

Marriage and Parenting

Topic 14 – Parenting – Special Needs Children

Randy Thompson
Valley Bible Church
www.valleybible.net

Disclaimer

I am not a medical doctor. I have no medical training beyond basic first aid and CPR. No one should independently change the course of medical treatment based on what I share today. No one should start taking unprescribed medication, stop taking prescribed medication, or alter the dosage of prescribed medication based on what I say or what you infer or conclude from what I say today. You should always talk to the medical doctor who prescribed any medication before changing the course of treatment.

Introduction

We have all had or seen an interaction with prospective parents. It goes like this... Someone asks an expectant mother or father, “Do you want a (“Are you hoping for a”) boy or girl?” The answer is almost always, “I doesn’t matter as long as (“All I care about is if”) he/she is healthy.” This reveals a lot about the hopes and dreams of parents. We expect or hope for a child who will develop normally, experience the normal things children and young people experience, come to know Christ, become educated at some level, serve the body of Christ, learn a marketable skill, have a job/career, fall in love, get married and raise a family, live long life, grow old, and die surrounded by the spouse of their youth and children.

We observe that our child’s life does not always turn out according to our hopes and dreams. The Scriptures declare it is for God’s glory and our sanctifying good that God brings something else into our life.

Parenting special needs children may seem like a strange topic. Truly, all people are special as those created by God. Additionally, each child is unique in their needs – physical, mental, and emotional. For parents to be faithful (remember the definition of successful parenting) they must be students of their children understanding how to parent in accord with the child’s God-given uniqueness (see 1 Pet 3:7 for a similar principle applied to the husband-wife relationship).

The phrase “special needs” has come to mean those children who are different than the average child in ways like the following:

Medical – Things like heart defects, cancer, muscular dystrophy, chronic conditions like asthma or diabetes, cerebral palsy, severe food allergies, etc.

Developmental – Things like autism, Down syndrome, intellectual disabilities, etc.

Learning – Things like dyslexia, central auditory processing disorder, etc.

Behavioral / Mental Health – Things like Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD); Disruptive Mood Dysregulation Disorder, or Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), anxiety, depression, attachment disorder, etc.

"Special needs" are commonly defined by what a child *can't* do -- by milestones unmet, foods banned, activities avoided, experiences denied. These minuses hit families hard, and may make "special needs" seem like a tragic designation. From specialchildren.about.com

These issues require additional effort on the part of parents to bring special care to the child. The parents will have additional pressures/stresses and difficult times through the parenting process that will require increased support and grace in applying God’s Word to their unique situations.

Although every special-needs child is different and every family is unique, there are some common concerns that link parents of challenged kids, including getting appropriate care and accommodations; promoting acceptance in the extended family, school and community; planning for an uncertain future; and adjusting routines and expectations. From specialchildren.about.com

General Principles

Since parenting a special needs child can be difficult, we can start our study today with a review from last week looking at how to honor God in hard times.

1. Understand at the heart-level several truths.

- a. God is faithful and sovereign and is working all things for His glory and my sanctifying good.

God is faithful. He will always do what He has said and fulfill what He has promised. He is steadfast, unchanging, perfectly reliable, utterly dependable, and completely trustworthy. Because He is faithful, we can fully submit ourselves to His sovereignty.

God is sovereign. He is the supreme ruler. All things are under His rule and control. Nothing happens without His direction or permission. His purpose is all-inclusive and is never thwarted; nothing takes Him by surprise.

All believers will experience life's difficulties. The purposes of difficulty is to test the strength of our faith, humble us, teach us to trust God and not in ourselves, remind us of our future glory, develop godly character and strength, enable us to better help others in their trials, allow us to receive help in time of need, cause us to learn more of God's Word, and give us opportunities for service. God has given His children everything they need to glorify Him through the suffering. God is sovereign and in His sovereignty He works ALL things for His glory and our sanctifying good.

²⁸And we know that **God causes all things to work together for good** to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. ²⁹For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to become* **conformed to the image of His Son**, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; Rom 8:28-29

- b. The trial may never end this side of heaven, but glory awaits the true believer.

¹⁸For I consider that **the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.** Rom 8:18

- c. The hope of glory is an anchor for our soul.

¹⁹**This hope we have as an anchor of the soul**, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, Heb 6:19

- d. God has given us everything we need to glorify Him through the trial.

²Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; ³seeing that **His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness**, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. ⁴For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust. 2 Pet 1:2-4

- e. God will not allow more trials (temptations) than we can bear through His strength.

¹³No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it. 1 Cor 10:13

- f. The Word can equip us to glorify God in the trial.

¹⁶All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; ¹⁷**so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.** 2 Tim 3:16-17

- g. Saturation with the Word provides peace.

¹⁶⁵Those who love Your law have great peace, And nothing causes them to stumble. Psa 119:165

- h. Prayer brings peace.

⁶Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷**And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.** Phil 4:6-7

- i. Cast the burden on God and He will care for you.

²²**Cast your burden upon the LORD and He will sustain you;** He will never allow the righteous to be shaken. Psa 55:22

⁶Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, ⁷**casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.** 1 Pet 5:6-7

- j. Perseverance results in blessing, maturity and eventually the crown of life (glory for God).

¹²Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. James 1:12

- k. Focus on God's goodness and care for you.

⁷I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love, because you have seen my affliction; you have known the distress of my soul, Psa 31:7 (ESV)

⁸**You are good and do good;** Teach me Your statutes. Psa 119:68

2. As a family (with parents as the example) commit to strive to honor and glorify God.

³¹Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever **you do, do all to the glory of God.** 1 Cor 10:31

²⁰I have been crucified with Christ; and **it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me;** and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. Gal 2:20

3. Walk in the Spirit, bowing only to the Lord as master and not to the despair of a hard time.

¹⁶But I say, **walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.** ... ²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Gal 5:16, 22-23

4. As a family, strive to cultivate a deep understanding of God and His character through His word.

¹Praise the Lord! **How blessed is the man who fears the Lord, Who greatly delights in His commandments.** Psa 112:1

¹¹**Teach me Your way, O Lord; I will walk in Your truth; Unite my heart to fear Your name.** Psa 86:11

5. As a family, strive to maintain an active involvement in a local body.

²³Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; ²⁴and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more as you see the day drawing near. Heb 10:23-25

6. Focus on God's goodness and care for you.

⁷I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love, because you have seen my affliction; you have known the distress of my soul, Psa 31:7 (ESV)

⁸**You are good and do good;** Teach me Your statutes. Psa 119:68

Do not start your thoughts with your difficulty and then think of the goodness of God. Start with the goodness of God and then think about your difficulty. Understand your difficulty in the context of God's unwavering goodness.

7. Parents, focus on your marriage. Marriages can unravel during family difficulty (for example: statistics indicate that ~16% of marriages end in divorce after the death of a child). Pray, meditate on God's Word, talk, fulfill your marriage roles, and seek the fellowship of mature brothers and sisters.

Medical, Developmental, or Learning Needs

There are a myriad of medical, developmental, and learning disabilities that families may experience with their children. For each of these types of issues, there are physiological causes. These can be taxing emotionally, physically, and financially for a family.

For families with children with these types of needs, remember the seven points above. In addition...

1. Do not hide or diminish the difficulty, but also do not make it your idol. Cry out to the Lord and seek help within the body of Christ.

¹Give ear to my words, O Lord, Consider my groaning. ²Heed the sound of my cry for help, my King and my God, For to You I pray. ³In the morning, O Lord, You will hear my voice; In the morning I will order *my prayer* to You and *eagerly* watch. Psa 5:1-3

⁷casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you. 1 Pet 5:7

^{24b}...**But God has so composed the body**, giving more abundant honor to that *member* which lacked, ²⁵so that there may be no division in the body, but **that the members may have the same care for one another.** ²⁶And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if *one* member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. 1 Cor 12:24b-26

2. Seek to make wise decisions on current and future, long-term care for your child. Consider availability/quality of care, government funded care, finances, impact on the family, etc.

⁵But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. ⁶But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. James 1:5-6

²²Without consultation, plans are frustrated, But with many counselors they succeed. Prov 15:22

3. Apply the Biblical parenting principles that we have studied in a wise way according to your child's ability to understand and respond.

Behavioral and Mental Health Needs

In this section we want to address the special needs area that tends to cause the most confusion within the body of Christ.

Mental Health

There are many people who are very good at extending judgment to those struggling with difficult behavioral, emotional, and cognitive issues. Instead, it is important that we become very good at extending compassion and grace to those dear souls.

Life is difficult and experience tells us that diverse people in diverse life situations with diverse life experiences can struggle with behavioral, emotional, and cognitive difficulties. But, what do we call this? The world's name for this struggle is mental illness.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) calls mental illness "... a medical condition that disrupts a person's thinking, feeling, mood, ability to relate to others and daily functioning" (from nami.org). The key phrase in this definition is "medical condition". The prevailing thought in the medical community is that people struggling with behavioral, emotional, or cognitive difficulties are sick. This is based on a medical model of these struggles.

When someone has the flu, a test can show a viral infection which can then be treated in a medical way. When someone has an infection, a test can show a bacterial infection which can then be treated with antibiotics. When someone has elevated blood sugar levels, a test can show this and a treatment can be prescribed to treat diabetes. When someone has cancer, there is a pathology showing that a disease is present which must be treated in a medical way. There are diseases for which pathology does not yet exist, but the presence of the disease is not based on presuppositions or theory. An example is migraine headaches.

The problem with calling behavioral, emotional, and cognitive struggles an "illness" is that there are no tests that show a pathology. Mental illness is a theory based on presuppositions and a medical model of mental illness. Viewing these difficulties in a purely medical way is one end of a spectrum.

The other end of the spectrum can be found with people who reject any medical causes for behavioral, emotional, or cognitive struggles. They believe that the cause for any of these struggles is always sin.

So the two extremes are viewing behavioral, emotional, or cognitive struggles purely medical or purely spiritual (sin). The truth is somewhere in the middle.

Issues Influencing Behavior, Emotions, and Thinking

Scripture tells us that the body and mind are connected. Look at what David says of how his body felt because of ignoring the conviction of sin.

¹How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered! ²How blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, And in whose spirit there is no deceit! ³**When I kept silent *about my sin*, my body wasted away Through my groaning all day long. ⁴For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer.** Selah. ⁵I acknowledged my sin to You, And my iniquity I did not hide; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD”; And You forgave the guilt of my sin. Psa 32:1-5

¹O LORD, rebuke me not in Your wrath, And chasten me not in Your burning anger. ²**For Your arrows have sunk deep into me, And Your hand has pressed down on me. ³There is no soundness in my flesh because of Your indignation; There is no health in my bones because of my sin. ⁴For my iniquities are gone over my head; As a heavy burden they weigh too much for me. ⁵My wounds grow foul *and fester* Because of my folly. ... ¹⁸For I confess my iniquity; I am full of anxiety because of my sin.** Psa 38:1-5, 18

Dr. Charles Hodges in his book “Good Mood Bad Mood” notes that how people think, feel, and act can shape their brain (see chapter 8). For example, psychological research into Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) looked at brain scans of people diagnosed with OCD before and after they were treated with talk therapy. After they had learned to change their thinking and behavior, their brain scans changed towards normal. This demonstrates that how we choose to think and behave can influence how our brain works; not the other way around, necessarily.

There are also cases in which physiological diseases influence behavior, emotions, and thinking. In other words, behavioral, emotional, and cognitive issues are symptoms of physiological diseases. Some examples can be found in “Good Mood Bad Mood” Appendix B. Hodges’ evaluation of medical conditions affecting mood is focused on depression, but it is instructive to demonstrate that medical conditions can affect behavior, emotions, or thinking. Hodges breaks the medical issues into groupings:

- Metabolic and endocrine diseases (e.g. thyroid and pituitary diseases)
- Infectious diseases (e.g. TB, Mono, HIV, and influenza)
- Neurological diseases (e.g. Alzheimer’s, MS, Parkinson’s, tumors, strokes, or TBIs)
- General diseases (e.g. cancer, lupus or auto-immune diseases, sleep deprivation, diet)
- Medication (individually or interactions) and drugs

Note: In some cases, people suffer from psychosis (a loss of contact with reality) or are psychotic. This is characterized for example by hallucinations and delusions. It is important to note that those people who are suffering from psychosis (after physiological or pharmacological causes are ruled out) are most likely suffering from a true mental illness (i.e. a brain dysfunction) where pathology exists, but for which medicine does not yet have the ability to detect. These diseases are Schizophrenia and Bipolar I (manic-depression).

Who or What is Culpable?

The question then arises, if there can be physiological influences to behavior, emotions, or thinking, then are people responsible for the sin they commit?

The answer to this question lies in the question, "What is the source of a person's sin?" Sin comes from the heart.

⁹“The heart is more deceitful than all else And is desperately sick; Who can understand it?

¹⁰“I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, Even to give to each man according to his ways, According to the results of his deeds. Jer 17:9-10

²⁰And He was saying, "That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man.

²¹"For from within, out **of the heart of men, proceed** the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, ²²deeds of coveting *and* wickedness, *as well as* deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride *and* foolishness. ²³"All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man." Mark 7:20-23

The heart, the essence of each person, is corrupted by sin. We are hopelessly lost and not able to do anything by ourselves that can make us right before God. We are not able to choose or do anything that is acceptable to God apart from His grace. The Scriptures describe each person as a sinner (Rom 3:23); having a wicked heart (Jer 17:9); not seeking God (Rom 3:10-12); separated from God (Isa 59:2); a slave of sin (Rom 6:15-23); dead in trespasses and sins, walking according to the ways of Satan, a child of wrath (Eph 2:1-3); father is the devil (John 8:44); blinded by Satan (2 Cor 4:3); under the domain (authority; house) of darkness (Col 1:13); under the power of Satan (1 John 5:19); and under the wrath of God (John 3:36).

Having a physiological condition that influences someone to sin does not absolve people of responsibility for their sin.

A good axiom is: "Never call anything a disease that the Bible calls sin. Never call anything sin the Bible does not clearly identify as sin." (Charles Hodges during a lecture on bipolar disorder during the 2013 NANC annual conference.)

A believer who has been shown their sin will be broken over the sin (Psa 51) and want to repent and make restitution even if it was done while under the influence of something else.

Psychotropic Medication

The first thing to consider when discussing the use of psychotropic drugs is to understand the purpose of the medication. When we think of medicine we normally think of a drug that attacks the cause of a disease in the body in order to cure a person (e.g. antibiotics attacking an infection or chemotherapy attacking cancer). Medicine can also be used to supplement what the body can no longer manufacture on its own (e.g. insulin or thyroid hormones or male/female hormones). Medicine can also be used to make the body more comfortable and able to function (e.g. allergy or cold/flu medication or over the counter or prescribed pain medications).

There is no cure for psychological disorders. The purpose of psychotropic medication is to help regulate behavior, emotions, and thinking. Psychotropic medication is also not replacing something that the body can no longer manufacture on its own since there is no pathology related to most psychological disorders to determine what is missing.

The decision to use psychotropic drugs to modulate behavior, emotions, and thinking is a wisdom issue. (For cases of psychosis such as Schizophrenia or Bipolar I or physical safety, psychotropic drugs used by prescription from a qualified medical doctor are often required.) The same criteria should be used to determine the use of these drugs as is used to determine partaking in any non-moral activity (an activity not commanded nor prohibited in Scripture). See Topic 18 in the Biblical Solutions for Life Issues classes on the VBC website for a detailed discussion on making decisions in non-moral areas. Some questions to ask oneself:

1. Will the decision glorify God? (1 Cor 10:31)
2. Will the decision cause a hindrance to the Gospel? (1 Cor 9:12)
3. Does the desire for the thing overshadow your desire for God? (Matt 6:33)
4. Is the decision spiritually profitable? (1 Cor 10:23-24)
5. Will the decision control me or bring bondage (master me)? (1 Cor 6:12)
6. Will the decision allow sin to be easily accomplished? (Rom 13:14)
7. Will the decision defile God's temple? (1 Cor 6:19-20)
8. Will the decision violate my conscience? (Rom 14:22-23)
9. Is the decision worth imitating? (1 Cor 11:1)
10. Does the decision fit the Phil 4:8 pattern?
11. Will the decision cause my brother or sister to stumble? (Rom 14:21; 1 Cor 8:13)
12. Will the decision build up or tear down? (Rom 15:1-2; 14:19)

Note: No one should independently change the course of medical treatment without consultation with the prescribing physician. No one should start taking unprescribed medication, stop taking prescribed medication, or alter the dosage of prescribed medication without consultation with the prescribing physician. You should talk to the medical doctor who prescribed the medication before changing the course of treatment.

Psychological Disorder Diagnosis

Remember, pathology related to psychological disorders does not exist. Tests do not exist to determine what is wrong in the body. Psychological disorders are diagnosed based on observed behavior. The diagnostic criteria is documented in the “American Psychiatric Association: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders” or DSM for short. It is currently on its fifth revision. The publishing dates for the DSM are: DSM-I (1952), DSM-II (1968), DSM-II 7th printing (1974), DSM-III (1980), DSM-III-R (1987), DSM-IV (1994), DSM-IV-TR (2000), DSM-5 (2013).

You can do your own research on the history and reasons for revisions of the DSM, but for our study today it is important to simply note that the use of the DSM to diagnose mental disorders is based on observed behavior.

Commonly Diagnosed Disorders in Children

There are many DSM disorders that can be diagnosed in childhood. Some of the most common:

- Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) – A frequent and persistent pattern of angry/irritable mood, argumentative/defiant behavior, or vindictiveness.
- Disruptive Mood Dysregulation Disorder (new to the DSM-V) – Chronic, severe persistent irritability or angry mood between frequent temper tantrums.
- Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) – A persistent pattern of inattention (wandering off task, lacking persistence, having difficulty sustaining focus, and being disorganized not due to defiance or lack of comprehension) and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity (excessive motor activity when it is not appropriate, or excessive fidgeting, tapping, or talkativeness and/or hasty actions that occur in the moment without forethought and that have high potential for harm to the individual) that interferes with functioning or development.

As an example of the DSM diagnostic criteria which focuses on behavior, we will look at ADHD. Remember, our desire is to “never call anything a disease that the Bible calls sin.”

Inattention in children is diagnosed by at least six of the following behaviors:

- He does not pay close attention to detail and makes mistakes in his work.
- He has a hard time keeping focused on the task at hand.
- He is easily distracted from work or play.
- He does not listen when he is spoken to.
- He does not follow through on work he is given to do.
- He has a hard time organizing his work.
- He avoids work that requires sustained mental attention.
- He loses things that he needs for his work.
- He forgets what he's supposed to be doing.

Hyperactivity-impulsivity in children is diagnosed by at least six of the following behaviors:

- He fidgets in his chair.
- He often gets out of his seat when he is required to remain seated.
- He is restless (runs about and climbs when he should be still).
- He does not play quietly.
- He is "busy", always doing something.
- He does not wait for the teacher to quit talking before blurting' out his answer.
- He has a hard time waiting for his turn.
- He talks when he should listen (interrupts other's conversations and activities).

It is also important to remember that every child is uniquely created by God, each with his/her strengths and weaknesses. God-honoring parenting requires that parents consider their children's understanding and abilities when applying biblical instruction. It takes time, energy, and creativity to parent in a God honoring way.

Unfortunately, the label of ADHD often provides an excuse for sinful behavior. Blame is shifted from the child and parents to a disorder. The biblical explanation for much of the diagnostic criteria is disobedience (not doing what he is told), laziness or irresponsibility, self-centeredness (considering himself more important than others), or lacking self-control and self-discipline.

Along with teaching the child that his behaviors are sin and addressing them in a Biblical way, parents should develop structure in the child's life, clearly explain and enforce rules, ensure a balanced diet, and possibly minimize extraneous stimulus.

Concluding Thoughts

God is there in your difficulty as a family. He has provided precepts, principles, and promises in His Word that provide hope and care as you raise each unique child for His glory.

Believers must be careful to never call anything a disease that the Bible calls sin and to never call anything sin the Bible does not clearly identify as sin. Christians should also be careful to not label people with psychological labels. Labeling sin as disease offers no hope and could tend to influence God's children to avoid responsibility for their sin.

Real Life Scenarios

Yourself #1: You have just given birth. As the staff is cleaning up your child, you note that his foot is turned severely. You ask the doctor about this and he tells you this is normal and it will straighten out in a few days. After the days pass, the foot does not return to normal and you ask the doctor again when he tells you that your child has a club foot – a congenital birth defect. What thoughts and heart attitudes would most honor God at this time? When you talk to the medical staff, family, and friends regarding your child's condition what would most honor God?

Yourself #2: Several months ago your mother passed away. She was your best friend and confidant and you have been down ever since. You had a doctor appointment last week and mentioned this to your doctor and he recommended an antidepressant. What might be your thought process as you think through taking the medication?

Someone Else #1: Your friend has an autistic child. The family is struggling and at times are at their wits end. She confides in you these things. In thinking about bringing Biblical care to your hurting friend, what is the first thing you need to know? What is the next thing you might share with him/her? What else might you do?

Someone Else #2: Your friend's child is out of control at home and school. Your friend is at her wits end and is thinking of putting the child on medication. In thinking about bringing Biblical care to your hurting friend, what is the first thing you need to know? What is the next thing you might share with him/her?

Marriage and Parenting – Additional Study
Topic 13 – Parenting – Special Needs Children

Read Hebrews 13:15. What should be your response to the circumstances of life?

Read 2 Corinthians 12:9-10. Has God given you what you need today to glorify Him?

Read Psalm 32

How does David describe God?

How does David describe himself?

What does David call the reader to do?

Read Psalm 38

How does David describe God?

How does David describe himself?

What does David call the reader to do?

Read Psalm 62

How does David describe God?

How does David describe himself?

What does David call the reader to do?