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FAMILY FOCUS - THE QUIET STRUGGLE

From heartbreak to hope: moms of kids with special needs.



By: Jennifer Owens, Photo: Veer

Moms who have children with special needs often neglect themselves during their consuming quest to help their kids. Here, they share ways they've discovered to take care of themselves, too.

Kristina Chew teaches with her cell phone on. More than once over the years it's flashed in the middle of a lecture with the number of her son's school, prompting her to pack her things and rush to her car to pick up Charlie, now 10, who was diagnosed with autism at age 2.

Charlie's bad days have weighed heavily on Kristina, a classics professor in Jersey City, NJ. She would often leave her office early to drop off a prescription or rush to school because Charlie was banging his head on the floor in frustration. Still, she considers herself fortunate: "I've been lucky. Because I'm a professor, I have a flexible schedule and have been able to get home in time to pick him up from school. But it can still be very stressful to make it all work."

Between her full-time job and her full-time role as Charlie's mom and advocate, she rarely finds time for herself, though she does try. "I get in moments for myself throughout the day, small and fleeting," says Kristina, who started a blog in 2005 to write about her experiences with her son and about autism in general and to connect with other moms.

The number of working moms raising kids who have special needs is eye-opening. Nearly a quarter of a million children under age 3 have a developmental delay and difficulty moving their arms or legs or both, according to recent U.S. Census figures. More than 400,000 children who are 3 to 5 years old have a developmental delay and are challenged when walking, running or playing. And among those ages 6 to 24, more than eight million have a disability. All told, about 9 percent of employees care for a child with a disability. These parents juggle work and family along with doctor, therapist and specialist appointments—not to mention handling the unexpected, like seizures and medical emergencies, says Nadine Vogel, president of Springboard Consulting, a Mendham, NJ, group that works with companies to support employees who have disabilities or are raising a child with special needs.

"It's stressful to raise a child with a disability," says Jonathan Kaufman, president of DisabilityWorks, a New York City consulting firm.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

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