

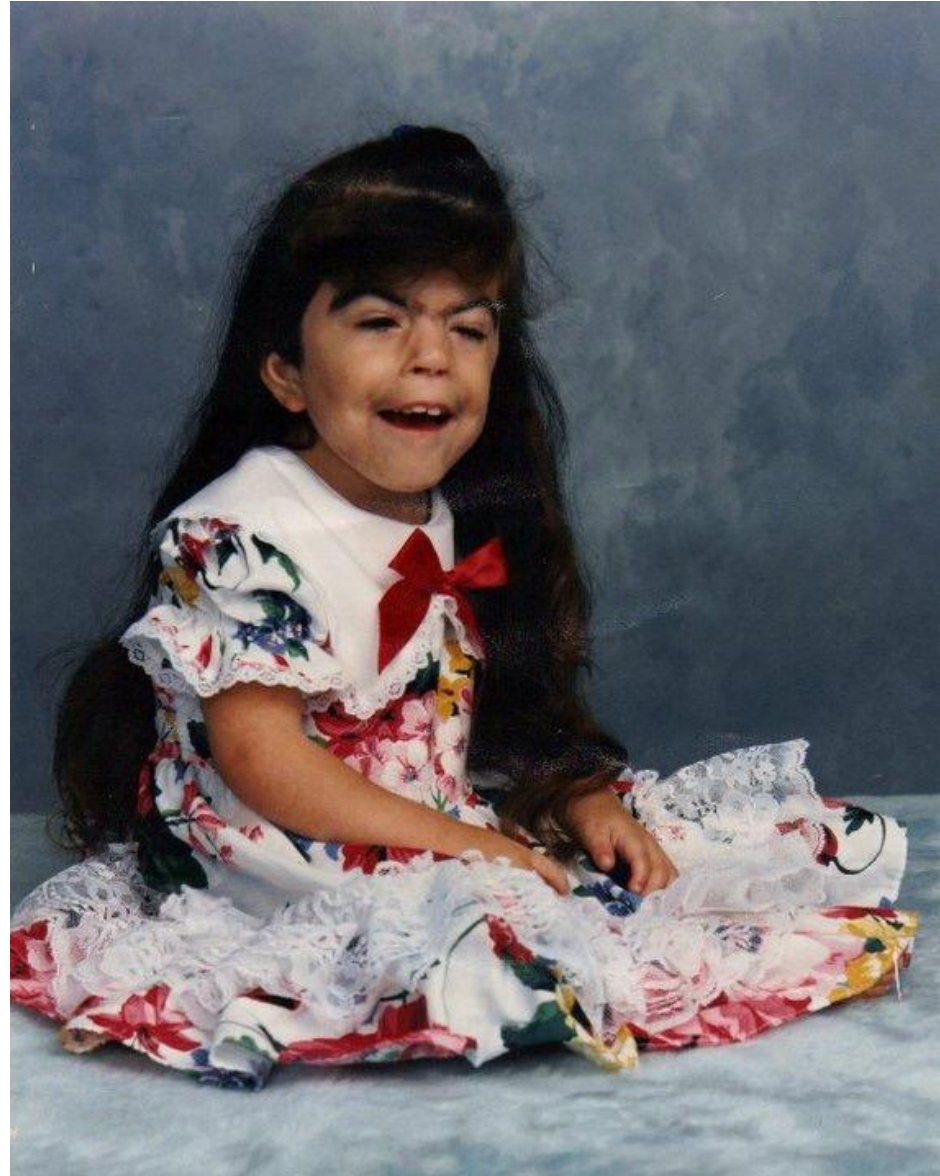
Non-traditional Families Raising Children with Special Needs: Navigating Dynamics in the 21st Century Family

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CdLS Foundation
Cornelia de Lange Syndrome Foundation, Inc.





“The nature of life is change and we don’t need to be afraid of this new face of the American family. We just need to know how to adjust and adapt to the diversity, different households and family units that currently make up contemporary family life.”

~Mary T. Kelly, M.A.



Common Stressors in Combined Families

- ❖ Tension or fighting over each other's children
- ❖ Lack of time for your relationship
- ❖ Lack of patience for the way you each handle parenting
- ❖ Feeling like you need to protect your biological children from your partner
- ❖ Your child/partner's child has serious physical, mental, or behavioral health issues
- ❖ Lack of acceptance
- ❖ Difficulty understanding one another
- ❖ Exes and in-laws



Non-Traditional Families Raising Children with Special Needs

- If the child has difficulties with other adult caregivers, the biological parent may be very protective of the child.
- The biological parent has gained knowledge of the child with CdLS over the years, but a stepparent is beginning at ground zero and may struggle to know how to contribute to parenting.
- The biological parent knows what triggers the child and leads to mood and behavior changes; the stepparent may view this as manipulative misbehavior.

Non-Traditional Families Raising Children with Special Needs

- The biological parent budgets for therapy/treatment/resources; the stepparent may not anticipate those types of financial obligations.
- The biological parent knows where the child started and has watched his/her progress; the stepparent only sees where the child is now and may not fully appreciate his/her accomplishments.
- Biological siblings are used to accommodating the needs of their sibling with CdLS; stepsiblings may have difficulty adjusting to life oriented around the child's needs.

Myths

- Roles are similar to “traditional” families
- Members instantly love one another
- Non-traditional families function like traditional families

Facts

- It can take up to **5 years** for a combined family to know what they are supposed to look like.
- As of 2014, the majority of families are made up of stepfamilies, singles and families living together outside of marriage.
- 1,300 step families are formed each day.
- 35 million parents are step parents. 18 million children live in step families.
- Parenting in a combined family is **hard work**, and you'll have to learn as you go.



What can we do to better navigate family dynamics?



Expectations

- Take a close look at your expectations about what your family is “supposed” to look like
- Are your expectations reasonable at the moment?
- Are your expectations about love realistic?
- Consider reevaluating your expectations for your current reality
- Set smaller goals and focus on individual relationships
- We can expect more as our families evolve





Accept the fact that some people
didn't intend to let you down. Their
best is just less than you expected.

Quotes & Thoughts



~ Thema Davis ~

What screws us
up most in life
is the picture
in our head of
how it is
supposed to be.

The key to happiness is
low expectations.

Lower.

Nope, even lower.

There you go.

Seek Healing



- Wounds from divorce or widowhood
- Hurt, anger, resentment, shame, jealousy
- Grief

Effective Communication

- Talk often
- Don't avoid difficult conversations
- Check-in with each other at least once a week
- Acknowledge accomplishments, even small ones
- Consider having regular family meetings
- Listen more wholeheartedly (see handout)



Identify Roles

- Roles shift in non-traditional families
- Every member of the family has to recognize and live out their role in order for the family unit to function healthily
- Know your role in the life of the child with CdLS

Peaceful Conflict Resolution

- Calm down first
- Consider your perspective & the perspective of others
- Use “I” statements
- Use rephrasing
- Take ownership
- Brainstorm ideas & solutions
- Validate, reaffirm, and thank



Discipline

- Acknowledge that discipline expectations may change
- Have a family conversation about rules and consequences
- Enforce consequences!
- Do not unilaterally change rules
- Strive for unity in parenting and discipline

Remain a United Front

- Children need consistency
 - They feel more stable and confident when routines are in place
- Hearing conflicting messages from each parent can cause a child to feel as if they need to ‘take sides’
 - They may even use it to their advantage by playing one parent off of the other
- Remain a united front when interacting with other family members and ex partners

Traditions & Routines

- Find Activities that unite members of the family
- Create new traditions that are your own
- Involve all members of the family unit in identifying new traditions
- Create regular routines (family meals, weekend activities)
- How can different members of the family be involved in the care of the child with CdLS?



*Find balance in maintaining what is familiar,
but also unique to your family.*

Navigating the Exes and In-Laws

- Identify what you want these relationships to look like
- **Boundaries are essential**
- Learn how to disengage when it becomes toxic or unhealthy
- Acknowledge painful emotions associated with these relationships
- Use discretion when talking in front of the children



Siblings

- Acknowledge differences and strengths
- Focus on the gifts and talents each sibling brings to the family
- Focus on what unifies the siblings
- Promote understanding –obtain the historical narratives
- Consider the **Super Siblings** program through the CdLS Foundation

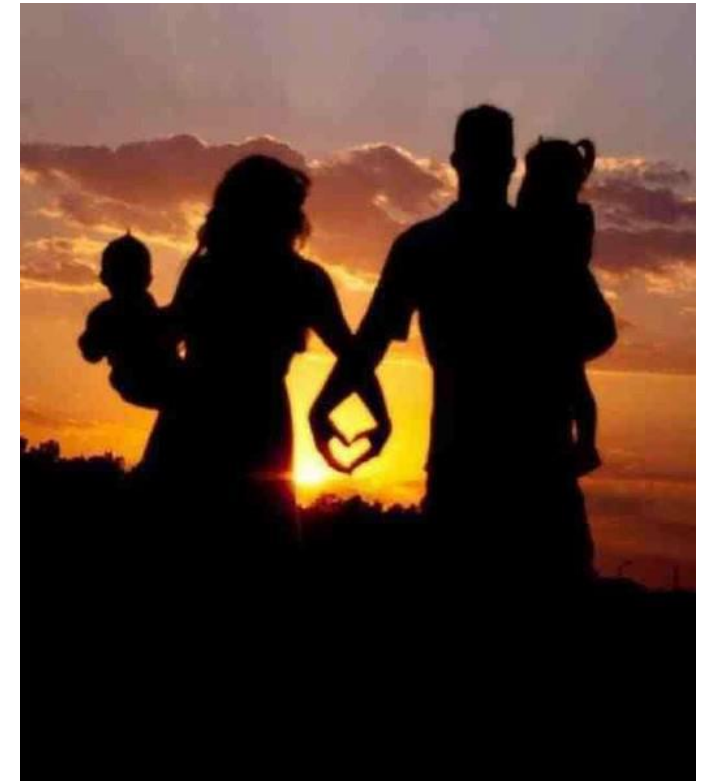
"Sibling relationships - and 80 percent of Americans have at least one - outlast marriages, survive the death of parents, resurface after quarrels that would sink any friendship."

Grandfamilies: Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

- 7.8 million children live in households headed by grandparents or other relatives.
- Recommendations for grandparents:
 - Acknowledge how you feel
 - Acknowledge your grandchild's feelings
 - Self-care
 - Know your rights
 - Encourage communication
 - Contact the CdLS Foundation for support

Seek Help if You Need it

- Therapy is an essential tool for helping non-traditional families who are raising a child with special needs.
 - Individual, marital, and family therapy
- Connect with others in similar situations. ***They get it.***
- Contact the CdLS Foundation for family support.





What can
you do to
embrace
your new
normal?





Resources

<http://www.blendedfamilyfocus.com/>

<http://www.stepfamilies.info/support-groups.php>

<https://www.divorcecare.org/>

<http://www.cdlsusa.org/what-we-do/cdls-grandparents-program.htm>

<https://www.aarp.org/relationships/friends-family/info-08-2011/grandfamilies-guide-getting-started.html>

<http://cdlsusa.org/>

Books:

- *The Smart Stepfamily: Seven Steps to a Healthy Family* (2014), Ron Deal & Gary Chapman
- *The Smart Stepfamily: Keys to Success in the Blended Family* (2015), Ron Deal & David Olsen
- *Blended: Writers on the Stepfamily Experience* (2015), Samantha Waltz





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