



Things to Think About!



By Brandan Atkin

Special Parent Support Network is a new online resource for parents. Information and resources can be found here:

<http://www.specialparentsupport.org>

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11 Benefits of Support Groups

By Mecole Jordan, Executive Director
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Editor's Note: *This is a new program started in December 2014. We find the information provided well worth the time to follow and read. Reprinted with permission.*

Being a parent of a special needs child can be an isolating experience, but it doesn't have to be. The benefits of joining a support group whether traditional or virtual are innumerable and can be tremendous source of strength, comfort, and healing. Here are a few ways how:

1. **You realize you are not alone-** Whether there are other kids around or not, being the parent of a special needs child can be isolating. When your child is not developing at the same rate as the other children around them, it limits those play dates that usually double as much needed adult time. Joining a support group allows you to meet people with children and circumstances similar to yours. I joined my first virtual support group while on strict bed rest. I had nothing but time and eventually there was nothing else I wanted to watch on television. It was simply amazing to me how many people were in similar situations as I was...and the virtual support group brought us all together from all over the world.
2. **Share your frustrations-** Sometimes any and everything will frustrate you...doctors, nurses, your parents, your spouse, siblings, even the weird lady down the street from you. You also can become frustrated with yourself or with lack of progress in your child. There are some days that you can be frustrated simply just because! Joining a support group allows you to share your feelings with people who understand because they have had very similar frustrations.
3. **Learn additional coping skills-** In the beginning of any new and difficult journey and/or at any point during your journey, the totality of the situation can hit you like a Louisville Slugger. You can have myriad of emotions and feeling ranging from despair to anger to hopelessness. Again, you are not alone in this, but the good news is when you are a part of a support group you can hear/read how others have dealt with the same feelings and try various coping skills to help you overcome your personal feelings.
4. **Get feedback and suggestions-** The great thing about support groups is the amount of feedback that you are able to get from parents who have "been there, done that" and from those who are trying to figure it out with you. Those who are in support groups are not doctors, and should never take the place of your doctors, but do not underestimate

the power of home remedies! I have gotten so much advice for various ways to try something from online support groups and a lot of it actually worked.

5. **Helping others helps you too-** When you are new to your situation, you really join groups looking for assistance, an ear to hear, support, etc. But eventually, once you hop over a couple hurdles, you are in a position to give advice, a listening ear, and words of comfort to others and being on the giving end of information really gives you a feeling of accomplishment. You have endured enough to help someone coming under you!!! I remember the beginning of my journey on bed rest and then with a 24 weeker, I would think to myself, "I cannot wait until I am able to offer advice!" And when I was able to offer my "expert" advice, it was the best feeling in the world.
6. **Reduces stress-** Being able to ask other parents about their experiences and their version of "normal" can be a tremendous stress reliever when your new "normal" is not necessarily the "normal" for other kids. I remember my daughter was about 5 months old and I had never seen her smile (with exception to reflex smiling while she was sleep). I was so concerned about it. I did not know if she would ever smile. That's when I took to my virtual support group. After posting my question, I was flooded with success stories of parents whose children had similar stories. Their words and testimonies stopped me from obsessing over the situation...and wouldn't you know it, a couple weeks later my sweet pea was giggling all over the place.
7. **Additional resources and information-** Again, support groups are filled with those who are currently, or have been, where you are. If your support group is a virtual one, you can get information about programs and resources in other states that you may be able to find in your own state. If you are a part of a traditional support group, there may be another parent that can provide information about resources that was helpful for them. You do not know what you do not know, when other parents share how they obtained resources and assistance, it may prompt you to get resources you were looking for as well.
8. **Make connections-** You never know where friendships can be forged. Some people enter your life for a moment when you need them the most and others enter for a life time. The thing is you never know between the two. I made a very meaningful connection through a virtual support group while I was on strict bed rest while carrying my sweet pea. The young lady and I literally talked each other through our roughest periods of pregnancy because we were going through the same thing at the same time. When I was weak she was strong and vice versa. We lived hundreds of miles apart and would not have connected for any other reason. But today we are friends and continue to share our journey as mothers. Everyone may not have the same long-term friendship building, but while you are on your journey, no matter how long you have been on it, support groups are a great way to connect and share.
9. **Gain strength-** Being a special parent can deplete every fiber of mental (and sometimes physical) strength that you thought you had. Being a part of a support group provides strength to you regardless of where you are in your journey. When you are new on the scene, you gain strength from those who share the victories. When you are a little more seasoned, you gain strength from those you are able to help. One of the best parts of a support group is that you always have a group of cheerleaders to remind you of how far you have come and how far you can go... they remind you not to give up and that you indeed are an exceptional parent!
10. **You can get a good laugh-** There are just some jokes that only another special parent can tell and/or understand. Sometimes those laughs can make all the difference in the world.
11. **You have understood "bragging rights"-** When your child accomplishes anything you have a place to go that celebrate with you. This is not to say that your friends and family are not happy for your child, however you do not have to explain to your support group over and over again why this accomplishment means so much. They understand and celebrate!