

How to Encourage a Special-Needs Mom (When You Aren't One)

1. Express that you care about her as a person. While some of her struggles are unique, she is a woman and a mom just like you and has a lot of the same struggles that you do. Ask her regularly how she is doing. Listen and tell her that it's okay for her to vent, even if you don't fully understand what she is going through.

2. Ask her questions about her child's diagnosis and learn their language. You will probably never fully understand their life, but at least try to understand her child's diagnosis and what it means for their lifestyle. You may ask a dumb question, but trying to understand and floundering a little will mean more to her than if you had pretended that there were no special needs or kept your distance.

You don't have to be a special needs mom to learn about special needs.

3. Include her AND her special needs child. Invite them to play-dates and birthday parties. Take her out for coffee. Sit with them at church. It may be awkward, because you and your children don't know how to act around her child. You may have to talk with your children about her child's special needs and potential behaviors that they can expect. You and your children will probably make mistakes when interacting with her child, but you will never learn how unless you try. Taking the time to do so will mean so much to them that they will be more understanding of your mistakes than if you had kept your distance.

4. Keep advice to yourself. These moms have spent countless hours researching their child's diagnosis and treatment options, and they are also regularly receiving information from their child's doctors and other providers. Unsolicited, uneducated, or irrelevant advice is very frustrating. Trust that she is the best mom for her child and that she has her child's best interests in mind.

5. Don't invalidate or downplay her hardship by saying "oh, my child does that too." While her frustrations may be *similar* to what you have gone through with your child, there is a whole other lineup of difficulties that go along with having a special-needs child that you are not experiencing. Therefore, it is not the same.

6. Refuse to compare your child's development to hers. When she announces her child's milestone – and your child did it 10 months ago – simply rejoice with her. These things are huge deals to her! Her child has overcome huge obstacles to get to that point that your child never had to overcome.

7. Offer tangible help, and don't wait to be asked to offer it. Offer to babysit and ask the questions needed to know how to care for her child. Take her a meal or groceries. Help her with housework. Seemingly simple activities can feel overwhelming when exhausted, and this is further amplified when parents have a child with special needs.

If you are separated from your friend by distance, send her a care package with her favorite candy, a good book, a gift for her child, gift cards, or money. Often families of a special needs child are under a huge financial strain as they provide the best care and therapies for their child that they can. Shower her with a few splurges.

8. Pray for her and her child. Pray for healing for her child or improvement in her child's functions and behavior. Pray that God would bring friends into her life who understand her life. Pray for her marriage as it is probably going through far more strain that you could ever know. Pray for her to have strength and grace to get through each long, exhausting, difficult day.