

DISCIPLINE FOR SPECIAL NEEDS KIDS – Part 2

by Sally Burgess, Forefront families LLC

Over the last three months we have had the privilege of speaking to parents of special needs kids on a range of subjects. As part of our research I sought the advice of a friend of mine named Isobel who has a profoundly disabled son named Frederick who is now 13-years-old. Isobel has a husband and one other younger child and they live on the outskirts of Nashville on a small hobby farm. The insight she gave me was so helpful I thought I would share it with you.

Frederick's condition was caused by a birth injury, leaving him wheelchair bound. He has good understanding and some speech. He has very limited use of his arms and hands, and no use of his legs. He attends a special needs class in a normal school. Frederick thrives on structure. The family follows the same process every day so that Frederick knows what is happening at any given time. If they try to throw in some other activity that is not on the plan, he becomes agitated until the family gets back with the program. Structure makes Frederick feel safe and secure.

Frederick doesn't like to be left out of family activities. When his Dad goes down to the road to get the mail or put out the trash, he gets Frederick to 'help'. Even though Frederick isn't really involved with the task itself, just sitting in the truck or out in the field in his chair, watching Dad round up the sheep, it makes him feel valued. Frederick's parents take him on all sorts of adventures. They have shown him how to drive his own chair and he is excited to have some measure of control of his young life.

One day, Frederick had a horn fitted to the arm of his chair. He was so excited with it that he kept tooting it in the classroom. The teacher asked him several times to stop, but he just didn't want to. Nobody was able to hear the lesson, so Frederick was told to leave the classroom. When his parents heard what had happened they explained to him why his behavior was unacceptable. They told him that the next day he would have to apologize to the teacher and the rest of the class. When he got home from school next afternoon he told his mother that it was the worst day of his life. She told him that he had to pay the consequence of annoying others, like anyone else would have to. He learned from this that he has to take responsibility for his own actions.

Unfortunately, with some special needs kids, their parents protect them from any consequences and they end up as lonely adults, unable to fit into society. Frederick's sister, Emily, told her mother she thought it was unfair that she was made to attend so many of Frederick's Doctors' appointments. Her mother's reply gave her a different perspective. Was it fair that Frederick would stay in a wheelchair for the rest of his life when Emily was perfectly able to choose any life path she wanted?

To discipline Frederick, Isobel puts him in his room as a time out. She only makes him stay there for one quarter of the time Emily would. Emily could

sit and read a book, or color in, play with dolls or otherwise amuse herself. Frederick thinks he has been sent to prison because he can't do anything but sit.

Children don't always understand parents' actions. Many times Isobel would become so frustrated with Frederick that she would have to walk outside until she was calm again. Special needs kids need praise and reassurance after discipline to make them feel loved and secure. Isobel has found it very important to go and talk with the teacher at the beginning of the school year to discuss how Frederick's behavior is affected, or what sets him off. She likes to have the teacher follow through the same kind of discipline they do at home to create a similarity of expectation and response. This is not always possible in a classroom setting with so many other children, so it isn't wise to castigate the teacher if your suggestions are not always followed.

Isobel and her husband have noticed that when they have a difference of opinion or raise their voice for any reason, Frederick becomes distressed. They say it is important for them to create and maintain a calm environment for Frederick to have a good day. When special needs kids become stressed because of a negative happening at home, they very often have a disastrous day at school. They need a calm environment because they cannot assimilate situations as readily as an able child can.

Special needs parents need lots of support and time for themselves. Many are single parents and do not have the opportunity to unload their frustrations on a spouse or get a break from their child. Special Needs classes in public schools have some of the best-behaved children in the school. This doesn't happen by chance. All honor to the extremely hard-working parents and the dedicated teachers!

If you have any comments or questions on this subject, please do not hesitate to contact us at sally@forefrontfamilies.org. We invite you to also check out our website at www.forefrontfamilies.org and our blog site at www.forefrontfamilies.blogspot.com for further assistance.