

How to Be a Dad Who Turns Difficulties Into Blessings

How is fathering a child with special needs a “privilege”?

Rob is a veteran father of four whose oldest child has Down syndrome. Recently we were both in a group of dads, and Rob made a startling statement. He said that, despite all the physical, emotional and financial stresses, “If any of you ever get the privilege of having a Down syndrome child, it’s the greatest gift to your family, because it creates the sensitivity and the awareness of others that kids just don’t have. It was a real gift to us; it made all our kids more compassionate, more aware, more sensitive.”

Did you catch that? Having a special-needs child made Rob and his entire family more perceptive about the needs of each other as well as people outside their family, and now they are more willing and able to jump in and help someone when they see an opportunity. They are better people because they were part of a family going through unusual circumstances.

Now, I know Rob made those comments with a bit of trepidation. He doesn’t wish difficulties on any other dads, and I wouldn’t either.

On the other hand, who defines what is a difficulty and what is a benefit or blessing? Do we look just at our own convenience or our long-held hopes and dreams? Or should we try to see things more from a larger perspective—where life isn’t about pursuing *happiness*, but rather making the world a little better for those around us?

And that goes for our kids too! Maybe the best condition for them to become mature and responsible isn’t a life where everything works out great and there are no challenges. Maybe dealing with unexpected surprises and trials is the best way

to grow. (And we know that meeting challenges also prepares us to help others to face those same challenges.)

In our family, one of my children experienced struggles in school and was found to have a mild learning disability. Not a major trial, but it set me back for a while. And it wasn't long before those more self-centered thoughts turned to love and concern for my child. My consuming thoughts were: *Hey, this is my time to step up. I have to be a father. I need to be there for my child!*

Ever since then, I keep growing in admiration and respect for dads who have special-needs children and step up to the challenge. If you have children with similar issues—like autism, Down syndrome, a life-threatening disease or something else—I know you're very familiar with this. It's often dads like you who set the mark and help us define what it means to be a committed dad. When the needs of your child required some extra sacrifices, you stepped up. You put your child's needs before your own, and you've never regretted it.

For the rest of us who face the routine rigors of being a dad but aren't facing the overwhelming exhaustion of raising a child with more pronounced disabilities, I would say: "Dad, take a page from the playbook of the most committed dads you know. Make the radical decision to sacrifice your own desires and goals for the sake of your children."

And then: "No matter what your children's gifts, abilities and weaknesses may be, cherish them for who they are. Be flexible, and grow with them. Let them teach you what it means to be a committed father."

Action Points for Dads on the Journey

- Coach your children through situations they perceive as trials. When they complain, help them see a different perspective, and challenge them to step up and meet the task head on.

- Remember that you set the tone for your family. Stay positive during challenges; inject hope and humor into your family life. Your wife and children will follow your lead.
- Be ready to adjust to your child's unique situation and find new ways to interact with him or her. Maybe your child needs more physical affection or more verbal interaction. (Talk about the specifics with his or her mom.)
- If you're married, continue to invest yourself fully in that relationship. Difficulties with a child so often lead couples to withdraw and eventually divorce. Get whatever help you need to maintain a strong marriage; it's a huge benefit to your children.
- It's critical to have other men who will support you through challenges—similar to the group I was in with Rob. Find another dad who's been through your situation, and ask him lots of questions.

What about you, Dad? How have you become a better dad—or how has your family changed for the better—because of a trial or challenge you've been through? Please leave a comment below. You can encourage another dad who may be going through that difficulty right now.

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