

Ten top tips for supporting families who care for a child with additional needs.

At Care for the Family we speak with many parents of additional needs children. We hear some lovely stories of the helpful people they have met. Sadly some parents are often not as well supported as they could be. Parents quickly become the expert on their own child and will know how you can help, all you have to do is ask!

1	The family is like any other family - but with extras! Clothes still need washing, meals still need to be prepared and children still need transport to activities, but remember that having a child with additional needs places extra demands on the whole family.
2	Parents will feel encouraged when you talk to the Additional Needs child as you would to any child, even if it is apparent that the child cannot reply. Get down to their level if in a wheelchair; ask parents if touching, hugs, handshakes, eye contact etc. are helpful or not. Talk to the siblings too.
3	When you talk with the parents, try to get a picture of the family's daily life. Ask the parents to 'tell me about your child' or 'what is a typical day like for you'. Actively listen to their answer. Speak about any 'issues' or 'difficulties' but never ask what is 'wrong' with their child.
4	Accept that there can be hidden Additional Needs that may not be apparent from looking at the child. Listen carefully to what the parents tell you.
5	Don't pretend you understand when you don't. It can seem patronising.
6	Do accept, encourage and affirm their parenting and priorities. Don't judge.
7	In a group situation, other people may be anxious about the unpredictable behaviour of some Additional Needs children. Lead by example in your own response. Ask the parents about 'triggers' and helpful coping techniques if the child becomes upset.
8	Accept the family as they are. Understand that you cannot 'fix' the child or maybe even the situation. Never assume, always ask.
9	Take time to get to know the family and earn the trust of all of the children, then you will be in a good place to help the family. Getting babysitters and child care can be so much harder, and so the sense of isolation even greater, for parents of Additional Needs children. Most parents will appreciate the offer of some reliable childcare; help with transport for hospital visits or after school activities; looking after siblings so mum and dad can go to appointments; help with accessing support or filling in forms.
10	Remember that these parents face a lifetime of coping and they may need support every step of the way, particularly during times of change. When the child reaches adulthood, the Additional Needs will not disappear. Be the friend who is there for the long haul.

Parents, carers and grandparents can find it helpful to talk openly with one of our trained Befrienders, a person who is in a similar parenting situation to them. Support can also be gained by signing up to our email newsletters. Parents have told us how much they appreciate this support.

- Find out more at: www.careforthefamily.org.uk/additionalneeds
- Join us on Facebook: www.facebook.com/cffadditionalneeds