perhaps you are the grandparent, Sunday school teacher, 4-H leader, or a neighbor, there are five key areas that you can enrich your understanding of your task and empower you as a role model.

- 1.) Let go of old baggage by removing past prejudices and myths.
- 2.) Learn about the words “unconditional love.”
- 3.) Understand what gifts you bring to this relationship.
- 4.) Accept change readily.
- 5.) Educate yourself about the disability.

1.) **Let go of old baggage by removing past prejudices and myths.**

For many years people with disabilities were shunned and even hidden. Terms such as “deaf and dumb,” “retard,” “creep,” and “four eyes,” may have left horrible memories, or may still be a part of your vocabulary. Now, you must make an effort to eliminate them, as well as any preconceived notions about the life of a person with a disability. This can be a painfully slow process as it literally requires you to erase old attitudes and behaviors. The results can be positive for you and others.

- Master the art of reframing thoughts.
- Times have changed for people with disabilities, and you must update yourself about the nature and solution of the condition.

2.) **Embrace what the words “unconditional love” really means.**

Understanding Your Special Needs Grandchild by Clare B. Jones PHD tells this story in her book:

One day a nine-year-old boy was visiting my office and we talked for a long time about school, his interests and his family. At one point he said to me “my mom loves me but my grandpa loves ALL of me.” I responded “ALL of you from top to bottom?” He said, “top to bottom, inside and outside.” He has truly experienced “unconditional love.”

“Unconditional love” describes a love with no limits and no boundaries. Unconditional love recognizes that every one is special and in need of the expression of love.

- Each of us needs acceptance for *who* we are and not *what* we are or what we *have*. This acceptance will bring be a source of strength for those around you and you are *the right person* to model this acceptance.
- Confidence in things that make you exceptional, your attributes and strength can go a long way in improving your attitude; reveal your uniqueness and gifts you bear.
- Actively participate by using positive affirmations and respect. Become valued for your contributions by listening and educating yourself.

3.) Understand what gifts you bring to this relationship.

- First and foremost the best present you can give is TIME. Time to listen, time to wait patiently.
 - Good listening tip:
 - Concentrate on the feelings or message
 - Make positive eye contact
 - Be alert to the feelings being expressed
 - Lean forward to show your interest
 - Nod frequently and show both verbal and nonverbal gestures.
 - When you respond, stay on topic.
 - Attend to what is being shared; avoid adding your own experiences.
 - Show that you are there to listen.
- You are able to give affirming messages, help them identify things they are doing well.
- You may be in a position to help financially; check with the family first.
- Your sense of humor helps you survive and maintain a good attitude throughout life. Humor is a wonderful way to connect.
- Offering yourself as a caregiver. Times may be few or as many as you are comfortable with. Your ability to relieve others is a real act of support. You decide how much time you will allow for this. ***You can ease their burdens, but you can not remove them.***

4.) Accept change readily.

- Acceptance **Does not** mean you are giving up.
- Old is not a four letter word. Smile and display your joy at being alive and your ability to participate in the livelihood of the generations around you.
- Look within yourself and see the advantage of your years of wisdom.
- People cope with acknowledgement of a disability in many different ways:
 - Some will choose to ignore it and hope it will fade away in time.
 - Some will become pro-active and find out everything they can about it.
 - Some will accept it as a burden and disappointment and regard everything about the difficulty as a loss.

5.) Educate yourself about the Disability.

- Read everything you can about the disability. Become informed as to what current information is and what is not. Seek from a wide variety of resources.
- Be aware that coping with a disability is a growing process. Life is full of choices whether we make consciously with thought and planning, or whether we chose by default. The more effective our choices the more control we have over our lives.
- When someone seeks your opinion or perhaps your listening ear, respond positively and demonstrate that you are ready to hear their concerns. Take time and actively listen to their experiences.
- Your thoughtful, sensitive response and your recently acquired knowledge will help you play a pivotal and important role in their life.

6.) Practical ways to give support:

- Gifts outside the normal range (get creative) Offer to pay for a special speech therapist; arrange for doctor transportation; gift cards for video rentals, coupons for restaurants.
- Batteries for hearing aid, wheel chairs, special watches, and other equipment
- Tape a book you have enjoyed and share it.
- Offer a Coupon book of various jobs you can do. (raking a yard, helping with shopping)
- Take for library visits or bring books to them.
- Provide for a caregiver from a respite service to give the caregiver a break.
- A nice meal or a special dessert, just because....

Professional Definitions:

Individual Education Plans (IEP): a legal document written to set up a plan for a child's education in the school. It outlines goals and objectives for the student particular needs

Least Restrictive Environment: the educational environment should be as similar as possible to that of a typical student with out distracting from the learning and growth of the student with a disability.

Development Disability: a condition that develops in childhood and results in a significant handicap. Ex: ADHD, Cerebral palsy, etc.

Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: A book published by the American Psychiatric Association. It documents all mental disorders and provides definitions, characteristics, and suggested treatments.

Neurologically Impaired or Neurologically Handicapped: This pertains to various conditions resulting from injury or malformation of the central nervous system.

Mainstreaming: This refers to the practice of educating children in a regular classroom setting.

These definitions are brief and met only as a starting point of understanding.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: ADHD is a neuron-developmental disorder that affects attention and behavior. Children and Adults with this disorder are impulsive, hyperactive and/or inattentive. About 5% of the population is affected by ADHD. There are three types of ADHD:

- Predominantly inattentive type
- Predominantly hyperactive-impulsive type
- Combined.

This disorder has been reported in every culture in the world. Approximately 70% of the children with this disorder also have a parent who has ADHD or has had symptoms of ADHD. More information: www.adda.org; www.nichcy.org

Autism: Autism is a neurobiological condition. It is characterized by difficulty with social interaction and communication and by unusual forms of repetitive behaviors. It was originally diagnosed in 1943 by Dr. Leo Kanner. Autism MAY be caused by genetic predisposition, something environmental in nature, vaccines children are given or diet or nutritional deficiency. Autism appears generally between the ages of 12-30 months. There are higher incidences in males (2.5-4 males to 1 female.). Both verbal and non verbal communications are affected. There may be severe problems with social interaction. Early intervention is critical. More information: www.autismsociety.org

Asperger's Syndrome: First documented in the 1940's, but has only come into wide recognition since 1981. Asperger's Syndrome is classified as pervasive developmental disorder. Autism is also classified as this type of disorder. A diagnosis can be made as early as 24 months. It is a complex disorder characterized by difficulties with social interaction.. Difficulties are noted in pragmatic and language processing. They may not process social cues or understand subtle social suggestions. They may appear distance and distracted. www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/asperger/asperger.htm

Cerebral Palsy: This is a non-progressive disorder that generally appears in the first year or two of life. It is cause by malfunctioning or damage to the brain. Cerebral palsy occurs in 1-3 in every 1000 infants born. Disabling conditions that can occur include perceptual and motor impairments, vision and hearing loss, convulsive disorders and speech problems. Physical signs can include weakness and floppiness to spasticity and rigidity of muscles, varying with individuals. Evaluation begins with the fine and gross motor skills. http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/cerebral_palsy/cerebral_palsy.htm

Down Syndrome and Mental Retardation: IS a chromosomal disorder with the presence of the extra chromosome 21. They have characteristic physical features and some mental retardation. Learning id focused on basic skills with emphasis placed on self-help, language and social skills. With support most Down syndrome can function fairly independently as adults. More information: National Down Syndrome Society <http://www.ndss.org>

Hearing Impairments: There are two main types of hearing impairment: The term *deaf* refers to people who cannot use their hearing with or without amplification. The term *hard of hearing* refers to people who can improve their hearing with the use of amplification and have some residual hearing, The area most affect by a hearing loss is in the development of language. <http://www.asha.org/public/hearing/disorders/types.htm>

Learning Disabilities: learning disabilities refer to a heterogeneous group of difficulties in acquiring and using skills for listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or math calculations and application. This disorder can include dyslexia (reading), dysgraphia (spelling/writing) and dyscalculia (arithmetic). Learning disabilities can not be out grown, but rather learn to cope with it. You can learn but you learn differently. The difficulty in learning is not primarily due to visual or hearing deficits, mental retardation, emotional disturbance or economic, environmental or cultural disadvantages. <http://www.ldonline.org/>; <http://www.lidaamerica.org/>

Speech and Language Problems: Language is the major vehicle for transmitting ideas, feelings and information to others. It is a critical life skill. Language is a means for problem solving. Speech challenges may involve faulty production of sound and the sound system itself. Fluency disorders (cluttering or stuttering) are another type of speech disorder. <http://www.dysphonia.org/> ; <http://www.ldonline.org/>

Tourette's Syndrome/Tic Disorders: This is an involuntary tic disorder. A tic is described as a sudden, rapid, recurrent, non-rhythmic, stereotyped motor movement or vocalization. Tics disrupt the normal pattern of life giving individuals a sense of not being in control of their actions. Stress and anxiety can make tics more pronounced. <http://www.tsa-usa.org/>

Vision Impairments: A measured loss of any of the visual functions such as acuity, visual fields, color vision or binocular vision would be considered a visual disability. Children born with the disorder are said to be *congenitally* visual impaired. An acquired loss later in life are *adventitiously* blind. The term legally blind refers to anyone with a visual acuity of 20/200 or worse in the better eye. Visually impaired individuals often have a poorly developed self concept duet o lack of interaction with others. They may be ignored by others, or treated as unapproachable and helpless. We need to educate others about their strengths and abilities. http://www.kidshealth.org/teen/diseases_conditions/sight/visual_impairment.html; <http://www.nichcy.org/pubs/factshe/fs13txt.htm>; http://www.kidshealth.org/kid/health_problems/sight/visual_impaired.html <http://www.afb.org/Section.asp?SectionID=54>

Activity: *How Many Bears Can Live In This Forest*

From “Project Wild” by the Western Regions Environmental Education Council

Requires some preparations before presentation:

<u>Cut 30 squares; 2”x 2” cards from each color:</u>	<u>Needs for 10 DAYS</u>
Orange – (Nuts): mark 5 pieces N-20 and 25 pieces N-10	20 lbs.
Blue – (Berries and Fruit): mark 5 pieces B-20 and 25 pieces B-10	20 lbs.
Yellow – (Insects): mark 5 pieces I -12 and 25 pieces I - 6	12 lbs.
Red – (Meat): mark 5 pieces M-8 and 25 pieces M-4	8 lbs.
Green – (Plants): mark 5 pieces P- 20 and 25 pieces P-10	20 lbs

AN envelope for each participate with their name –This represents their “DEN”

Food need for one bear in ten days is eighty pounds.

We are using the **extension activity on page 117**. This activity is a simulation of reality of Black Bears living within a certain habitat; some of the bears having “limiting factors”.

Define Limiting factor as something which is needed for the survival of an animal: shelter, food, water, relationships. For humans limiting factors are anything that may limit the quality of life or survival.

Our simulation:

You are now all black bears. All bears are not exactly alike.

- One bear has a broken leg (provide a walker or crutch to this “bear”)
- One bear was blinded in a fight with a porcupine. (provide a blindfold)
- One bear is a young mother with twin cubs, she must gather twice as much food.

Scatter the food (colored paper) throughout the forest(floor/yard). All the bears are looking for food; every bear that find a piece of food **MUST** return each piece to his DEN (the envelope left at his starting point) before getting another piece of food.

When all squares have been picked up, the food gathering is over. Return to your DEN and add all the food you collected.

- Which bears survived?
- How many pounds did the blind bear collect/ the bear with the broken leg?
- Did the mother bear get twice as much food? If not who did she feed first?

Resource: Understanding Your Special Needs Grandchild by Clair B. Jones Ph.D
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“The Power of Words” (Free)

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