

Building a Village – for Yourself *Wild Peace*

When our kids struggle, we don't think twice about figuring out what we can do to help them. We do research and network and try to put together the right mix of support for them. But 'It Takes a Village' applies to parents, too. You will feel and function better when you create a portfolio of support for yourself.

Here are some tips to get you started:

1 • Think About Your Own Needs

Consider the roles different friends and other supportive resources play in your life and identify your unmet needs. Support comes in many forms. It can mean a shoulder to cry on, or a source of information; an advocate to fight for you, or a helping hand to lift you; acceptance and non-judgement, or a knowing sense of humor. Note the people who comprise your support team and seek to fill the voids.

2 • Focus on the Long Term

You might feel like you don't have enough time to cultivate friendships, but even brief connections with others will buoy you. A 75-year "Adult Development" study conducted at Harvard found that good relationships keep us healthier and happier. Genuine connections provide true fulfillment, and a key finding was that creating micro experiences that cause an emotional uplifting in others is one of the most efficient ways to foster such connections.

3 • Find Another Parent Who 'Gets It'

Connecting with other parents who relate to your experience can be a lifeline. They offer the trifecta of lived-experience, information and empathy. Sharing the story of your latest challenges with a person who understands - who won't judge, gasp in horror, or offer useless advice, but who will instead give a nod, offer a hug, and maybe even provide a helpful suggestion or point out the humor in it all - is priceless.

- Tap resources in your community. Find a peer or mentor by networking through your school guidance \ counselor or the school's special education parents' association.
- Look for a parent in your orbit. Keep your eyes peeled for someone who seems to be on a parallel path, and start up a conversation or propose a date. I know several parents who met each other in the waiting room of a specialist.
- Lower your force field. Take a risk and open up the door a crack; share a little bit about your situation with someone you think you could trust. You'll be amazed how many people will say "me too". Admitting imperfection often creates connection.
- Go online. You can't hug your laptop, but the online world offers a myriad of opportunities to find community, resources, inspiration and ideas. You can look for forums or Facebook groups related to almost any issue; or search for a "parent mentor / peer matching program" in your area.

4 • Join a Support Group / Seek Professional Guidance

Moderated, local support groups are often organized by hospitals and other professional providers. One example is the Parent to Parent program of the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#) (NAMI), which provides free education,

advocacy, and support group programs across the country. If you'd prefer a casual support group (similar to a book group), consider creating your own by reaching out to a small group of parents on a parallel path.

Sometimes you need professional support to help manage the emotional upheaval and complexity of parenting a child who struggles – not to mention life in general. If you wish you had someone who could help you come up with strategies for coping, or you're feeling like this is more than you can handle, don't hesitate to look for a professional.

5 • Remember Your Own Self

Having a child who struggles is only part of who you are. Don't forget who you are as an individual. Try to connect with people on multiple levels. Some family members and good old friends can still provide support and fulfillment, even if they don't understand every aspect of your life.

6 • Have an Emergency Plan

Make a plan for challenging times. What can you do in the moment to calm down and think clearly? What helps you and your child feel physically and emotionally safe? Who can you call for support? Put together any information you would need to have on-hand to share with healthcare providers and other professionals so you feel prepared if necessary. person, as well as "Sibshops", which are local peer support programs for school-age siblings.