



## Healthy Relationships Overview

Individuals with disabilities must overcome many challenges throughout their lifetime, including barriers to learning, socializing, and accessing the community. These challenges often require an intense and ongoing effort by parents. So consuming are these needs that parents may overlook or forgo a focus on their own needs and challenges. The professional community has begun to realize the need to “care for the caregiver” and thus supports such as respite care and efforts to include children with disabilities in community programs are more common. However, the need to cultivate and care for relationships outside of the parent-child relationship has not received as much emphasis.

There are a variety of relationships that can be impacted when a child with intense needs is part of the family unit. These include the relationships between the parents (husband/wife or other parenting partners), between parents and their social community, and between parents and the professionals that work with their child.

The parental relationship is at great risk of being impacted by the intense needs of the child with a complex disability. Dr. Bowman described this stress during an Autism Society of America conference,

“...sometime around age five to ten years the marital deficits and inadequacy of the traditional roles began to show evidence of strain and even open dissatisfaction. Dads became frustrated at the demands of their wives to ‘play with’ a son or daughter who didn't know how to play, and moms became frustrated at the lack of involvement of their mates. In retrospect, this appears to be the time that the existing intra-marital separation starts the couples on a path towards formal separation and divorce.”

—William M. Bolman, M.D., University of Hawaii - John A. Burns School of Medicine, Child Psychiatrist (ASA's 37th National Conference on Autism Spectrum Disorders, 2006)

While not all couples experience this specific scenario, Dr. Bolman describes the tremendous stress that families face when attempting to balance parenting with maintaining intimate relationships. Media reports indicate that the divorce rate among parents of children with autism is as high as 85%! Although this number has yet to be validated, professionals and media continue to support the notion that families of children with autism and complex needs face unusual and sometimes overwhelming stress that leads to the breakdown of relationships.

Triggers or sources to these stressors include:

1. Balancing the parental roles and responsibilities
2. Lack of time and ability to act as a couple, instead each fulfills isolated roles
3. Sibling needs
4. Identifying and locating appropriate services and supports
5. Disagreements about the types of interventions to use
6. Lack of or slow progress in skill development



7. Child's behavioral challenges that can place limitations on typical activities
8. Financial issues and needs
9. Lack of understanding and support from extended family and friends

Another type of relationship that often is difficult to manage is that of the parent/family –professional/provider relationship. Although parent-parent and parent-professional are different interactions, success or failure in either of these relationships can impact the other. Stress from a difficult personal relationship can deplete one's energy to work well with others outside of the home. The parent-teacher or parent-provider interactions may suffer. Additionally, if a parent must spend a great deal of time and energy focusing on every aspect of the education program because there is not a working relationship, this stress will inevitably drain the parents' energies to maintain the family unit.

A survey of families of students with autism conducted by the Indiana Resource Center for Autism in 1997 focused on the relationship between school staff and families. The results support the importance of a positive parent- professional relationship, and highlighted the role of collaboration and teamwork in the educational programming of students with autism. The results of this study suggest that parents and professionals who work collaboratively as a team increase their chances of delivering effective services to students with autism, and promote educational success. A child's educational success and positive skill development can also lower the stress level in the family unit. So it stands to reason that improved relationships between school program staff and parents can positively affect the relationship between parents.