

10 Fingers, 10 Toes...

by Regina Eardley

It is estimated that more than 200,000 children in Harris County, 6% of the population, are classified as children with special needs. In an effort to recognize as many parenting issues as possible, Houston Parent would like to present a column devoted to these children.

Where Do Special Needs Children Come From?

The waiting is the worst part. Five minutes and the test will show a plus or minus. When it is confirmed that you are going to have a baby, the joy, fear, anticipation, relief and excitement set in. For nine months you dream, pray, and hope for a healthy child that will grow up to be president. Ten fingers, ten toes and all the correct chromosomes.

During my first pregnancy, I traveled across the nation to promote a rural living environment for people with mental retardation. I listened to the desperate stories of elderly parents searching for a safe place where their adult child could grow old when they were no longer able to care for the child. I listened to how having a child with mental retardation was like having a child in college for life, that the financial obligation was always there and provisions would have to be made even after the parents died. I would go back to my hotel room rubbing my swollen belly and pray: please Lord, let it have all the right chromosomes.

My prayers were answered when we were blessed with a healthy baby boy. But my work then led me to meet more parents with children with a different type of special need: mental illness. I listened to the cries of parents afraid to go to sleep at night because they were being threatened by their own children. I listened to the pleas of parents needing respite care and medication for their children who tried to commit suicide. Now, during my second pregnancy, my prayers still begin let it have all the right chromosomes, but I've added and no chemical imbalances in the brain.

So who are special needs children? Sometimes, for reasons beyond our control, nature steps in and a child is born with a special need. Mental retardation, mental illness and physical impairments may cause a child to have

needs different from other children.

There are not always answers to why a particular child develops autism, cerebral palsy, attention deficit disorder, deafness, blindness, or Down Syndrome. Sara Toles, executive director for Arc of Greater Houston, says there are different types of disabilities and each must be handled individually.

"You have children who are physically challenged, developmentally delayed and children with adaptive behavior problems," says Toles. "As parents, we have to learn to meet those special needs and help the child grow and live as productively as possible."

So you make it through labor, delivery and, in my case, postpartum depression. Ten fingers, ten toes. But what about the chromosomes? At each pediatric visit you sit on the edge of your seat waiting for the doctor's report. Bettye Crites, a good friend and the mother of a teenage daughter with autism, says shortly after her daughter turned two she was diagnosed with autism. Bettye went through the "why me" syndrome, but she says eventually "you pick yourself up and start trying to find out where to go from there." After a child has been diagnosed as having a special need, she says parents go through a series of stages including shock, mourning the loss of a "healthy" child, and anger.

"Because each child has different needs, there's no magic rule book that tells you 'this is what you do.'" You have to research and dig and make calls and even then, you don't get all the answers," says Bettye.

All of the parents I've talked to have said one of the most important things for parents to do once they have learned of their child's disability is to find a good support group for themselves.

As parents, from time to time we all have the struggle of doing what's best for our child, but for parents with children with special needs those issues are intensified. Finding a daycare that will work with the child's need can be one of the toughest challenges for parents. Confronting the added financial strains on the family budget, determining what type of educa-

tion programs are available and acceptable for the child, and monitoring the effect on siblings and family members are only a few of the major challenges for these parents. Networking within a support group allows the parents a safe haven for venting their feelings with others who share similar experiences. It also gives parents a resource when facing the issues previously mentioned.

Parents should also seek a general pediatrician to help manage the sub-specialists that the child may require.

A good pediatrician can provide guidance for the parent and can advocate for the child. My son's pediatrician says sometimes a child with a developmental disability may require a speech therapist, a physical therapist, a pediatric dentist, a behavior manager and a host of other professionals. The parent needs to be able to depend on a general pediatrician to help coordinate the care the child is receiving. The pediatrician can help provide guidance to an overwhelmed parent and ensure the child is receiving the treatment he needs.

Education is one of the best tools a parent can have when trying to care for their special needs child.

Learning what governmental issues will have effect on your child's benefits, knowing the laws concerning special education, and being informed what home health care is available can allow parents to make decisions about the care of their child.

So, here I sit, rubbing my swollen belly and saying my prayers: Please, Lord, let it have all the right chromosomes, and no chemical imbalances in the brain; let it have sight and hearing abilities and ten toes and ten fingers. Still, there is probably something I'm not aware of. And if my child is born with a special need, I know there are support groups, professionals and laws to help me. Parenting is rewarding, challenging, exhausting and, at best, never easy. **HE**

The following references may be of help for more information on specific special needs.

Mental Health Mental
Retardation Authority
2850 Fannin
Houston, Tx 77002
750-5600

The Children's Mental
Health Plan of Harris
County
630-6655

The Arc of Greater Houston
3737 Dacoma, Suite E
Houston, TX 77292
957-3357

Center for the Retarded
3550 West Dallas
Houston, TX 77019
525-8400

Houston School for Deaf
Children
3636 West Dallas
Houston, TX 77019
523-3633