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# Five tips for raising a child with special needs

Published Sep. 20, 2018

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## Remember, you're not alone

Caring for a child with special needs can be both rewarding and challenging. But, like any form of parenting, there isn't a rulebook or manual to help you decide what's best for your child's growth and development. From milestones like their first steps and words, through schooling and giving them the tools to be as independent as they can be, you might be looking to doctors, other parents or caretakers for advice.



"Raising children is an adventure for any parent, but the journey for parents of

children with special needs often has a few more twists and turns,” said Dr. Thomas D. Challman, medical director, [Geisinger Autism & Developmental Medicine Institute](#). “From identifying medical conditions they may have a predisposition for, to securing the most effective education, it’s important to know what your options are.”

Here are a few tips that can help navigate some of special needs parenting’s biggest questions.

### **Know the condition**

Learning everything you can about your child’s condition means you can identify potential medical complications, assist with their development and advocate for them at every stage of life.

“Many developmental disorders affect a child’s physical health, and vice versa,” said Dr. Challman. “For example, children with autism may experience seizures, gastrointestinal difficulties, sleeplessness and trouble eating.” Being aware of these predispositions will help you advocate for your child at home, school or the doctor’s office.

### **Foster independence**

Parents of children with special needs may often wonder if their child could one day live an independent life. Experts say the first steps toward this independence are made at home when children are young.

“If possible, teaching children to be responsible for their own laundry or other chores will provide great experience and translate to self-confidence when making their own decisions,” said Dr. Challman. “It will also encourage them to continue seeking out their own successes, teaching

vital life skills.”

Riding public transportation or running errands together will also help acclimate your child to more crowded areas and help them become more comfortable navigating outside of the home.

### **Encourage education**

School is hard for all children, especially those with special needs. Staying involved with your child’s school and teacher will keep you in tune with their progress.

“At-home engagement on in-class topics can cement the teachings in a way homework can’t always fulfill,” said Dr. Challman. “Plus, your child will see how important school is to you, allowing you to lead by example.”

### **Play can be therapeutic**

Getting your child involved in group activities like art, camps or sports will give them a chance to socialize outside of the home, building confidence and creating lasting friendships. Plus, staying active with exercise and learning a new skill is valuable for any developing mind and body.

“Being able to play well with others is a foundational skill for effective participation in school settings,” said Dr. Challman. “It means they can work well in a group, learn to compromise and take responsibility. Confidence in social situations can also translate to personal independence.”

### **Join a support group**

“It takes a village” goes for more than typical child-rearing. Joining a family or parent support group for developmental disabilities can help share experiences, frustrations and successes. Plus, support groups are a

way for families to practice self-care during what can often be a stressful experience.

“Remember, you’re not alone,” said Dr. Challman. “Other parents have been through this, or are currently going through it, so they might be able to help answer questions, give advice or provide support.”

*[Thomas Challman, MD](#), is a neurodevelopmental pediatrician and medical director of [Geisinger’s Autism & Developmental Medicine Institute](#), where a multidisciplinary team offers comprehensive diagnostic evaluations and genetic testing for autism and other developmental disorders. For more information, please visit <http://geisingeradmi.org>.*

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