

Are We This Pro-Life? Parenting Special-Needs Children

Sharon's prenatal ultrasound looked ominous. She knew others with similar ultrasounds who had delivered perfectly normal children, but all indications were that her child had Down Syndrome. He was one of those infants who typically wind up in the trash, either aborted or abandoned. Because of their worldview, however, Sharon and Burt Kettinger chose to keep the child.

B. J. was a month premature, with two heart defects. Vital functions stopped three times in a twenty-four-hour period. He was hospitalized nearly five months. Surrounded by specialists, the parents soon found life very exhausting. Complicating it further were insurance challenges. A doctor belittled Sharon, saying she had acted "very irresponsibly" in bringing one "like him" into the world.

B. J. couldn't walk until age 3. At age 15, he still has trouble with speech. Yet when anyone says "Down Syndrome child," his parents Burt and Sharon respond, "He is first a child, who happens to have Down Syndrome. "Four out of five marriages in this situation, break up under the strain. When a father sees the long-term commitment required, he often abandons the mother at the time she needs help most.

The Kettingers stayed together, but a "special needs child" needs supplemental help. Church friends arranged transportation for Sharon's fifty-eight-mile daily round trip to the hospital. Neighbors helped with laundry, vacuuming, and meals. A nurse watched B. J. so Sharon could attend church.

And the exhaustion in part destroys the families, so parents critically need relief. Parents need time away from their child so they can focus on their relationship. Friends have stayed with B. J., once for twelve days. One church provides a regular respite evening for children, including some 40- or 50-year-olds.

To make it all work Burt stresses the need for volunteer training, spiritual responsibility, and patience, and familiar with C.P.R. Sign language can be helpful, and a hundred details need to be in place. It

demands that the Church be the Church.

Burt says, "God isn't looking for experts, but those who are willing and not afraid to learn." Kids with special needs will respond more slowly, but their emotions are intact. Praise and humor go a long way.

B. J. is a Big Job, but he's also a Big Joy. Burt observes, "B. J. can make almost anyone smile. He has unending empathy for others. . . . In terms of heart and spirit, he outdoes us." When he earned AWANA's Timothy Award, another child exclaimed, "Wow, he's pretty smart for being retarded!"

What does it mean to be pro-life? Just signing petitions and affirming an abstract concept? Or responding to needs when you meet a couple who followed their pro-life convictions by giving birth to a "special needs child" they could have aborted?

We salute the Kettingers and others who have ignored the "pro-choice" rhetoric and made the difficult, courageous choice -- giving birth to a child they knew would have "special needs." And three cheers for all the volunteers who have helped out over the years. Parents like this need a hand -- not just in applause, but in lifting the extra burden.

Burt summarizes, "It's one thing to sing, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,' but another to be the one coming in God's stead."