

SPECIAL Parenting Matters of Westchester

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NEWSLETTER

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Our publication is dedicated to parents of children with special needs. We offer options, awareness and validation for the diverse feelings and voices parents have for their children and themselves.

Co-Founders and Editors

Roberta R. Omin, CSW-R
(914) 941-8179
Jenny A. Frank, CSW
(914) 939-6557

Advisory Board

Peter Deri, Ph.D.
Gail Gallante, M.S., CCC-LP
Mark Maginn, CSW
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FAIR AND NOT EQUAL PARENTING

Roberta R. Omin, CSW-R

As parents, we often believe that we should love and treat our children equally. Our fear is if we don't, then we'll be blamed or feel guilty. The challenge is how we meet the many needs of our child with special needs as well as those of our typical child.

The Equality Myth The origins of this quandary are passed down through generations. The way we were parented powerfully influences how we parent. If we experienced favoritism, or lack of, or our parents, needed to "love their children equally" then we, as parents, will either repeat the same pattern or do the opposite in order to correct our parents' mistakes. The problem is if we swing too far in the other direction we inadvertently create new problems. Add to this, each of us brings our parenting styles to the family we co-create. Furthermore, when we are stressed, and parenting is stressful, we can easily revert to less than desirable behavior.

Loving our children equally is unrealistic; they are not the same. As our children love us in different ways, we love them deeply for whom they are. At the very best, our love is felt fairly by our children through our actions,

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AN INSIDE VIEW

Jenny A. Frank, CSW
Roberta R. Omin, CSW-R

Frequently, out of necessity, parents find novel solutions for the myriad of emotions experienced in raising a family in which one of the children has special needs. Pre-sented are three vignettes of parents who have grappled with the "fair and not equal" dilemma. (Identifying details have been changed for confidentiality).

Loving our children equally is unrealistic



They are not the same

In the Butler family, Gail and George work outside the home. Gail expressed the feeling that her family was not "solidified" given her work responsibilities, the children's activities, and 8-year-old Tommy's chronic heart condition. She had considerable fear knowing their "over focus" of attention on Tommy was hurting 5-year-old Amanda, using words like "abandoned" and "neglected." George expressed his sadness and resentment as "this was not exactly how I pictured my life."

To help them with their anxiety and guilt, family meetings were started to provide a forum to discuss home issues, upcoming events, delegate responsibilities more fairly, decide how to spend time together and think through how to make time for each child. At the end of the meetings, a contract was

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feelings and attitudes toward them. Most profoundly, how we love our children is reflected in how we meet their special and individual needs.

Reality Of Special Needs. Having a child with special needs greatly increases their needs for attention. We often feel depleted with no more energy or time to spare to do anything else. A lopsided situation can result and be accepted as the way it is. While there can't be equality in the way resources and time are allocated, we need to honestly self-evaluate. Allow yourself to clearly assess what is happening. Make some accommodations by letting go of some self-expectations and doing what is necessary, eliminating what isn't.

Polarizing Pitfalls. We are always going to have an easier time with one child, and this can shift over time. A particular parent/child fit can be more comfortable; or one child is more difficult or needier than the other. Without awareness of these dynamics, we can polarize, thus weakening the family constellation. One parent may be with the special needs child most of the time and the other with the non-special needs child. Playing favorites is another form of polarizing. Our children pick up on this, spoken or not. Dividing a family into camps or sides reduces stability, interrupts lines of communication and can lower self-esteem.

Fair Attention Is Good Enough. Fair means that each person receives not equal or perfect attention, but good enough attention. We can be sidetracked with the mistaken notion that we can meet our child's needs by overindulging them materially, scheduling many activities, supplying toys, or enlarging their educational horizons. In the long run, these become poor substitutes for nurturing their non-material emotional needs.

Good enough attention is intention expressed in caring action that nourishes our children in meaningful ways. By giving of ourselves in this manner we genuinely demonstrate **seeing** and **hearing** with our hearts, **paying attention** to what our children are feeling. This is not elaborate or expensive. It's something simple, like making car rides special, cooking together, playing a game together, eating out, having special bedtime rituals, family meetings

or a warm smile. Being present without preoccupation, interruptions or rushing allows each child to experience us fitting into their moments. While not easy to do, it is what our children really need.

When we are filled with concerns, it can be difficult to make space to be with our children. There is an art to shuttling back and forth between feelings. Putting certain emotions aside when they don't belong with the person we are with requires a subtle shift to clear our minds temporarily from consuming thoughts and worries, and to open our hearts in order to be fully available. This doesn't mean our lives have to stop. Turning off the phones, pagers and TV's, and by being inaccessible to others for a while, we give the clear message: "I am here with you." Creatively focusing our attention on them, transforms ordinary time into magic moments. Through this gifting, each child feels he counts and the time spent together cherished.

**Being present without
preoccupation, interruptions
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**TIPS
ON GIVING
ATTENTION FAIRLY**

- ❖ Have a separate and special relationship with each of your children where you have certain things you do with that child. Make the relationship stand on its own enhancing their self-esteem.
- ❖ Find something in each child that supports developing abilities, skills and talents and differentiates him from the other.
- ❖ Be aware of your language describing similarities and differences so as not to make one child better than the other. Labeling with value judgments such as "good," "easy," "difficult" or "bad" promotes polarization.
- ❖ Acknowledge competitive feelings between your children for your attention. It reduces jealousy. Remember, each child has things that are hard for him and needs the attention and rewards for their willing effort to master difficult tasks.
- ❖ Avoid excluding one child over the other by meeting the special child's needs first and foremost and giving too little to the typically developing child. Actual time will probably be imbalanced. This is okay, as long as it is not extreme.

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FAIR AND NOT EQUAL PARENTING

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❖ Watch fussing over either child for those things that can be done easily. Your special needs child may notice your typical child doesn't get pushed as much. He also may feel guilty for the exorbitant attention paid to his multiple needs.

❖ Be careful not to overburden your typical child so he feels he has to do with less to make up for the limitations of his special needs sibling.

❖ Increase all your children's understanding of what fair means. Explain according to their developmental ages why special services are received. At the same time it should not be an excuse for not being fair.

❖ Be aware of the desire to talk your children out of their feelings when they express that they are not getting some of their needs met. What is needed is acknowledgment, not denial of their feelings.

Lastly, children test us about how much they are loved especially when they feel insecure. Other times it may be an occasion when our child feels he is not getting a fair share of our attention, even though we may believe we are giving it. Imagine the world from your child's point of view, purposefully letting go of your own. Let it guide you to respond out of knowing your child, and not your reactivity, regarding what the driving force is (insecurity, manipulation, or a true unmet need). When necessary, re-examine your priorities to restore balance. Children show us through their behavior when something is awry and when it is better. Simply said we need to listen, see and breathe deeply.

Every child is special

Every child has special needs

Each has an entirely unique way of being

AN INSIDE VIEW

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written recapping their agreements. Four months later, Gail and George are more relaxed and feel there is a better balance of time and energy. The Butlers are experiencing themselves having more choices, new perspectives and the sense of cohesion they were seeking.

Cindy, a single mother of three children, was experiencing severe internal pressure to equalize everything between her two sons, Josh age 5 (who has a mild form of autism), Michael age 8, and 3-year-old Karina. Michael was jealous of the attention Josh was receiving. At the end

of Michael's session, he received a small prize for his hard work. Concerned Josh would become upset if Michael was the only one to get a prize, Cindy asked if she could have a prize for him as well. In response, it was explained that it would devalue the reward Michael had earned. Taking a breath and sighing, her nod showed she understood the distinction between making things equal and making things fair. In the parenting component, Cindy continues to be supported in recognizing her children's differing needs and distributing her attention more fairly.

Our third family, the Steins, have two daughters. Seven-year-old Jennifer, who has a learning disability and ADHD, has been receiving special education services since preschool. Eleven-year-old Jessica has become increasingly argumentative and sullen.

Linda Stein has spent an overwhelming amount of time dealing with Jennifer's multiple needs. Howard, the dad, has been reacting to Jessica's low frustration tolerance, much preferring to be with Jennifer. A natural response is for the family to become divided and to revert to old stress behaviors when parenting. Family sessions began by having Linda and Howard spend sessions with each child so the parent/child connections were enhanced without the usual interruptions and distractions.

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New York Times Magazine December 15, 2002

The belief that parents should try to treat their children equally can be disheartening. Laurie Kramer and Amanda Kowal researchers in applied family studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign found treating kids unequally can benefit their mental health.

❖ 3/4 of all cases in which there was preferential parental treatment, the children judged things as fair.

❖ Paradoxically the child who feels favored is sometimes the one who suffers from the "golden child" syndrome. If the favorite child feels her perks are unearned, she may develop internalized behavioral problems, like anxiety and withdrawal; the standard behaviors of the overachiever.

❖ It's okay to respond to children differently.

(article cited did not specifically address children with special needs.)

Each parent practiced and learned how to listen to their daughters better and see their unique strengths. Jessica has become brighter again and Jennifer is relieved to have the preponderance of focus on her lifted. A new parent/child pattern has been created which is carrying over into their home life.

Throughout our work we have continuously seen that the seemingly ideal of making everything equal is neither possible nor desirable. However, the ways in which parents

SPECIAL Parenting Matters
of Westchester
announces

**TWO PARENT SUPPORT
GROUPS**

**FOR
PARENTS OF ELEMENTARY
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WITH EITHER**

**SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL
NEEDS**

OR

**CHRONIC/LIFE CHALLENGING
MEDICAL CONDITIONS**

Advance Registration



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*The greatest gift you can
give your child is yourself*

Let Us Know

A Column For Parents To Be Heard

Each of us has had the experience of discovering we've supported our children in ways we would not have planned or imagined. We'd like to hear about yours in regard to the topics presented in this issue.

We would also like to incorporate your ideas for other topics in the upcoming issues of *SPECIAL* Parenting Matters of Westchester. Email: Specialparentingmatters@yahoo.com.



Roberta Rachel Omin, CSW-R, psychotherapist, has her MSW and post-masters certificate in Advanced Clinical Social Work from Hunter College School of Social Work. She is a graduate of the Gestalt Center of Long Island.

Roberta has extensive experience working with parents and children with special needs and childhood difficulties as well as working with individuals and couples. She is Past President and Program Chair of the Westchester Chapter, New York State Society for Clinical Social Work, Inc. Roberta maintains her private practice in Ossining (914) 941-8179.



Jenny A. Frank, CSW is a graduate of Fordham University Graduate School of Social Work. Jenny works with children birth through age 5 in their homes and pre-school settings. Her private practice includes family treatment, working with children, and working with parents of children with special needs. Jenny's clinical experience is also with the adult mentally ill. She is an active member of the Westchester Chapter, New York State Society for Clinical Social Work, Inc. serving on its Conference and Student Affairs Committees. Jenny's private office is in Rye Brook (914) 939-6557.

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