

# FAMILY RESILIENCY: SUPPORTING CHILDREN WITH AUTISM AND NEURODEVELOPMENTAL DISORDERS

By Jeanne Anne Carriere, Ph.D.



Raising a child with a disability brings a unique set of joys and challenges for a family. Many parents face increased struggles with daily routines, finances, and navigating the maze of doctors and support services.

This can be complicated by decreases in the amount of time parents spend engaged in the community, with friends or as a couple. However, research has demonstrated that many families with a child with a disability are able to balance these demands and believe their family is closer, stronger and happier because of their challenges.

Family resilience is a growing field of study. Resilience is the ability to withstand hardship and rebound from adversity, becoming stronger and more resourceful in the process. Dr. Froma Walsh (2003), a family therapist, has identified characteristics and practices of resilient families.

- Resilient families are optimistic and have a “can do” attitude when faced with adversity. Crisis is viewed as meaningful and manageable. They are adaptable and can rebound and

reorganize in the face of challenges.

- Resilient families use clear, consistent and honest communication with each other, openly sharing feelings and opinions and practicing empathy.

- Resilient families know they can count on each other. They work as a team to solve problems and make time to have fun together.

- Resilient families find strength, comfort and guidance in adversity through cultural and religious traditions or through personal interests like nature or music. They create a support network of people and organizations to provide practical assistance, emotional support, and connection.

Families may recognize resilient factors they possess or identify different practices that work for them. Many factors influence the well being of a family, though making small changes can help build your family’s resilience.

**Practice and prioritize self-care.** Putting your well-being before others may seem counterintuitive. However, if you want to take the best possible care of your child, you must first take the best possible care of yourself. Make time for yourself, friendships and exploring creative interests.



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## **Become informed and make connections.**

Take advantage of services and activities in your area. Develop a support system of family and friends or get involved in the ability/disability community. This can be in-person or through on-line networking, though, be mindful of how much time you spend on social media and the internet. Ask yourself “Is what I am reading relevant to my child? Helpful? From a reliable source?”

## **Engage in fun activities together.**

Laughter can revitalize families who are under stress. This can be as simple as watching a movie together or playing a board game. Siblings of children with disabilities need attention that is individualized and celebrates their uniqueness. There are stressful aspects to having a brother or sister with a disability, though many siblings embrace this as a positive experience, often developing compassion, patience and tolerance.

## **Re-think and revise family and household responsibilities.**

Don't compare yourself to others...there is no “perfect” family. Allow imperfections and decide for yourself how to prioritize your values and make your life work for your family.

Creating a more resilient family is not an end goal but a process. Families make decisions

about what is best for their child and family.

It is important to make small steps toward working together, growing stronger, and learning ways to promote a positive future for your children and family.

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