

# The Dad Navigates Troubled Waters: Please Pass the Cinnamon



By Steve DeBenedetti-Emanuel

We ran out of spices recently, so I stopped at the store on my way home. I was exhausted from my day and rushing to make the train. I went to the bulk section and filled a container with what I thought was cinnamon. Instead, it was cumin. Even though I laughed at myself, I had a pretty horrific memory from the time when KD was a toddler.

Before KD (our now 11 year old son) was born, Captain Mommy (my wife Stephanie) and I were all set to do things our way. We took those parenting classes where they teach you how to use a sling and co-parent peacefully. We had the cloth diapers. We were planning to do a water birth. We didn't find out his gender. We had a birthing coach. Etc.

And then everything went sideways. He spent 20 days in the NICU, came home on oxygen, etc. It was not what we expected, at all. We were in parenting hell, and just did our best to survive. The cloth diapers turned into all-purpose rags. He had pretty intense pulmonary challenges, so he didn't sleep. I spent most nights in the steam with him.

After about a month, he came off oxygen but was still sick. We had three more visits to the ICU. When he got a little older and started eating we just grabbed whatever we could through the haze of sleep deprivation. And as long as he didn't complain, food didn't matter. My favorite moment is the day I reached to put cinnamon into his applesauce

and instead put in cumin. Since he gobbled it down and didn't complain, it was a win.

Moving forward, KD's "special needs" lasted until he was 4-5. We had moments of hell, but they subsided. Now his health is normal.

But what happens for a family with a number of kids when a child's special needs persist long-term or develop later? Whether it's a child with Down's Syndrome or is autistic or a kid with an eating disorder or who is cutting repeatedly, appropriately, more parental resources go to the more needy child and, out of necessity, less to the others.

Children aren't stupid; when they recognize that their parents aren't around and/or emotionally available, they know they'll have to work to get the attention they need and deserve. Although there are a number of strategies kids use, these are the ones I see most frequently. The uber-responsible kid (typically the oldest) who tries to pick-up the slack by cooking, cleaning, and "parenting" younger siblings. They want to be recognized for their help. Instead, parents often feel reassured that things are under control and keep their focus on the more needy child.

Other kids act out by failing their classes, getting "caught" using drugs, and/or by being particularly defiant. It may not be their preferred method, but some attention is better than none. As you can guess, it backfires. Instead of getting love, affection, interest and concern, the little emotional energy their parents do have is spent on anger, yelling and punitive consequences.

Perhaps most difficult to spot are the kids who, on some level, recognize that their parents have little to give them and disappear, instead of being demanding. Rather than giving the love and attention they deserve, the stressed parents figure they must be OK and continue taking care of the more needy child.

Then one day you have one of those "wait, I'm a good parent who's supposed to act differently" moments and realize that your parenting is out of balance and your other children need more. That's not to say that you'll be able to do anything differently. But here are a few questions for you to consider?

Do you both HAVE to go to all of your child's appointments? Instead, can you divide and conquer? If you don't divide and conquer, what little things can you do so that your other kids know you're thinking of them? Are you spending regular, one-on-one time with the other kids, when the crisis subsides? What are you doing to take care of yourself physically and emotionally? Are you depending on your friends/family for support with watching the kids and getting time for you as a couple? Are there other, healthy adults (e.g. coaches, scout master, teachers, club moderators, etc.) available to help "parent" your other kids? Are you pointing your kids toward these activities? Are you preaching to your kids the importance of being kids, not parents, and send them to places that support this (e.g. summer camp)? Do they visit relatives in areas away from home? Would you consider having your child see a therapist?

No-matter what strategies you use for coping with being a parent of a special needs child, his or her birth and upbringing will throw the delicate balance of a family into a destabilizing blender. Things won't be "normal." But there are things you can try. After all, we can only do the best we can do.

Until next time.

Steve is a Marriage and Family Therapist who specializes in working with teens and parents, in Midtown. His website is [www.rivercitycounseling.com](http://www.rivercitycounseling.com), and he can be found on Facebook at River City Counseling and Twitter @rivercitysteve.

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