



## Mentor Parents

October, 2003

“Mentor Parents” or “Experienced Parents” provide emotional and informational support to other parents of children who have special needs. Mentor Parents are matched in a one-to-one relationship with parents of a child newly diagnosed with disabilities or with parents of a child with an existing or chronic condition who find themselves in need of support. Because the Mentor Parent has experience in having a child with disabilities, the Mentor Parent is often able to provide a unique form of support that only another parent who has “been there” can.

A Mentor Parent:

- Helps a parent through the difficult time they may experience.
- Has already weathered and navigated some of these same life experiences.
- Is intimately familiar with the emotions and the real challenges that often come with having a child with disabilities.
- Offers something that other support systems cannot—shared common experience.

Becoming a Mentor Parent can be a very rewarding and fulfilling experience. It is a way for an experienced parent to:

- “Give back” by providing support to other families at a time when they are able.
- Ease the way for another family and maybe make things a little less difficult than what it was for them.
- Share some of the lessons they have learned over time.

As rewarding as this experience can be, the key to making Parent-to-Parent matches successful and beneficial is making sure Mentor Parents receive training about:

- Grief
- Communication and Listening
- Meeting with Families
- Boundaries
- Self Care

Mentor Parents and especially those with good Parent-to-Parent skills can be useful in a variety of settings beyond a one to one parent match. They can be useful in support groups, informal gatherings and retreats, chance meetings with other parents of children with disabilities and even when sharing a parent story or perspective.

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Characteristics of good Mentor Parents include:

- Acceptance of their own child and adjustment to their family situation
- Good listening skills
- Effective communication skills
- Willingness to share their own story
- Tolerance of values and feelings that maybe different than their own.
- A comfort and understanding of their own grief
- Proactive problem solving skills

It is not imperative that every Mentor Parent have all these characteristics the day they come to the table to be a mentor. However it is important that they are gained and nurtured through training and self-growth.

Keep in mind that Mentor Parents are on a journey of their own. The opportunity and experience of mentoring other parents can enhance their own growth and sense of well-being. Mentor Parents are also parents of children with disabilities and there may be times when their own child, family and life requires them to step out of the role of Mentor Parent.

There are also times when matches do not work out due to differences in personality between people. The similarities that may exist based on a child's disability, do not necessarily guarantee a successful match. Regardless of how the relationship develops the new family has an opportunity to see how others are raising a child with disabilities and who are accepting the child as he or she is.

Parent-to-Parent referrals and connections come from many sources; educators, social workers, therapists, doctors, nurses and other medical personnel, clergy, advocacy and support agencies, relatives, friends, neighbors and even from new parents themselves who are seeking a connection to another parent. Once a connection is made between the parents, it is important that the Mentor Parent contact the new parent in a timely manner.

Through any Parent-to-Parent match, opportunities are created for very unique sharing of information and emotional support, and these shared experiences are the very foundation of Parent-to-Parent support. Mentor Parents have a wonderful gift to offer other parents. They give the gift of listening and true understanding from someone who has "walked the walk".