

## **Parenting After Stroke**

### **Raising children**

Parenting is an adventure and a lifetime commitment to surprises and challenges, achievements and doubts. Most of all it is a relationship of nurturing for the parent and child. What happens to this relationship when the parent has a stroke? Will the physical and mental consequences of a stroke stop the joy and adventures of parenting? It shouldn't.

### **Effects of stroke on parenting**

A stroke is a sudden loss of brain function caused when blood flow to the brain is disrupted. The effects of the stroke depend on where the brain is damaged. A stroke can affect your ability to communicate, move, remember, problem-solve and interpret what you see. It can affect your personality and behaviour. According to the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada, a significant number of stroke survivors are less than 45 years of age. Pregnancy and childbirth are additional risk factors for stroke for women.

John Rolland, Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the Centre for Family Health at the University of Chicago describes any illness suffered by a family as “an uninvited guest that must be incorporated into the family.” The good news is that most families adjust well to this challenge.

A stroke creates practical and emotional demands on the parent and child. The parent who has had the stroke is occupied with recovery and has limited reserve for being a parent. The non-disabled parent often takes on extra roles and responsibilities. A study by Dr. Anne Visser-Meily on parenting and stroke found that the stress felt by the non-disabled parent has a major influence on the children's reaction to the situation. Surprisingly, the severity of the stroke was found not to be an influencing factor. According to the study some children may have behaviour problems or show signs of depression after parental stroke. Improvement in these problems is often noted within the first year following the stroke. Children's reactions often depend on their age and gender.

## **How do you thrive as a parent following a stroke?**

Here are some recommendations from experts on parenting after a stroke:

- Communicate. Make sure children have opportunities to express their feelings and concerns.
- Communicate at the child's level. Be open, sensitive and honest.
- Be approachable. Don't let the stroke dictate the relationship with your child. Make time for your child.
- Maintain routines within the family and make having fun part of the routine. It helps in coping with uncertainty.
- Pace yourself to help avoid burnout.
- Let children be children. Remember your children are growing and going through their own changes.
- Children need information to cope with life's changes. Make them part of your recovery team so they understand what is happening to you. Teach them how to handle crisis and emergencies. The Brain Child Project found that through brief education, children can learn about stroke and how to respond if a stroke occurs.
- Be supportive. Don't be overwhelmed by the whole situation. Plan to cope as a family with each problem as it occurs.
- Empower the family. Children can be very intuitive and great problem solvers. Use their talents.
- Get help when you need it from family, friends and professionals. Help can be found through your doctor, nurse, social worker or other rehabilitation professionals. Many areas have specific family and child service agencies which offer counselling and play therapy.

## **Special advice for the parents of newborns**

- Good bonding is important for the parent and baby. Create opportunities for bonding—lay baby on your chest and stroke the child with your hand; keep a bassinet at the bedside, watch for opportunities to ask for assistance, e.g., in handling the baby. Have someone close to assist.
- Break everything into small functional tasks. You may need assistance with parts of the task (e.g., someone prepares the bottles and you feed the child). Aim for success—small successes are encouraging.
- Support is the crucial element of success—support for the parents, immediate family and extended family.
- Access social work as needed. Social workers are a great resource to help problem solve or access resources.
- Educate the family on how to support you and your child.
- Use assistive devices creatively to increase function for parenting e.g., hand splints.

## **Resources on parenting with a disability**

*Practical Parenting*

[www.dppi.org.uk/journal/47/goodpractice.html](http://www.dppi.org.uk/journal/47/goodpractice.html)

*Parenting with a Disability Network*

[www.cilt.ca/parenting.aspx](http://www.cilt.ca/parenting.aspx)

*Parents with a Disability On-line*

[www.disabledparents.net/](http://www.disabledparents.net/)

*Through the Looking Glass*

<http://lookingglass.org/index.php>

*Disability Resources on the Internet*

[www.disabilityresources.org/](http://www.disabilityresources.org/)

*Disability, Pregnancy and Parenthood International*

[www.dppi.org.uk/](http://www.dppi.org.uk/)

*Disabled Parents Network*

[www.disabledparentsnetwork.org.uk/](http://www.disabledparentsnetwork.org.uk/)

*Enable Link*

[www.enablelink.ca](http://www.enablelink.ca)

*Different Strokes*

[www.differentstrokes.co.uk/](http://www.differentstrokes.co.uk/)

*Parenting with a disability: the last frontier*

[www.apa.org/monitor/may03/challenges.html](http://www.apa.org/monitor/may03/challenges.html)

Carty E. (1995). *Parenting with a disability: Assistive devices and adaptations for child care*. (1995). Available for \$15 from Elaine Carty, School of Nursing, University of British Columbia, T201-2211 Westbrook Mall, Vancouver, BC V6T 2B5; fax: 604-822-7466; email: [carty@nursing.ubc.ca](mailto:carty@nursing.ubc.ca)

*Exceptional Parents Magazine (On-line)*

[www.eparent.com](http://www.eparent.com)

*Family Village Library Parents with Disability*

[www.familyvillage.wisc.edu/general/parentswwdis.html](http://www.familyvillage.wisc.edu/general/parentswwdis.html)

*Parents with a Disability Community Project*

<http://home.vicnet.net.au/~parentwd/welcome.htm>

## **Other disability Web sites**

*Accessibility Directorate of Ontario*

[www.mcass.gov.on.ca/mcass/english/pillars/accessibilityOntario/](http://www.mcass.gov.on.ca/mcass/english/pillars/accessibilityOntario/)

*March of Dimes*

[www.marchofdimes.ca](http://www.marchofdimes.ca)

*Canadian Abilities Foundation*

[www.abilities.ca/](http://www.abilities.ca/)

*Breaking Down Barriers, Independent Living*

[www.breakingdownbarriers.org](http://www.breakingdownbarriers.org)

*The Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work*

[www.ccrw.org](http://www.ccrw.org)

*Heart and Stroke Foundation*

[www.heartandstroke.ca](http://www.heartandstroke.ca)

*Ability Online*

[www.abilityonline.org](http://www.abilityonline.org)

## **References**

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Visser-Meily A et al. (2005). When a parent has a stroke. *Stroke* 36, 2436-2440.

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