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## INTRODUCTION

Hi and welcome to the Cerebral Palsy Foundation's ParentWise Podcast series. I'm Robyn Cummins.

Today, social work consultant, Natalie Morton, discusses the impact that having a child with a disability can have on parents' relationships and talks about what people can do to ensure they can maintain strong, healthy and communicative relationships.

## HAVING A CHILD WITH A DISABILITY

Hi I'm Natalie Morton. The pace and expectations of the modern world can be very demanding for relationships and families. It seems to be a general social trend that relationships and family are under a lot more pressure. Having a child with a disability can add enormously to these overall feelings of stress and strain.

Parents of children with a disability often completely overlook their own needs, and the needs of their partner, to take care of their child. This is quite a natural reaction to the situation, but not one that can be sustained for a long time.

Going through the experience of having a new baby, and then discovering that your baby has a disability, has the potential to cause a lot of stress to a relationship.

Everybody's reactions to the situation will be different and the way each person deals with stress will contribute to this.

It is important to remember that all relationships have pressures and stresses and the key issue is in understanding what effect stress has on you and your partner.

The fact that each partner may have a different approach to handling stressful situations can be a strength for a relationship. But difficulty can arise for any couple when there is a lack of understanding of those natural stress reactions.

Acknowledging each other's natural stress reactions can take some of the anxiety and stress out of the couple relationship.

It will also help you to communicate how you are coping with things.

If both you and your partner have a good sense of how you are affected by stress, or distress, then together you can talk through how you are both together managing the situation.

Sometimes a partner will not acknowledge the reality of the situation. Instead they cope by immersing themselves in the care of their child or working hard to provide for the family.

This can lead to the other person getting very fed up with their partner's emotional response to having a child with a disability.

If this situation sounds familiar to you, then a good strategy is to bring that difficulty up with your partner – to talk it through. For example, you might say, 'I've noticed that you're spending a lot of time at work. Is it because you have a lot on at work or is it because it's pretty confronting to be at home with the family?'

Talk about what is happening for each of you and how you might be reacting to this very stressful situation.

Stress does affect everyone differently but ultimately it can build up and affect your relationship. If you can identify when this is happening you are three quarters of the way to managing it more effectively.

When you and your partner find yourself in a demanding situation it's essential not to personalise the stress – that is, blaming your partner rather than the situation. Keeping it in its context will help you to keep the stress separate from your relationship.

Sometimes when you have a child with a disability, a stressful state seems to become the 'status quo'.

If this is the case, it's helpful if - together - you can try and take a different perspective.

Acknowledging that, 'Stress is pushing our relationship around at the moment' is much better than, 'Our relationship is failing. We just don't talk anymore'.

If you can look at things in a different way, and not personalise the stress, it will be easier to see that feeling pressured doesn't mean your relationship is failing.

## COMMUNICATION

Communication styles can be as varied as the number of people in the world and miscommunication can be one of the biggest sticking points in any relationship.

Some people will be very 'teary', others will not want to talk about it.

Some people might be very angry.

Others might want to occupy themselves with other things, instead of thinking about the stressful situation.

Occasionally, people just want to crack jokes.

It's important to identify your natural way of communicating and that of your partner. To do this, ask the question, 'In order to get through this situation, what do we need from each other to move forward?'

Understanding each other's communication styles is also very important for problem solving - working out how to deal with things and the kind of communication you need to have.

We often do it, but reading people's non-verbal communication, without asking them about it, can be a danger.

You may think that someone is really upset or really cranky but you need to check it out with the other person to confirm before reacting to it.

For example, instead of making assumptions you might say, 'I noticed that you slammed the book down. I'm wondering whether you're cranky with me. Am I reading you right?'

Your partner might respond, 'You should have heard what I've just read, it's so ridiculous'.

This is an example of a situation where you could have observed your partner's body language, made assumptions and modified your own behaviour, when in fact it had nothing to do with you.

By clarifying situations like this with your partner, there's a greater chance of 'staying on the same page' as each other.

Another common example of where couple communication breakdown can occur is around the issue of 'time out'.

A husband might tell his wife to go to the gym to have some time out (because that's what he might like to do if he had the opportunity) when all she really wants to do is stay home and relax or visit a friend for coffee.

The lesson here is that offering each other time out is a good thing but imposing it on each other is not.

Instead, ask your partner, 'How can I support you to do something for yourself?'

By continuing to communicate openly like this, you'll find it easier to reconnect and you'll be able to achieve a better balance of having your needs being met both by yourself as well as through your couple relationship.

Having a new baby does require a rethinking of the roles and expectations in a relationship and how a partnership works.

People have lots of expectations when a new baby comes along and those can be informed by social norms and individual values. For example, one partner might expect that the person doing the majority of the care-giving at home will also pick up the cooking or the cleaning.

The other partner might expect that leisure activities will need to be modified with a new baby to care for. Couples need to talk through these kinds of expectations without assuming what will happen.

Sometimes when couples do this they may be shocked at each other's expectations around issues such as household responsibilities.

It can be helpful to have a conversation about how household responsibilities will be shared, how each partner will contribute financially to the family, the equality of roles in the relationship and how much time needs to be spent with the children. Essentially you have to make decisions about what you think is fair in the relationship and the family.

All of these are common issues that place pressure on all couples. Ultimately, you need to be able to answer the question, 'How do we want to see these roles and responsibilities work for our family?'

The issues around family roles and responsibilities can become more complex if your child has a disability. Added to the usual responsibilities of raising a child can be your child's need for constant care, and ongoing medical and therapy appointments.

Shifting the focus from problems to finding things that work well can be empowering.

For example, how well are you sharing the workload? Are you keeping an even balance, especially when there are additional demands?

If the workload is uneven - for example if one parent is spending more time with children due to work demands of the other - the other parent needs to continue to check how the other partner is travelling with this situation.

It can be especially hard to be realistic and rational about this when we're tired and irritable.

Many parents of children with a disability report feelings of ongoing mental, physical and emotional exhaustion. Knowing the signs of exhaustion in yourself and your partner and talking about it will bring it out into the open.

If we know what our particular exhaustion triggers and reactions are, and how we respond to them, we can manage them more effectively.

Some strategies for managing exhaustion include having a 'nanna nap' during the day or giving one partner the opportunity to sleep away from the family for a night. You might also think about giving each other permission to go to bed at 8:30 when the kids go to bed.

As things continue to change, you'll also need to revisit that discussion around your expectations of yourself and your partner in the relationship and the family.

## CONFLICT

We first learn about conflict as children, watching the adults around us and dealing with peers.

We all develop our own way of dealing with conflict. These approaches to conflict can be broadly categorised as assertive, aggressive and passive.

Assertive conflict resolution, where a person confronts and discusses the issues openly and directly with their partner, is the optimal option for managing conflict.

The first step to successful conflict resolution is reflecting on, and understanding, you and your partner's approaches to conflict.

Are you explosive, or do you brood over arguments and take longer to forgive? Do you or your partner see some conflict in the relationship as healthy or do you try to avoid conflict all together?

You might also reflect on your approach to conflict by asking questions such as:

- What are our natural preferences for managing conflict?
- What's our preferred way of handling conflict for our family?
- What are our expectations when we are irritated with each other?
- How do we stay focused on our common goals?
- How do we want to raise our children to manage conflict?
- When the relationship gets prickly or heated, how do I react?

Effective communication and conflict resolution techniques will help keep stress at bay. So will keeping friendship and intimacy in your relationship.

When couples are in conflict and when things are starting to disintegrate, people begin to become focused on what's not working in their relationship.

They often forget about what it was that first attracted them to their partner and what it was that brought them together in the first place.

Maintaining your mindfulness about that, and what it was that worked really well in your relationship, can help you to deal with the difficult times.

It will also help you to work out what you can do to support each other to have a connection with the original aspects of the relationship that worked.

If you enjoy exercising together for example, perhaps an idea would be to organise someone to mind your child, so you can get out for a bike ride together once a week.

Whatever it is, think about what keeps you friends with your partner and what you could both do to make sure this continues.

If you can't answer the question of what drew your partner to you, ask them, and try and get a clear and positive view of this.

Keeping intimacy in your relationship can be difficult if you and your partner find yourself in chronically stressful situations.

Lack of sleep can also create havoc with intimacy.

Expectations in relation to sex can be difficult to talk about because many people fear being blamed or being accused of being unresponsive or cold, or of making too many demands.

When communication around intimacy breaks down, partners may react by withdrawing from each other, and this can become a vicious cycle.

If you are too exhausted for intimacy, at the very least work to keep up warmth and affection and value companionship and friendship in your relationship.

## SOURCES OF SUPPORT

Sometimes, despite all your efforts as a couple, stressful situations can create cracks in the foundations of a relationship.

If you feel you are in this situation, it's essential to act quickly and early and seek support from friends, family or a helping professional.

Firstly, try talking about it with each other.

If this is unsuccessful, then it's probably time to organise some professional support.

There are many sources of support out there including family support workers at your disability service and relationship counsellors at peak organisations such as the Australian Association of Social Workers, The Australian Psychological Society, Unifam, Anglicare or Centacare.

A good relationship counsellor will facilitate the conversation between you and your partner, not just focus on solving the problems.

You can contact a counselling service directly such as Relationships Australia on 1300 364 277.

## CLOSE

Thanks for listening. We hope you've found these strategies and ideas useful.

You can download or listen to more episodes in the ParentWise Podcast series at the Cerebral Palsy Foundation's website - [www.cpfoundation.com.au](http://www.cpfoundation.com.au)