

# Father Survival Guide: Surviving the Challenges of Parenting a Child with a Disability



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## Recognize that your journey as a father is like running a marathon. And not a sprint.

- It may take time to navigate the obstacles you will encounter. Pace yourself. Have reasonable expectations. You will grow and evolve as the journey continues.

## Don't be afraid to redefine your expectations as a father.

- Embrace a new vision of your strength, your presence and tenderness.
- Take inventory of the resources, relationships and contacts you have available. And use them!

## Learn all you can about your child's disability.

- Read reports from your child's healthcare providers.
- If a healthcare provider offers online access to your child's medical records, sign up for it.
- Attend appointments with health care providers and contribute to conversations. Feel free to ask questions.
- If your child depends on technology (for mobility or communication, for example), learn how to use it. Then teach your child how to use it.

## Get involved in your child's education.

- Review school records like report cards, evaluations, IEP (Individualized Education Program) documents and 504 plans.

- Attend school meetings. Be part of the discussion. Feel free to ask questions.
- Did you know you can use FMLA (Family and Medical Leave Act) to attend your child's IEP meetings without risking losing your job? You and your employer must meet the general eligibility requirements for FMLA leave. Details: [https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/WHD/legacy/files/2019\\_08\\_08\\_2A\\_FMLA.pdf](https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/WHD/legacy/files/2019_08_08_2A_FMLA.pdf)

## Don't underestimate the value of your experiences as a father when you meet with your child's school team.

- School professionals who evaluate your child can provide insights into their learning strengths and weaknesses. However you, as a parent, understand your child better than school people do.
- Share your unique knowledge of your child at school meetings. You have information and observations about your child they don't have.
- Establish regular, two-way communications with the teachers and staff on your child's school team. Doing this will enable you to understand your child's progress and find ways to follow up at home.

## Don't let the stress of being a father take over your life.

- Regular exercise, healthy eating and sufficient sleep will combat stress.
- Consider using relaxation techniques like deep breathing, meditation, and mindfulness. Make time to pursue a hobby or an interest of your own.

### **Consider using EFT (Emotional Freedom Technologies).**

- EFT is a scientifically proven technique for managing stress which you can do on your own. Learning how to use EFT is best done with the guidance of a professional who has completed EFT training.
- Read *The EFT Manual* by Gary Craig, which is regarded as the official manual for EFT. It is one of the most successful self-help manuals ever published

### **Be prepared to experience a wide range of emotions.**

- Shock, denial, guilt, fear, grief, and acceptance are a few emotions you will experience. You will ride the waves of “highs” and “lows.”
- Working through these emotions is part of the mourning process. And you are mourning a loss.
- Take care of your mental health. It’s not a weakness to seek counseling, coaching, or peer support when you feel overwhelmed.

- Many fathers find that talking with a trusted professional, a faith leader, or another dad who has walked this road helps them reset and refocus.
- Remember, strong dads ask for help when they need it.

### **Don’t go it alone. Build your own “Dad Network”**

Many fathers of children with disabilities experience the same emotions. Make it a priority to build relationships with other men who “get it” like you do.

- Start by finding at least one other father who understands what you are going through.
- It could be through a local support group or an online community.
- Sometimes just one text or phone call from another dad can make the difference between feeling isolated and feeling understood.
- You will become a better father by talking with other fathers and learning what works for them.

**Remember:** You are not just surviving. You are modeling resilience for your child. Every step you take -- whether it’s attending a meeting, learning a new skill, or simply showing up -- teaches your child the power of perseverance. Your presence makes a lifelong difference.

**Parent-To-Parent USA** can help you connect with another parent in a situation like yours who is trained to provide one-to-one support. To find a local Parent-To-Parent organization, visit: <https://www.p2pusa.org/parents/>

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*This document should not be regarded as legal advice or healthcare advice.  
Always consult with qualified professionals.  
From The Father Engagement Task Force*