

Unlocking the Heart of Your Special Needs Child

Written by Debbi Keeler – Published in ACSI CEE Magazine 6.4

Assisting parents in connecting with their children is a privilege of the early educator. This article, written from a child's point of view, gives parents and teachers alike the opportunity to get a glimpse into the perspective of a differently abled child.

As parents of special needs children, have you ever wondered what is happening in the hearts of these children as a result of the unique journey they are on? If they could articulate their thoughts, what would they be? Their reflections, questions, and fears may surface from time to time. You as parents can easily stay consumed with functional issues or with the emotional struggles you may have regarding your parental challenges, instead of stopping to think about the emotional needs of your children. Being aware of the heartfelt needs of your children can go a long way toward developing a closer relationship that includes trust and emotional safety. This type of relationship will ultimately strengthen the ability of your children to connect with family, and friends. It will also help them deal with the challenges and joys of life. From a child's perspective, let's explore thoughts about eight key issues. If you use this knowledge as a foundation in your parenting, you will encourage and support your exceptional child.

THIS IS MY JOURNEY

Mom and Dad, I need you to understand that this is my journey. Although we share common experiences, our perspectives are different. Just as you carry with you the fear, joy, sadness, and gratitude that are unique to being a parent, I have similar feelings that are special to me as a child and as an individual. You will never fully understand my experiences, and I will not fully understand yours. If you want to find an expert on special needs, I am right here to talk with you.

HELP ME PROTECT MYSELF

Mom and Dad, teach me ways I can deal with the emotions that come when others ask me difficult questions or when they treat me differently. You have taught me that I am special, but why can't others see that too? Teach me that it is okay not to answer questions other people ask if answering would not be safe for me and would hurt my heart. Help me develop boundaries to protect myself so that I can be in control and not feel as if I am an easy target.

TEACH ME TO BE INDEPENDENT

Mom and Dad, I find great joy in doing things for myself; it helps me feel more in control of my life. People always want to help, but that is not always best for me. Offer me emotional support, but be tough on me about doing tasks for myself. It will help me be on my own when I am older and you cannot be with me.

DON'T BE AFRAID OF MY EMOTIONS

Mom and Dad, when I feel sad, it is okay because it means I am alive and am a human being. Sadness helps me let go of what I cannot change to embrace the future. Sadness helps me live life at a deeper level. I will have good days and bad days like everyone else, and sometimes you cannot make everything better. This is part of the real world I live in. Just comfort me on those sad days. Don't tell me to ignore people who make me feel sad. And let me express my feelings.

HELP ME STAY EMOTIONALLY CONNECTED

Mom and Dad, it is easy for me to isolate myself emotionally because there are things that I carry in my heart and that only a few people can understand. Help me understand that although no one truly knows these struggles, the love and comfort I receive from others can nurture me enough to become a healthy person. I need you, and friends in my life to give me emotional fuel for this journey. Refuse to let me walk alone.

FOCUS ON MY GIFTS AND ABILITIES

Mom and Dad, remember that we are similar in more ways than we are different. I am very aware of my limitations-I face them every day. But what I don't see sometimes are those unique gifts that only I can use. Help me to see my uniqueness in a special way and to know that my relationships and my contributions are significant.

WHEN YOU TALK ABOUT ME, INCLUDE ME

Mom and Dad, sometimes when I am with you at school, the doctor's office, or home, you talk to others about me. When I am around you, be sure to include me in the conversation and in the decisions you make about me. I have thoughts, feelings, and ideas I want to share. Remember, I am a person and not a problem to solve.

I HAVE A UNIQUE PLACE IN THIS WORLD

Mom and Dad, I am here for a reason and entrusted to you. Rest in that truth. We need each other and other people in our lives. That is part of our journey together. My identity goes well beyond my experiences into the person I am becoming. I will one day leave your home and have my own life, but I will be there to help you when you need me. Remember that we will always be a family.