

Fathers Are Caregivers Too!

A Father's Perspective

by Steve Fischer

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When the doctor walked in, his intense and focused eyes already communicated the message that his voice was about to deliver. The words he began so mechanically to speak did not come as a surprise. My daughter was extremely sick. Medical science had yet to determine the cause of the illness that resulted in her being born profoundly retarded, crippled with cerebral palsy, and a myriad of other problems. I do not remember much of that day. I believe the mind may have a method of protecting us by somehow clouding the details of extremely traumatic events. I do, however, remember a peculiar occurrence of that day that has since repeated itself time and time again.

When the physician walked in to deliver the message, he looked squarely into my wife's eyes. Even though we were sitting side by side on a chair turned hospital bed, his eyes never made contact with mine. I can surely empathize with the physician, who no doubt recognized the pain in my beautiful wife's eyes. The fact remained, however, that I, the father, was also in a state of complete emotional collapse. The failure of this particular physician to even make eye contact with me seemed to send the message that either I was not hurting, or I was to simply "take it like a man." I have to believe that this extremely capable physician did not do this with any degree of premeditation. Rather, he avoided eye contact with me, much less a dialogue, out of conditioning. While the mother-child is undeniably powerful, recognition within our health care providers to the equally powerful father-child bond must occur. Countless nights spent with grieving fathers over late night coffee has made me realize that many of my brothers are hurting and have minimal outlets for emotional expression.

We are all at a different place along the acceptance curve for the different challenges placed in front of us. Wherever we are, we deserve the respect to be considered within the continuum of our child's care. I readily admit that my wife assumes the greater percentage of the day-to-day care of our child. However, I am also a caregiver in my little angel's life; and, therefore, deserve the respect and consideration shared by my wife.

It has been an interesting phenomenon to watch a physician's initial reaction to my line of questions to issues that are considered within the domain of motherhood. Examples that I have noticed where the questions were directed towards the mother include hospital technicians who come to get permission to take the child off for tests, questions regarding the issue of DNR orders, support groups

dominated by mothers, and the provision for home health care. Typically fathers may be relegated to handling the admitting and discharge paperwork.

I have come to realize that we have a long way to go in educating our health care providers to the emotional needs that fathers have with special needs children. I have also realized that fathers must take it upon themselves to be an advocate for this learning. We must support each other, encourage each other, and when comfortable, share with each other. We must remind our health care providers that fathers are caregivers too.

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