

Raising a child with special needs

A closer look at families with special needs children

With the birth of a child, families are challenged to change and grow to accommodate the individual needs and wants of a whole new person. Each member of the family has to adjust to a new role, to their new spot in the pecking order, and often to new physical and emotional demands. Not to mention the many new joys and experiences the addition to their family brings!

But if that child happens to carry the label of “special needs” – any disorder or diagnosis that places them beyond the norm – then families are faced with some unique challenges and requirements.

BrightRock held an interactive [Iris session](#) on Google Hangout with David O’Sullivan – who is himself a parent of a special needs child, [Val Witt](#), Head of the Crossroads school for children with learning challenges and Stacey Vee and Margot Bertelsmann, who are both parenting children with special needs.

Each of the guests described their challenges and the coping mechanisms they employ for their unique situations.

Stacey’s son Travis (fondly referred to as Travis the Lionheart) has septo-optic dysplasia and is the oldest of three boys in the family. This rare brain malformation causes him to be both intellectually and physically impaired. She talked frankly about the realisation that his disability was going to change the family dynamic.

“What we found was that as he got older that developmental gap widened and widened. When he was born we thought that if we really worked hard as parents and put everything into his early childhood development phase we could somehow get him into a regular school by the time he was in grade one. He is eight years old now and Travis can’t count to three yet. So we have had to adapt and change as a family to make sure we are letting him be but also raising his brothers as regular kids, so it is an interesting dynamic in our family at the moment.”

Special needs differ from case to case and cannot be generalised, which makes it important for parents to find a method of dealing with it that works for their own situation, as Margot, whose son Richie has spina bifida, explains.

“If you have a child with special needs, I think it is tempting to try and place yourself on a continuum of ‘oh we are better off than these people’ or ‘we are less better off than these people!’ I think that the more special needs parents you encounter, the more variety there is out there, you realise that every family takes what has been given to them and makes of it what they are going to make of it.”

David believes that once you have a child with special needs it becomes difficult to contextualise what normal is any more.

“There can be all sorts of dysfunction in many families, it really is a case of how you adapt to it. I always describe my situation with my boy Michael who is 11 that I want to try and allow him to blend into society. I don’t want him to fit in like a square peg in a square hole, he is always going to be a square peg in a round hole but if he can blend in and find a niche for himself and a place where he is comfortable then, the job is done.”

Margot employs humour as a coping mechanism.

“What doesn’t kill you makes you funnier and I feel like if that doesn’t happen to you then you are doing it wrong. I try and manage Richie’s reaction to his disability because he is now getting to an age where he is aware of it. What seems to have concerned him very much was that sense of him as sticking out. I remember standing with him in a shopping line one day and because he wears orthotics on his lower legs people noticed them. When he walks he is very distinctive, he sort of lurches. A lady looked at him and smiled at him and he said ‘Why are people always looking at me?’ and it was of course awkward for me, I said to him Richie, it is because you look different and people notice that and they are always going to look at you, and you are also a very handsome boy.”

Val advises parents to deal with the inquisitiveness and the stigma attached to having a special needs child by educating themselves about it.

“When I first went into teaching (children with special needs), I remember parents driving up and literally opening the door and kicking their kids out of the car. They didn’t want their kid to be there. So I think a lot has changed through education now people are much more accepting of the fact that, as a remedial school, we will address the issues and not fix them. We will learn how to best support your child who thinks differently in a learning environment.”

Whilst dealing with special needs is difficult, therapy gives parents the tools and support necessary to deal with their situation the best way they can. For more advice and fascinating insights, view the discussion [here](#)

The Iris session was hosted as part of one of many conversations taking place on BrightRock’s Change Exchange (www.changeexchange.co.za), a dynamic online platform that taps into the emotions behind consumers’ biggest life changes. It is a space where people can learn from others going through the same Change Moments, ask questions and share experiences.

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About the Change Exchange

The Change Exchange focuses on four key [Change Moments](#), which include “Starting a family”, “Tying the knot”, “Landing *that* job” and “Making a home”. BrightRock selects a diverse mix of contributors, known as Change Agents, to share their experiences on those four change moments. BrightRock identified an opportunity to engage with consumers at a more personal, emotional level. Industry research shows that consumers’ propensity to initiate an insurance purchase is far higher at these times. A 2012 study in the Journal of Risk and Insurance* found that new parents were 40% more likely to buy life insurance cover. It also showed an increase in self-initiated life insurance purchases when starting a new job.

About BrightRock

BrightRock was started with the goal of changing insurance for good, by creating life insurance products that truly meets consumers’ and financial advisers’ needs. It offers individualised, needs-matched life insurance cover that’s built around your specific needs at the outset, and is specially designed to change with you as your needs change. And because BrightRock’s cover is flexible and changes appropriately when your needs change, it’s more efficient. This means both your cover and your premiums remain relevant, and more affordable, throughout your life. BrightRock (Pty) Ltd, underwritten by Lombard Life Ltd, is an authorised financial services provider.