

**The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Parents Raising Children with Special Needs** by Sharon Gabison (modified from Stephen Covey's The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People)

1. **Be Proactive. You will end up becoming your child's best specialist and your child's best advocate. To be your child's best advocate, you need to learn what it is you need to advocate for. Educate Yourself.** Become an autism expert. Autism can present itself along a spectrum in the areas of social interactions, behavior and language abilities. There are many different yet similar symptoms of autism. No two children with autism are the same. There are numerous interventions for the treatment of autism that claim effectiveness. Do your homework. Research. Do not believe everything you read and hear. Familiarize yourself with local services available to you and your child.
2. **Begin with the end in mind. The "end" can reflect the next 10-minutes, the end of the day, or 20 years down the road. Regardless of where the "end" is, plan. You would never venture out on a road trip without a map. A map is a plan. The future, whether immediate or long term is a ride that needs a plan. Your child's roadmap to the future is your plan. For the immediate future:** Outings and functions are challenging, coupled with unpredictable behaviour. Be prepared. Have a "just in case bag" packed and ready to go, full of items that will keep your child entertained if all else fails. You can keep the bag in your car or in your hall closet ready when you need it for easy access.

Plan ahead for the long term future. Preparing a will, taking out life insurance and planning for our children's education is something that most parents consider once they become parents. When raising children with special needs, this is more important. The natural course in life is that our kids will grow up, move out and have a family of their own. When raising a child with special needs, we may need to think of their adult living arrangements well before they are adults. Exploring future living arrangements is something that we may not consider when our children are young but a vital necessity in anticipation of lengthy waiting lists. Visit [www.specialneedsplanning.ca](http://www.specialneedsplanning.ca) for a wealth of useful information.

3. **Put First Things First. Try to maintain a sense of "normalcy" as best as possible. Your life does not have to be completely defined by your child's disorder. You are still a family. Don't forget other family members.** Siblings need to feel some sense of "normalcy". It is easy for parents to encourage siblings to "help out". It is not uncommon for younger siblings to assume a super-ordinate role in the care of their older sibling on the spectrum. Children need a childhood. It is not fair for adults to expect children to take on adult responsibilities, nor is it fair to deprive a child of their childhood. Don't let autism stop you from doing family things. Don't forget your spouse/partner. Have regular dates with your partner. Go out and do adult things.

**Don't forget the "others" in your life.** Try not to isolate yourself from the rest of the world, including your friends. Although a diagnosis of autism can completely engulf your life, and keep you very busy, it is important to keep in mind that your life, and your family's life is not all about autism.

4. **Think Win/Win. Learn how to get what your child needs by helping others understand how helping your child will help them. If others understand how they will benefit by helping your child, then they may be more apt to help.** Dale Carnegie, in his book "How to Win Friends and Influence People", first published in 1936, provides twelve suggestions on how to influence people. Here are some of my favourites. They include:

- Begin in a friendly way. Start off your interactions by being friendly.
- To get the best out of an argument is to avoid one. Do not turn your advocacy efforts into a boxing match.
- Show respect for the other person's opinions. Never say, "You're wrong." There will be plenty of times along your journey where you you know the person you are

negotiating with is wrong. Don't ever tell them what you think. It will burn your bridges very quickly.

- If you are wrong, admit it quickly and emphatically.
- Get the other person saying "yes, yes" immediately.
- Let the other person do a great deal of the talking.
- Let the other person feel that the idea is his or hers.
- Try honestly to see things from the other person's point of view.
- Be sympathetic with the other person's ideas and desires.
- Appeal to the nobler motives.
- Dramatize your ideas.
- Throw down a challenge.

Use these strategies. You will have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

5. **Seek first to understand then to be understood. You can't expect others to understand and help you or your child if they don't understand the disorder. You may need to educate other parents/family members and those interacting with our children on a day to day basis.** Many parents of children with special needs feel that others, including parents with "neurotypical" children just "don't get it". Your child may not participate like other children at parks, birthday parties and other functions. If you are open enough to discussing your child's needs, then do so. There is nothing to be embarrassed about. Not only will it help to inform them, but you may find that they are surprisingly supportive. You may be pleasantly surprised at the reception you receive. **Educate, educate, educate.** If you work, your employer and co-workers may not understand your need to be on constant "call". The numerous appointments for specialists and therapists, requires flexibility in your work schedule. Hopefully, you may be lucky enough to have an understanding employer. **If you need to educate a stranger, than you have educated one more person in this world.** There are many well intentioned individuals who may provide you with "good advice" on how to manage your child in the middle of a meltdown. There are people who will blame you for your child's behaviour. There are some people who would like to help but just don't know how. If the need arises, you may consider handing out autism information cards so that you don't have to explain.  
  
[Click Here for Autism Information Cards](#)
6. **Synergize. Connect with Other Parents/Families. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts.** You are not alone, and should not feel alone. There are other parents out there who are experiencing the same fears, frustrations and sadness that you may feel and longing for a connection. There is no need to be alone. Virtual (internet) communities are a great place to start to meet people. Local chapters (Autism Societies, Asperger's Societies) can be a vehicle to get connected with other parents. Join email and advocacy groups (see resource page). Your new "Autism Family" will ground you in ways that others may not be able to.
7. **Sharpen the Saw. Take care of yourself. Look after yourself spiritually, mentally, physically and socially.** Life is busy and hectic. If you are unable to look after yourself, then who will? Your need to maintain a healthy lifestyle including good nutrition, regular exercise and plenty of sleep is vital to optimum functioning. In order to maintain your sanity, you need to keep yourself as emotionally and physically healthy as possible. Set aside some regular weekly or twice weekly "me time" in which you can refuel. Hire a babysitter. Get out and watch a movie. Go out to a local coffee shop and read your favourite magazine.