

ing system was completely out of sync, exhibiting difficulties with the tactile (touch), vestibular (movement), and proprioceptive (positioning) senses and responding with a combination of hyper- and hyposensitivity. These sensory difficulties affected her speech, hearing, and sight as well.

In her infinite wisdom, Carol sat me down one day and gave me a stern talking-to. She pointed out that as my daughter's system became healthier she became manipulative. And although that was a good sign, a milestone, it was time for me to expect more, to stop enabling my daughter's behavior.

Carol went on to say that, as the parent of a child with special needs, I had special needs, too. I needed to look out for and take care of myself. The veneer of my brave face cracked with that simple statement. Choking tears coursed down my cheeks down and the old-as-time ma-ma-guilt loosened its hold on me.

In that moment I realized my mother love had pushed me to the background. I rarely thought of my needs or myself. I was emotionally spent.

I thought back to how often I felt isolated. My emotional exhaustion took a toll on my health and on my relationships with other family members and close friends. I had let parenting a child with special needs consume me, and it had been easy because I had so much love invested in her.

Today I hold Carol's sage advice within the invisible pocket of my heart and take heed when I need to. I search for compassion, not pity, understanding, and support, in the form of comfort and a listening ear. And my daughter? She has become even healthier because I have chosen to take care of my needs.

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Judy M. Miller works with pre- and adoptive parents, equipping them with new techniques and information and encouraging and empowering adoptive families through difficult times. She is a Certified Gotten Educator and the author of the internationally known parent guide, "What to expect From Your Adopted Tween," and a workbook for adopted adults, "Writing to Heal Adoption Grief: Making Connections & Moving Forward."

Tips for Families who have Loved Ones with Developmental Disabilities

Kenmore resident Aimee Levesque is the mom of an individual served by People Inc., a not-for-profit health and human services agency providing programs and services to more than 12,000 people with special needs, their families, and seniors throughout Western New York.

Aimee's daughter, Jessica, is a participant of People Inc.'s Arts Experience Program, former participant of the agency's Young Adult Life Transitions Program, and currently involved with its Self-Advocacy Program. Both fans of the arts, Aimee is co-founder and managing director and Jessica is an actor of Unique Productions, a company of artists that aspires to promote community integration through the arts by providing individuals with disabilities a chance to be artists, actors and writers.

Aimee Levesque is also a parent advocate. She has worked in the disability field in Western New York for more than 15 years. Levesque is currently enrolled at the University at Buffalo as a Ph.D. candidate for the Curriculum Instruction and the Sciences of Learning Program. Recently, in honor of March's designation as *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month*, Levesque shared her advice for families who have loved one with developmental disabilities.

"Parents are the best advocates for their children. You are an expert on 'all things your child,' play an important role in their education, and get to reap the rewards of their love and affection," says Levesque. As a parent advocate, there are many things that you can do, including:

1) Learn about your child's disability and teach them about their disability, too.

How many times have you heard the saying, 'knowledge is power?' The more you and your child know about their disability, the better advocates you both will be. Use the Internet, books and brochures to teach your child; use anything you feel will help them understand. Be accurate, consistent, and honest with them if they ask questions.

2) Know your child's abilities.

We are often forced to focus on what our children cannot do to get the services that they need, in and outside of school, but what about the great things they CAN do? Focus on the positives and on all of the terrific things that your child can do, has achieved and will continue to grow at.

3) Keep records.

Save copies of your child's Individualized Education Plans, reports, and samples of their schoolwork. Take notes while on phone calls or in meetings. Put all of these items in a large binder. These materials may be helpful for showing where your child might have some difficulties or may highlight the areas where they have strengths. If you are not the best at keeping things organized or need help getting started, local parent groups and organizations may offer 'Binder Trainings.'

4) Have goals for your child.

Just like every other student, your child will have goals and aspirations, so encourage them to set them. Also, include your child in the goal and decision-making processes as often as you can. Self-determination is a key component in the progression toward independence. If your child is unable to articulate goals to you, then creating these goals may become your responsibility, so do your homework.

5) Allow yourself to feel and display emotions.

Repeat after me, 'it is okay to cry, it is okay to get angry and it is okay to be happy.' Believe it or not, it is very easy for parents of children with disabilities to repress emotions because they may feel that the emotions will get in the way of powerful advocacy. Not only is repressing emotions terrible for your health, but it can also be counterproductive to your advocacy efforts. You cannot be an effective advocate if you are stuck in a cycle of painful and destructive emotions. If you don't think you can do it on your own, speak with a professional.

6) Join parent groups.

Parent groups - online or in person - serve many purposes. They provide the opportunity to meet families that are walking similar paths. You can share resources, discuss similar situations, laugh, and cry together. In essence, parent groups are a place of help, love, and support.

7) Take care of yourself!

Meetings, doctor's appointments, therapy sessions - most days we find ourselves being pulled in what feels like a million different directions and the last thing we think about is ourselves. But what help can we be if we are sick or overstressed? It is important to make sure that our needs as parents are met, too. So keep those health-related appointments, get to the gym, act in a play or take a yoga class. The bottom line is: take care of YOU."