



# 12 WAYS TO LOVE A SPECIAL NEEDS FAMILY

- 1. Cultivate Empathy.** Sit alongside them and be okay with not having any answers. Don't be afraid to say the wrong thing if you are coming from a place of love and encouragement. Strengthen your soul to sit in the uncertainty with them. Try not to be a fixer. "Empathy fuels connection" – Brene Brown
- 2. Encourage health** (physical, emotional, spiritual). Invite them for a run/walk/cycle class. Invite them to a Bible study or do one with them. Pay for a counseling appointment or if you are a counselor, provide some free sessions. Get them outside in nature when possible.
- 3. Remind them of their value.** Most people regularly see the rewards of their work and/or parenting (completed projects, met deadlines, developmental growth, changes in seasons of life and milestones, etc.). Special-needs families give and care for their children or family member often with no end in sight or measurable goals obtained. Let them know that they are not defined by their disability or circumstances.
- 4. Bring them a meal.** Find some way to get them what they need, whether it's a healthy meal or just something delivered to their door so they can care for their child and household without the added pressure of meal prep. Ask about dietary restrictions and choose food accordingly.
- 5. Take them out, invite and include them.** An afternoon or evening to do something NORMAL! These can be simple things like shopping, a long walk or hike, a pedicure, a pottery or art class, fun at a go kart track, target practice, anything you'd do with your other friends. Laughter is great medicine. If they can't get out, go to them.
- 6. Help with a date night for parents/caregivers!** Give gift cards. Put together a schedule where each family in their circle of friends can volunteer so they can have a consistent date night. If you are really brave, give them an overnight break!
- 7. Be a safe person.** Give them freedom to cry, grieve, and especially celebrate. Intercede and pray over them in these moments. Ask God to heal their hearts and their wounds, and to revive their weary spirits. Be careful not to compare your struggles or minimize their spiritual and emotional difficulties. Be trustworthy with their burdens. Celebrate in their victories!

**8. Teach and speak to your children about them.** Make sure your children treat people with special needs with dignity and make effort to include them. Encourage your children to participate, interact, ask questions, and deal with their own emotional discomforts. Be the example. Cultivate compassion. How can we build community if children and adults ignore those with disabilities?

**9. Allow them [special needs families] to help YOU.** Loving someone else while you are suffering brings great freedom. There is often guilt or a refusal to allow someone in great need to help you! It also blesses them and reminds them of their purpose. We are all made to receive love AND give love. Special needs families have endured a lot of suffering are often great teachers. They have a perspective that most of us will never have simply because we will not experience the same depth of suffering they have walked through.

**10. Be a champion and advocate for special needs families.** They are often depleted and run down by the many systems, providers, and people they have to interact with (schools, teachers, hospitals, physicians, insurance companies, sometimes even their own extended families). If you see they are being treated unfairly or being given poor care...STAND UP for them. If you see abuse or mistreatment, do something. Get involved in legislature.

**11. Be sensitive.** Many special needs families are not fragile, but they desire sensitivity and perspective as you enter into their world. As you listen to them, get to know them. It can be painful for special needs families to listen to people complain about small things (like a last place finish in sports when their child may not have the same opportunities, or to hear how your child talks too much when their child struggles and may not be able to speak). Just be aware and have a grateful heart.

**12. Be ready to extend grace.** Please know that these families have suffered loss and grief. They continue to do so in waves. They have also experienced mental, physical and emotional trauma. They need “trust builders” and advocates. It takes patience, so please be understanding and know that it is not always personal. Be BRAVE and BOLD in love!

**“PAIN IS NOT CONTAGIOUS, BUT JOY IS.”**

-COLLEEN MAILE

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