

# SPECIAL Parenting Matters of Westchester

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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.

## The Special Marriage Jenny A. Frank, CSW

No marriage is perfect. Embedded in the marriage resides each spouse's temperament, past experiences, identity, communication style, expectations, beliefs, wishes and culture. Some of our qualities compliment our partners and others do not. Add to this, most of the couple's time is spent in every day responsibilities such as work, financial, household, social, competing interests, and extended family.

Having children significantly impacts marriage. It means making lifestyle adjustments, learning parenting skills and balancing individual, spousal and children's needs. Woven into the decision to have children is the dream of having a healthy child and the life she/he can have. What happens to a marriage when a couple learns that their child has a disability?

When this unexpected trauma enters a marriage, it has the cumulative impact of shifting the balance and stability and triggers the process of mourning. Mourning entails the passage of feelings over stages ranging from shock, denial, anxiety, blame, anger and sadness to gradual acceptance. Though both spouses will not mourn in the same manner or rate, both have to "give up" the understandable fantasy of what could have been. Mourning is the realization that life is forever changed. Simultaneously the couple faces two challenges: the mourning of a different parenthood and a different marriage.

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## Marital Turning Points Roberta R. Omin, CSW-R

As we well know, parenting a child with special needs creates turning points that reshapes the course of our marriage and our lives. Facing what is truly important, we choose to either grow or stagnate. While we have come to the forefront in learning how to advocate for our child, we can also learn how to think, respond and behave differently when it comes to our partner. As we have undoubtedly taken many "necessary" risks on behalf of our child, can we challenge ourselves to do the same for the health and well being of our marriage? In not attending to our marriage we risk feeling more like individual parents to the exclusion of our couplehood. This article invites you to consider several ideas and perspectives for "necessary" risking and shares the experiences and wisdom from couples with whom I've been privileged to work.

## Distinguish behavior from intention.

The way each person copes with having a child with special needs is the attempt to re-establish equilibrium when feeling off balance or out of control. Our style of coping can bring out the worst in us as we can revert to familiar and defensive patterns. Does this behavior get us what we really need? Probably not. Do we feel supported by each other as friends? Definitely not. While our old ways of doing what we have always done may be comfortable, in the long run they may not be truly comforting. By recognizing our or our spouse's intention, we can choose to change

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## THE SPECIAL MARRIAGE

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Each person's history, personal style and gender impact these parental feelings and reactions. Spouses will share some of them in addition to each having their own. Frequently, women blame themselves, asking "Did I do enough during my pregnancy?" "Is it my fault?" It is the self-talk of "should have's." Women also tend to come to grips more quickly with their feelings than their husbands do. Men, on the other hand, often manage their sense of helplessness and grief by turning their attention to concrete activities in which they feel some control and competency. Given the different responses, then, a husband may become overwhelmed by his wife's need for emotional support while she might interpret his response as an under-response. Husbands and wives can either share the perception or argue that each is bringing less to their marriage engendering feelings of shame and guilt. Regardless, differing views and misunderstandings divide and strain their marriage.

There is contradictory data regarding the divorce rates of marriages with special needs children and how many couples seek counseling during these periods. Given the high rate of breakup as a whole, special marriages are understandably more vulnerable. A tenuous relationship is exacerbated by the unwelcome news of a child with special needs. Digesting the reality of the disability, making responsible decisions, adapting to the changing roles and increased demands as special parents is an agonizing process. The couple may not be able to tolerate the increased pressures and therefore will not be able to work as effective partners. Important and difficult demands will be harder to resolve in a marriage exhausted of good communication, a common ground and emotional support.

Child rearing can be a continuous challenge due to the struggle to cope with and/or collaborate on parenting issues and styles. One parent may, from fear, shame or guilt, become over-dedicated to the child while another parent may become intolerant of the child's disability due to anger and pain.

Often times, intimacy and affection are reduced or nonexistent because the depth of pain makes separate refuge simply more comfortable. The amount of energy directed toward the child can intensify emotional distance and give rise to quiet withdrawal and resentment.

Other concentric effects of a special needs child on a marriage

include: changes in parent-child-sibling relationships, parental power struggles, chronic fatigue, reduced financial and/or recreational options, lack of support from family members and the community and increased routine consultations with professionals. Special marriages have cycles. Marriages that have settled over time may be re-impacted periodically or routinely by situational stress, reflecting the peaks and valleys of the child's progress or condition. For example, there are particular developmental milestones and cycles that your child may or may not reach causing complex feelings to re-surface. Some of these milestones include transitioning into or changing schools, educational issues, setbacks, puberty, birthdays, re-hospitalizations and changes in prognosis and outcomes.

### "Simultaneously the couple faces two CHALLENGES:



### the MOURNING of a different parenthood and a different marriage."

Most couples creatively adapt to their changed marital and parental roles, slowly gaining a more realistic perspective. They become resilient with this crisis serving as a catalyst for change. A couple can find the courage to forge a different kind of partnership, find new solutions, "go out of the box" and create a self-designed life for their families. We often hear couples attest that having a child with special needs has added new meanings, significance and appreciation to their relationship and they have emerged revitalized.

Having a child with special needs has powerful rippling effects inside and outside of the marriage. The shifting currents and strong undertows pull at couples creating frequent feelings of being off course. Couples may feel like they are swimming more often against the tide than with it. How special marriages weather these changes will depend on how couples navigate these uncharted waters.

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## MARITAL TURNING POINTS

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to a more positive coping behavior. Acting from a place of love, wanting the best in our marriage, we become willing to alter our behavior to achieve a more fulfilling relationship.

In speaking with Jan and Rick, Jan said, "Rick, I know you are hurting [angry, sad]. So am I. I sense you feel scared [helpless] also and I see you are trying to get better control [by your behavior]. We are in a bad place right now. Can we stop and find another way to work together to tackle this?" Speechless, Rick appeared to melt. He had no one to push against or resist, only good will, friendship and love.

Cultivating awareness of our mutual predicament, as well as appreciating the intention of our partner's or our behavior, minimizes throwing out the baby with the bath water. We are still accountable for our behavior. If we don't face ourselves, go into our pain and ultimately go through it, it will not go away. What is hidden and disowned resurfaces in some other less desirable and hurtful form.

Tom and Amy have been dealing with their intentions and their behavior with their daughter as well as within their relationship as a couple. Their daughter, Katie, has ADD and learning disabilities and receives special educational services. Speaking very candidly of his own father's unavailability, Tom promised he would never neglect his family.

I said, "Many women are viewed rightly or wrongly as experts on meeting their child's needs and men often take the back seat." Tom replied, "I see it all the time. Fathers tell me how they get home late to avoid chores." I asked "What can a wife say when her husband does the 'not now or leave me alone' behavior?" Tom responded, "Ask him what kind of relationship he wants to have with his child?" "What kind of relationship does he want his child to remember twenty years from now?"

Tom got to the core of the issue. It is not about nagging or coercing, it is about wanting to have a real father-child relationship, not one in name sake only. I asked about husbands backing off because they wind up feeling like they can't parent as well as their wives. Tom said he and Amy acknowledge that they handle things differently. Women need to allow for this and "not correct their husbands's style." He described how they put their children to bed differently on the nights the other one is not home and that it works well. As cited in Jenny's article, *The Special Marriage*, (page 1), this means, for women, letting go of being the expert on their

child's needs and making room for their husbands to do things their way even if it is different. This means for men, being willing to really hear and take their wife's concerns to heart.

To reduce the stress in our marriage we need to leave our comfort zone and take the risks necessary for change. Here are more tools and perspectives.

❖ **Good communication.** When stressed, ask yourself "Is my communication getting me what I want and need right now?" The necessary risk here is in doing something more appropriate and novel, perhaps akin to what we try to develop in our children's social skills repertoire. For example, can we:

1. Bring good will and a desire to work things out as friends. Find what you really like and appreciate in your partner. If good will can't be found or doesn't exist, try acting as if it were there. If we feel stuck, we might be in more trouble than we can handle alone. We need to check inside ourselves to see if we are willing to ask for help.

2. Listen to each other without immediately interrupting or discounting. In marriage it is not about proving we are right and the other is wrong.

It is about taking in your partner's point of view or the intention hidden beneath the surface of his/her behavior.

3. Express feelings in "I" statements. Give ourselves permission to be open. Bring a lightness of heart where possible.

4. Develop the capacity to negotiate and compromise. Ask for what we need and what our partner emotionally needs from us. Remember, asking doesn't necessarily mean getting, especially if your partner needs to save face. The results may not come immediately.

5. Invite the less involved parent to share the problem by letting go of some responsibility. Ask the back line parent to be more willing to step into the previously avoided center of concern.

6. Do not bring up all the unsolved issues at once. What feels like a release of tension to one, may feel overwhelming to the other. It makes coping unwieldy and doomed to failure. Learn to resolve one issue at a time even if they are



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intertwined. Find your patience. We do not have to work out everything that bothers us right away and of course, watch out for provocative hooks such as you “never,” “always” and “forever.”

❖ **Come to terms with what is solvable and what is unsolvable.** Can we find a way to live with what isn't solvable with some humor or accommodation? Each has to learn how to live with parts of our spouse that we do not like or cannot change. What is unsolvable may not have to be a marriage deal breaker, unless it is harmful in some significant way.

❖ **Couples need to deal with the special needs issues as part of the whole, not the whole of their lives.** This requires the utmost belief that this is truly necessary. As partners, we can become aware of the needs of our whole family, breaking them down into manageable parts. Spend time that is fun, normal and non-conflicted all together and with each child.

❖ **Husbands and wives need couple time, apart from parenting time,** where we purposefully turn towards each other to nourish our relationship, share common interests, laugh, go on a date together, be intimate and be friends. With thoughtful awareness, creating time and preserving energy, this can be done. Couplehood is never what it was before children. However, it can be co-created anew in this phase of married life.

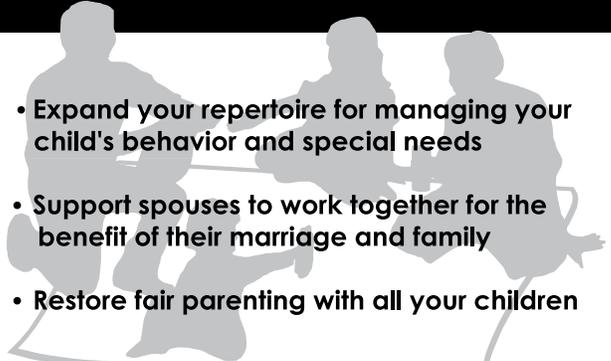
❖ **Our spouse cannot meet all our needs.** Each of us needs time alone for renewal, to be with friends and to pursue our interests. A group of mothers recently told me how they need time for themselves, where they are not taking care of children or their husbands – 100% self-time. Self-care does not equal selfish. Men need the same and usually feel more comfortable taking it for themselves through working out or engaging in some pastime.

Being married and having children, let alone a child with special needs, requires us to do things we never imagined we would do. For our marital relationship to survive and even thrive, we have to take many “necessary” risks to get us what we authentically need. What initially feels daring and frightening can become part of the exciting and rewarding journey of sharing a life together. Telling each other, “Aren't we worth it and isn't our family worth it” is crucial in healing the inherent pitfalls in any special marriage.

**We Welcome Your Comments And Experiences Specialparentingmatters@yahoo.com**

## Parent Coaching

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