

You are able to parent, even with a disability

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Kim with her daughter



Kim with her three of her girls

My world flipped upside-down when I experienced a severe brain stem stroke exactly two years ago. I was only in my late forties. Before this life-changing event, I was working in a full-time career, not to mention my other full-time jobs: as a farmer's wife, juggling six kids, and all that entails. (Equaling three full-time jobs, at least!) Sprinkled on top were my church callings and other civic projects. To put it lightly... I was busy.

At first, I was completely paralyzed, but over time I regained the use of my left side. Walking or getting around independently is not possible. I have three older kids in their mid-twenties and three younger girls in the teens and tweens. My older kids have been awesome helpers and assumed much of the parenting and farm responsibilities to allow my husband to remain with me. My girls were frequently by my side at first. They were incredibly attentive. "What do you need? What can I do?"

As the days marched on and my situation became all too normal, they returned to being kids. Mind you, children of a parent with a disability will nevermore have a normal life, but they value their personal time extremely. I try not to be overly needy, however sometimes there are things I need imperatively. (I have learned to pick my battles with my husband and kids!) After a kid is asked to do so many things they hit a figurative wall, and they are done.

At first, I cried when they were not so willing (sometimes randomly, sometimes purposely,) but that got old like an overripe banana for all of us. Asking personal favors would only last for so long. I try to alternate the "help mom chores" between girls. (I thought I'd spread the load.) But some have found hiding in their rooms would get them out of helping me.

One day my youngest, most helpful child was obviously worn down from the monotonous mom chores since she was downstairs alone. I was going to make one more request, but her expression said it all. As she answered with an eye-rolling, dejected "what?" I decided to say, "Have a nice day!"

This caught her off guard, and it was my unexpected way of saying "Thanks, I appreciate all you do for me." I found that not constantly asking for help (if that's possible) shows your unselfishness and gratitude. I needed to show interest in them. Listen to them. Compliment them. Love them. Catch them at doing good and make a big deal about their successes instead of constantly nagging and begging.

Ultimately, bribery has ended up working most successfully. Candy was super cheap when I was

shopping a while ago. So I bought way too many pieces and hid them in my closet for a “rainy day.” (I didn’t really anticipate rain, but it’s always “pouring” at our house, figuratively.) When I knew my request was above and beyond, a candy bar would certainly do the trick in pushing them over the edge of the stubborn cliff. Don’t abuse this ammo, since it won’t work as well if it’s commonplace. I also bribe with chore forgiveness and added perks. (Don’t we all!)

Additionally, I had to regain my dominance as a parental figure since they spent way too many months fending for themselves. My husband was an overworked, overstressed single dad as I lay in the hospital. He did his best, but my kids pretty much had free reign of the house. They did really well at housecleaning, but they had a lot of freedom. It took quite a few months after I got home for them to remember I did care and I was the boss. Nine months after returning home, I still have to remind them I call the shots. I attempted to take a cellphone away from a teenager once, and she tried the old “hold-it-outta-my-reach” play. It only happened once. She felt my wrath even though I couldn’t reach her backside. My mom glare was still intact, and my grounding and take-the-phone-away power continued to work. Thanks to my husband’s support, I was able to wield that power. Teamwork is critically important in all parenting.

I experienced a time when I attempted to test my kids to see if they would act on chivalrous instincts and do the right thing for me, simply out of love. We were heading outside to have a fire and cook some s’mores one evening. My husband was out lighting the fire. I didn’t say a word, just waited for help getting dressed warmly. Everyone grabbed a jacket and ran out to the fire pit. They didn’t forget to grab S’more ingredients. There I sat alone inside. (Insert cricket sounds.) It was difficult not to feel bad, but I also remembered: Kids will be kids!

They have, over time, learned to “take care of mom.” I stopped trying to test them. I just speak up and tell them what I need. Even though I probably sound like a broken record, I must let my necessities be known. My husband made a rule. “Mom gets fed first.” They alternate who prepares and delivers my dinner plate. I appreciate that courtesy. It means a lot. I guess as a bright side to this Greek tragedy (if there is one) is my children are well-educated in the art of service.

An increased sense of humor (usually at my own expense) is indispensable. My children know I’m still the same old me when I crack a joke or quote a movie. I don’t fritter away my time feeling sorry for myself. A positive attitude will rub off on everyone. “If momma ain’t happy, ain’t

nobody happy.” I saw that on a plaque somewhere in my life.

Even though I can’t exercise my normal motherly duties such as cooking, housecleaning, and chauffeuring, I can still teach and advise. I guess if I can’t do, I can teach. I can teach courtesy and act as a peacemaker. I can teach life skills. I can share my spiritual beliefs. I can be a listening ear (and sometimes give an unwanted opinion).

I have this hospital table in front of me whether I’m sitting in a wheelchair or an easy chair. All my necessities are within my reach. My iPad is conveniently in front of me on an easel. It is my own little world. This table is always covered with everyone’s stuff, because they come to talk to me, lay down what they’re holding, spill their guts, and leave. They never ask, “Are you busy?” or “Can you talk?” They know I’ll stop what I’m doing to hear them out or give a shoulder to cry on. When I decide to have a pity-party and say, “I’m not good for anything,” or “I’m a huge burden,” my husband reminds me that I am still here for my children.

To other parents with disabilities I say: Work on your own happiness. It is really your own personal choice to be happy. (It will improve your parenting, and everything thing else!) Be present for your children. We are still able to parent with a disability.