

Resilience in Families with Autistic Children

Maryanne Dennis, Founder of the Whole Learning School

Outline

I. Introduction

II. Marriage

- A. Finding a way to deal with the added stresses of having a special needs child, minimize them and overcome them-by sharing them-can glue a marriage (and family) together more than ever before.
- B. Resilient parents resist the temptation to turn their attention to the affected child to avoid dealing with marital problems.
- C. Resilient parents are able to separate their own life situation from their child's disability.
- D. Resilient parents resist the temptation for one parent (usually the mom) to become the "designated expert" on the child with Autism.
- E. Resilient parents trying to hang onto their marriage know that communication is key to coping as a couple.

III. Disabled Child's Personal Independence

- A. In our desire to safeguard our kids with great vigilance and love, we potentially stop children from learning for themselves.
- B. Research study regarding hardiness using newborn chicks
- C. In a large study, those who were unable to garner the personal resources to be resilient were the ones who stated that their autistic child was the "center of their lives."
- D. The balance between the child's needs and the family's needs encourages independence.
- E. In resilient families day to day life incorporates the child's disability needs into the daily schedule.
- F. Resilient families establish priorities based on the shared value of family members.

IV. Siblings

- A. In the resilient family, expressiveness is associated with better child and family outcomes.
- B. Resilient families make sure other children understand how they fit into this new family.
- C. Resilient families provide a safe place for the other children to remove themselves from aggression.
- D. Resilient parents spend special alone time with their kids each week and incorporate other strategies for developing positive relationships within the family.

V. Behavior

- A. Resilient parents know that behavior issues can be more difficult than the child's actual diagnosis. Therefore, they do everything they can to learn and incorporate successful behavior management techniques.
- B. Research shows that teaching parent's skills that help them to improve their child's behavior or teaching parents skills that help them cope with their own distress is very effective in helping the child to stay in better balance.
- C. Behavioral training teaches people of all ages with Autism to communicate appropriately
- D. Researchers have identified four key coping dimensions that are relevant to parents raising a child with Autism. They are as follows: active-avoidance coping, problem-focused coping, positive coping and religious coping.

VI. Beliefs, Perception, Attitude and Support

- A. The power of perception and attitude is viewed as a powerful indicator of family well-being. Family resilience always starts with attitude.
- B. Resilient families avoid catastrophizing.
- C. Resilient families find meaning in adversity.
- D. The literature about families is clear. The single greatest contributor to family resilience is the willingness to surround yourself with support.
- E. Gathering your support network involves knowing ahead of time who you can call for different types of support, even in emergencies
- F. To make the best choices for their child, resilient parents are aware that Autism is a severe and lifelong condition while at the same time holding out hope for accomplishments and improvements in their child's symptoms.

VII. Ways to Build Resilience for Typical Families

- A. Make connections
- B. Avoid seeing crisis as insurmountable problems
- C. Accept that change is part of living
- D. Move toward your goals
- E. Take decisive actions
- F. Look for opportunities for self discovery
- G. Nurture a positive view of yourself
- H. Keep things in perspective
- I. Maintain a hopeful outlook
- J. Take care of yourself

VIII. Learning About What Strategies for Building Resistance Might Work By Exploring the Following Questions

- A. What kind of events have been stressful for me?
- B. How have those events typically affected me?
- C. How have I found it helpful to think of important people in my life when I am distressed?
- D. To whom have I reached out for support in working through a traumatic or stressful experience?

- E. What have I learned about myself and my interactions with others during difficult times?
- F. Has it been helpful for me to assist someone else going through a similar experience?
- G. Have I been able to overcome obstacles, and if so-how?
- H. What has made me feel more hopeful about the future?

VIII. Closing