COUNSELLING FOR PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DIFFICULTIES

Save the Children

- Behavioral disorders
- Communication disorders
- Parents' manual to recognize their child’s difficulty

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What to do to help yourself during the coping stage

When parents learn that their child has a developmental delay, they react in different ways:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denial</th>
<th>One of the first reactions is denial - &quot;this cannot happen to me, to my child, to my family.&quot;</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>Denial is easily transformed in anger towards the medical staff. Anger is also expressed in communication between parents or other family members.</td>
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<td>Rejection</td>
<td>Rejection is another reaction that parents experience. Refusal may be addressed to medical staff, other relatives or their child. They may also desire the death of the child during aggravated emotional state.</td>
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<td>Fear</td>
<td>Fear is another immediate reaction. People usually feel frightened by the unknown. Having a diagnosis and clear information about the child’s medical conditions usually makes the situation easier. Fear for the future is a common feeling: &quot;What will happen to my child when he/she becomes 5, 12 or 20 years old? What will happen with my child when I am not anymore?</td>
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<td>Sense of guilt</td>
<td>Another feeling is the sense of guilt experienced by the parents that blame themselves for their child’s medical condition. &quot;Are we responsible for this? Are we being punished for something we have done? Did I care for myself during pregnancy?&quot;</td>
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<td>Confusion</td>
<td>Confusion accompanies this difficult moment. Due to not being fully aware of what is happening, oftentimes parents experience sleeplessness, inability take decisions and mental overload.</td>
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<td>Inability</td>
<td>Inability to accept the situation often leads to very stressful situations experienced by parents. Unfortunately, both parents are unable to change the reality.</td>
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<td>Disappointment</td>
<td>Both parents feel disappointed. The medical condition of their child hurts their ego.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>During the acceptance stage, parents reach emotional stability and initiate their first attempts to help their child by seeking medical assistance.</td>
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</table>
Not all the parents experience the abovementioned emotional stages, but it is important for them to become familiar with them and understand that they are not alone in this situation.
There are many ways to cope with problems and ask for help:

**Ask for help from other parents**
Create contacts with other parents who are experiencing the same problem and ask for their support and advice.

**Talk to your wife/husband, family and other persons that matter**
The more couples communicate in difficult times like these, the more strengthened they are to cope with the problem. Try to explain to each other how you feel and how you think of the situation.

**Focus on the present and on everyday activities**
Fear from the future might discourage you. You should not focus on “what if?” or “what will happen tomorrow?”

**Ask for information**
You should ask for quality information about your child’s medical state. Do not be afraid to ask because it is the first step towards better understanding your child.

**Try to cope with the feelings of anger and bitterness**
The feeling of bitterness and anger are inevitable when realizing that no of the hopes and dreams you had made for your child can come true. It is important to understand and express anger.

**Take a positive attitude**
Taking a positive attitude is one of your main weapons to cope with the problems.

**Be realistic**
Not losing grasp with reality means accepting it as it is. It also means that there are certain things that can change and some others that cannot change.

**Take care of yourself**
In stressful situations, everyone reacts in his/her own way. However, some tips are needed: rest well, eat well, take time for yourself and ask for the support of others.

**Avoid self-pity**
It is important to avoid self-pity, being pitied by others or pitying the child.

**Remember that is your child**
Remember that he/she is your child. His/her development is different from that of other children’s, but this does not make your child less worthy, less important, or less in need of love and parental care. Love and make happy your child.
Behavior disorders

Every child may demonstrate challenging and impulsive behaviors at a certain moment and this is considered completely normal. However, some children demonstrate very difficult and challenging behaviors that are characterized by tantrums exceeding the age-specific behavior patterns. Depending on behavior patterns, disorders are categorized in:

1. **Oppositional defiant disorder**, characterized by behaviors such as:
   - low self-esteem,
   - constant sadness and frequent tantrums,
   - confrontation mostly with adults,
   - refusal to follow rules,
   - deliberate insult to others,
   - not accepting criticisms and avoiding responsibilities.

   It is thought that 1-10 children at 12 years of age demonstrates the above-mentioned behavior problems.

2. **Antisocial personality disorder**, characterized by delinquent behaviors, opposition or rule and social norms breaking. Some typical behaviors are as follows:
   - refusal to obey to parents or people in authority,
   - tendency to abuse alcohol/drugs/sexual abuse,
   - lack of sensitivity towards other people,
   - aggression toward people or animals,
   - constant tendency to leave home,
   - tendency to constantly hide the truth,
   - tendency to have criminal behaviors such as destruction/breaking/arson,

   It is thought that about 3% of children at 10 years of age demonstrate the above-mentioned behavior problems.

   etc.

3. **Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder**, which is characterized by the following behaviors:
   - Lack of inclusion: difficulties in focusing/forgetting instructions,
   - Impulsivity: unreasonable tantrums,
   - Hyperactivity: nervousness, confusion and difficulties in staying at a certain place for a long time.

   It is thought that 2-5% of children demonstrate the above-mentioned behaviors.
Causes:

- Complicated pregnancies,
- *Child's temper*: children who are difficult to manage, are impulsive and aggressive at a young age are more likely to demonstrate behavior disorder at a later time in life.
- *Families that have social economic problems*: children who are part of families where there is abuse, violence, poverty, etc., are more likely to have behavior disorders.
- *Learning difficulties*: children who constantly fail and are frustrated and have a low self-esteem are also likely to demonstrate behavior disorders.
- *Intellectual disability*: behavior disorders are foreseen.
- *Brain development*: research shows that in some children, the area responsible for controlling attention is less active.

Treatment

**Parents' education and training**: How to communicate with and treat their child.

**Family therapy**: It helps in developing communication and problem solving skills.

**Cognitive behavior therapy**: It helps the child to control thoughts and inappropriate behavior.

**Anger management therapy**: It helps the child to distinguish negative feelings and by means of acquired skills to gradually mitigate feelings, such as anger, frustration or aggression.

**Stress management and relaxing therapy**: Children are taught how to use them independently.

**Encouragement technique**: Many children with behavior disorders experience repetitive failures at school or social interaction. This technique helps in identifying child's strengths and encouraging them to be successful and rebuild self-confidence.

**Drugs therapy**: In cases when the doctor deems it reasonable, this type of treatment helps in controlling impulsive and aggressive behaviors.

**Early intervention** is recommended just as it is for any concern presented by the child, because they are more likely to improve. Delay and lack of behavior disorders treatment brings about deterioration to children.
Communication disorders

Communication is a form of expressing opinions, ideas, feelings and one's self as a whole. We communicate by way of language and articulation symbols system. At the moment when children present difficulties in these two aspects, then we are dealing with:

**Language disorders**, characterized by difficulties presented by the child in understanding language, expressing through language or a combination of both. The deficiency is related to understanding and using the symbols' system, including speaking/writing/signs and drawings.

**Speech disorders**, characterized by difficulties presented by the child in producing sounds. In such case, the child presents difficulties in articulation, voicing, fluency or a combination of these symptoms.

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**When and how can it appear?**

For the most part, when the child turns 3 years old, one can tell if there is any inappropriate use of language according to the typical development parameters and when the right time to make a diagnostic assessment by the specialist is.

It is necessary considering the following alarm signs are:

- at 12 months, if the child presents difficulties in understanding language.
- at 24 months, if the child produces less than 10 words and has difficulties in understanding language.
- at 30 months, if the child produces less than 50 words and does not start combining two words, such as "I want the ball" and has difficulties in understanding language.
Causes of communication disorders:

- Loss of hearing
- Mental delays
- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Brain pathologies
- Emotional problems/pain
- Physical damage
- Neurological disorders

Communication disorders treatment:

- **Early intervention** reduces likelihood for the child to experience emotional and academic problems at pre- and school age; increases chances of recovering from communication problems, by helping the child feel equal in terms of language development.

- Take into consideration that by means of therapy treatment, depending on specifications some communication deficiencies may be improved, reduced or eliminated.

- Meanwhile, there are deficiencies that might not be recovered as desired despite professional and intensive treatment.

- **Communication training by means of technology.** Children with communication difficulties are ready to learn new communication strategies because expressing one's self is an indispensable need. Alternative communication needs, such as communication by means of technology may replace words used by the person themselves.