

## Early Childhood - Caring for Carers

# MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS AND CREATING CONNECTIONS

Following your child's diagnosis, research suggests that personal relationships with family and friends are often an important source of support<sup>1</sup>.

Some of your relationships may be impacted as you and your family adjust to the news. Some relationships will be strengthened and you will likely find them ready to stand by and provide support. You may also find yourself making new friends as you engage with other parents and carers going through similar experiences.

Maintaining your relationships and creating connections with others during this time will help to build your support network.

## Important things that will help

### Try to make time for others

During this time, maintaining your friendships may be the least of your concerns! All of your time and energy is most likely taken up caring for and supporting your child. While life will certainly be busy, and you might not always be able to catch-up regularly with friends, try for once a month or once every few months rather than once a year! You could also try to keep in touch via social media, texts, calls etc.

Perhaps you could schedule a "date night" where you and your partner (or friend/family member) set aside one night a month where it's just about you and them. You could arrange to see a movie, have dinner, or go to the theatre. Organise to have someone care for your child during this time so you can relax and enjoy yourself.

### Invest in the people that support you

Remember that friends are supposed to support you and make you feel good about yourself. Following your child's diagnosis, friends may come and go and some of your relationships may change. Make sure you are investing your time in those friends that are supportive and understanding during this time rather than those who don't support you or aren't there for you when you need them most.

### One parent describes her relationships with those around her following the diagnosis:

*"Everybody you know is like an apple on a tree. The diagnosis comes and it shakes the tree. You look up and there are maybe only one or two apples still there. These are the people who will help you and support you. Everybody else on the ground is ready to be made into an apple pie."<sup>2</sup>*

## Engage in peer support

It can be hard to engage with people following your child's diagnosis. Research shows that parents and carers often feel isolated. Factors that can contribute to this sense of isolation include feeling disconnected from family and society's lack of understanding<sup>3</sup>.

You may feel isolated from others because it seems like they don't understand what you and your family are going through or because you feel like a burden<sup>3,4</sup>. You might feel like it's too hard to go out or maybe you find it hard to deal with the questions, attitudes, and glances from those in the community. People in your life might be keeping their distance or no longer keep in touch.

Many parents report that an important source of support is connecting with others who are going through similar experiences<sup>5</sup>. Research shows that parents often count on other parents for information and support<sup>1</sup>. Support groups are a friendly space where you can share your experiences with people. You might find out what works for others in your situation and get ideas on how to handle challenges and celebrate achievements.

Most communities have local support groups and there are many online:

- **My Time** provides support groups for parents of children with disabilities, or call **1800 889 997**
- **Carer Support Network** is a free and anonymous online platform that enables supportive conversations between carers about the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).
- **PlayConnect** Playgroups provide play-based experiences that are designed to promote early childhood development for children with ASD or developmental delays in communication, behaviour or social skills. They also provide opportunities for families to connect with others, share knowledge and experiences and make friends in an environment of fun and mutual understanding.
- **Carer Gateway** is the Department of Social Services website for carers that provides information on services for carers and offers options for digital or in-person peer support.

Support groups should be a positive experience where you are able to learn from others and talk about both triumphs as well as challenges. You may need to try a few different groups before you find one that works best for you.

### One parent describes finding comfort in connecting with other parents experiencing similar issues:

*"...it's a relief to see that there are other people in your situation who you can talk to about the same sort of things and that understand the difficulties you have."<sup>5</sup>*

## Talk about things other than your child

It can be easy to talk about your child's disability because it is such a large part of your life, but it's likely that you are spending a majority of your time talking about your child. It's important to try talking about your hobbies and interests as well. Remember that friendships go both ways and so it is important to also spend time listening to your friends.

## Ask for and accept help

Know that you don't need to do everything on your own. Everyone needs help from time to time and your family and friends will likely want to help out, but may not know how. You may need to be direct and specifically request what help you need. For example, you might ask someone to pick up some groceries or ask someone to look after your child while you go out with a friend.

## Self-Evaluation

**Who are the people that support you?**

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**When is the last time you made time for the important relationships in your life?**

(your partner, friends, family etc.)

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**List some ways that your friends and family could support you, your child, and your family.**

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## References

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