



# Supporting Fathers of Children with Special Needs

by Danny Molina

**All parents are** profoundly affected when they hear the news that their child has been diagnosed with a disability or special need. Yet most research on children with special needs has focused almost exclusively on the role that mothers play in the lives of their children. Very little research has been conducted with fathers. However, early studies compiled by the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse show that fathers have a unique way in which they react to the news of their child's diagnosed disability or special need and how they use the supports needed to positively interact with their child.

## Reacting to the news:

Fathers often react to the news with a wide range of emotions such as shock, fear, isolation, guilt, and feeling overwhelmed. It is essential that social service providers equip themselves with the information and knowledge necessary to effectively support fathers and families of children with special needs.

- Help fathers overcome their feelings of **shock** by allowing enough time and space for them to process the news. Fathers may need a little more time to adapt to the situation.
- Assist fathers in confronting their feelings of **fear** by being honest about the challenges, but also reassuring them that there is a tremendous amount of resources and supports available.
- When fathers are feeling **overwhelmed**, be sure to be clear and concise with the information you share. Always check to see if they have questions. Fathers may feel overwhelmed with the barrage of information they're receiving from multiple people including medical, educational, and social supports. Take the time to clearly explain what information you have to assist them.
- Some fathers may experience feelings of **isolation**. They might think that they are alone and no one understands what they are going through. It is important to connect fathers to support groups for parents of children with special needs. Encourage fathers to meet and talk with other fathers who are dealing with similar situations.
- If a father is experiencing feelings of **guilt**, it is important to validate his feelings, but also focus on overcoming these reactions as they can have a negative impact on both the father's and child's well-being. Acknowledge the father's desire to want the best for their child and assure that no one is to blame in this situation.

## Interacting with their child

After navigating their reaction to the news, fathers often are able to move on to feelings of acceptance and empowerment, and allow themselves to respond to the situation and advocate for their child with special needs. It is important that fathers become comfortable advocating for what their child needs. To assist fathers with advocacy,

start by increasing their knowledge by sharing information with them about their child's rights and the laws that protect and support their child. Some resources to consider are Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Individual Education Plans (IEP), and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

It is important to encourage fathers to develop healthy daily interaction with their child by becoming familiar with their child's day-to-day needs. Remind fathers of the importance of establishing and maintaining daily routines. This will help fathers and their child feel a sense of comfort and consistency. Encourage fathers to find suitable activities that they and their child can do together. While a child with special needs might not become a professional athlete, he or she may still enjoy many other physical activities. Finally, always remind fathers that they are their child's hero and that every child needs and deserves a father who will actively support them and their development by being there through the everyday challenges of living life with a disability or special need.

