

KEEPING THE FAMILY TOGETHER

You and Your Significant Other

Keeping the family together (and as happy as possible) is our number one goal. My wife and I aim to have the best relationship with each other, with our typically developing son Sam, and with our daughter Rebecca who has special needs.

Having a child with special needs is a constant, never-ending series of challenges - emotional, financial and physical, and the stress can easily overwhelm even the strongest and most positive individuals.

There are a number of strategies that you can employ to help you cope with the never-ending roller coaster ride, which can help to preserve your relationship, make it stronger, and help keep your life in balance.

One of the most important things for our relationship was to make sure we made time for ourselves both together and individually. We have tried to schedule babysitters every Wednesday and Saturday night to have time on a regular basis to do something nice together or with friends. We have also made an effort on one of those nights to spend some time reviewing the past week, and thinking about the coming weeks, to see what went right or wrong, and to plan for what is ahead. We also take time individually to be with our respective friends and pursue our interests (my wife has a book club, goes to yoga and knitting. I try to exercise on a regular basis and spend time with friends seeing movies or going out to dinner). While babysitting is not an option for everyone for a variety of reasons, there are respite programs we have found to help pay some of the enormous costs of caring for our daughter, and family and friends have often been there to help.

When we can figure out the time and budget for vacations, we try to plan even short weekend getaways, sometimes at the homes of friends or family that which keeps the cost down. We periodically schedule days together locally, where I take off from work and we have coverage all day between babysitting and school for the kids. It is a good way for us to reconnect, and have a “mini-vacation” together - maybe spending the day walking around New York City, or doing something nice together close to home.

We are fortunate that my mother and father-in-law live nearby. They have been a great help in allowing us to take vacations, and I have often taken the kids to visit them for the day to give my wife a well-deserved break.

Overall, good communication has been the key for us and, while things have not always gone so smoothly, we have been able to build on and strengthen our relationship by working together as a team. Most of the issues where we butt heads come down to differences in style. I like to jump out of bed first thing in the morning, generally have lots of energy, and am ready to hit the deck running. I also happen to be a bit messy in the way that I do things. My wife, on the other hand practically cannot speak for the first twenty minutes that she is awake, and especially until she has had a cup of coffee. And she is very neat and organized. After hearing about our mornings, someone made the suggestion that I get the morning routine started, including making a cup of coffee for her and breakfast for the kids, and then she get things finished like getting the kids dressed and ready for school (and cleaning up my messes).

Time With the Kids

We try to schedule activities together as a family and spend time individually with each of our children but especially with Sam. We want Sam to know that he can have our undivided attention, and have special time with both of us, since Rebecca gets so much attention on a regular basis from us, babysitters and therapists. Since Rebecca spends so much time in school and with other professionals, we also make a concerted effort to plan to do things together.

We are very close to my brother's family, both as friends and geographically (they live only ten minutes away), and they manage to spend a good amount of time alone with Sam that gives him a lot of enjoyment.

Celebrating Progress, not Perfection

A critical strategy, which may seem very difficult at times, is to stop comparing our children to other typically developing kids and instead to look at their personal progress.

Every parent has hopes and dreams that their lives would unfold in a certain way. For us parents of children with special needs, it is easy to look at other kids and families and think of how life could have been, and how far behind and different our children seem.

While we may never be able to overcome all of the feelings of loss, jealousy, or inequality, there are choices that we can make about how we deal with our situations to gain a more positive outlook, and appreciate what we have been given.

The reality of life is that every child is different, and typically developing children are no exception. Some kids naturally excel in certain areas such as academics and sports, and no matter how hard they try, other kids will never come close to matching the achievements of their exceptionally gifted peers. And by constantly comparing average kids to high achievers, the middle of the road children will always come up short.

And the same goes for our kids with special needs compared to other kids their age. We will never appreciate the small progress that our children make if we keep comparing them to others with greater abilities. Our kids are individuals with unique qualities. We will only truly appreciate their special attributes by looking at their progress rather than comparing them to others.

While it is important to set goals, if we keep comparing our kids to others of greater abilities, we will never be happy with even the smallest steps ahead that should be appreciated. Once we start looking at our children individually, and enjoy their personal achievements over time, we can appreciate and celebrate their accomplishments.

Excerpted from *The Special Needs Caregiver Survival Guide* - our new book in progress. [Please let us know if this information was helpful](#). To help advance important medical and educational research, [please make a contribution](#) or [Join Team Rebecca to sponsor her walk of 1000 Miles for Autism™](#).

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