

# Protective Factors for Marriages with Children of Special Needs with Gottman Integration

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[www.WesleyCounseling.com](http://www.WesleyCounseling.com)

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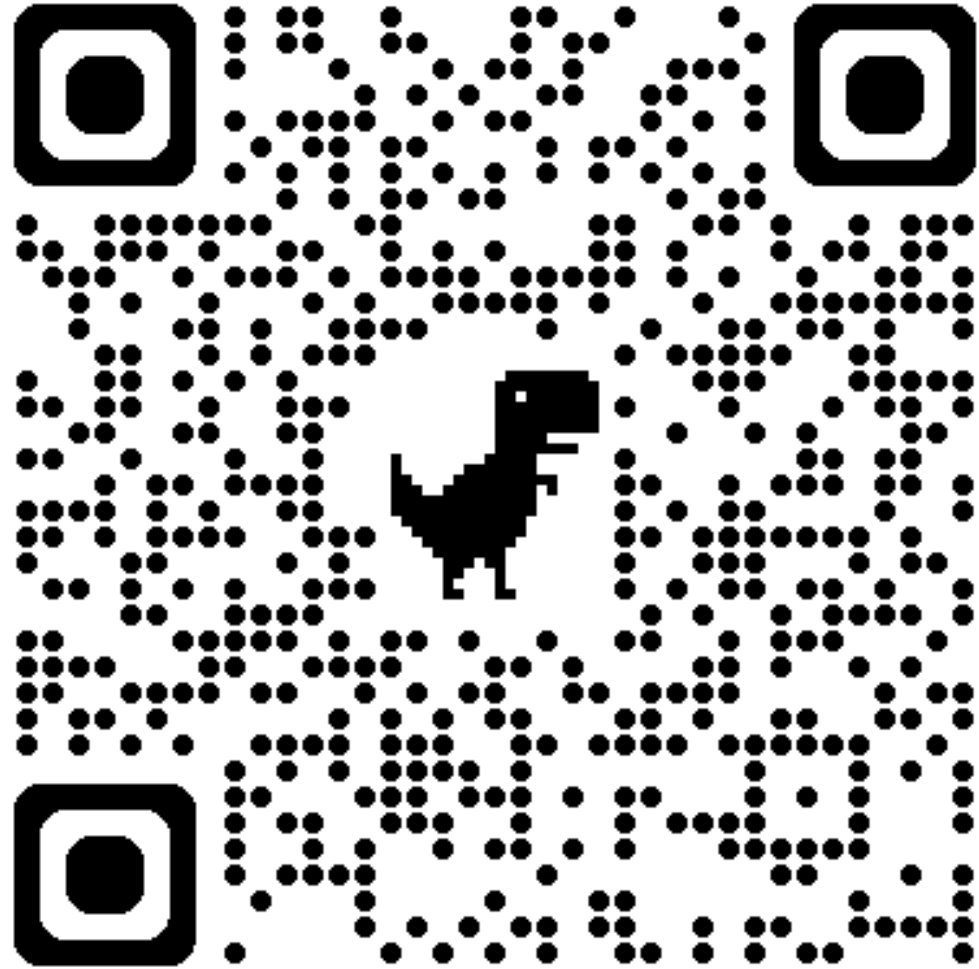
Buddy Cruise®

# About the Presenters

- Dr. Martin Wesley is a counseling professor at National Louis University and a therapist for Wesley Counseling
- Dawn Wesley is a therapist with Wesley Counseling and is the clinical coordinator for National Louis University



Handouts  
and Slides



# Objective for this workshop

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To help couples strengthen their relationship while navigating the unique challenges of raising a child with special needs. The session will combine brief educational elements with experiential activities to enhance understanding and practical application within a shorter time frame.

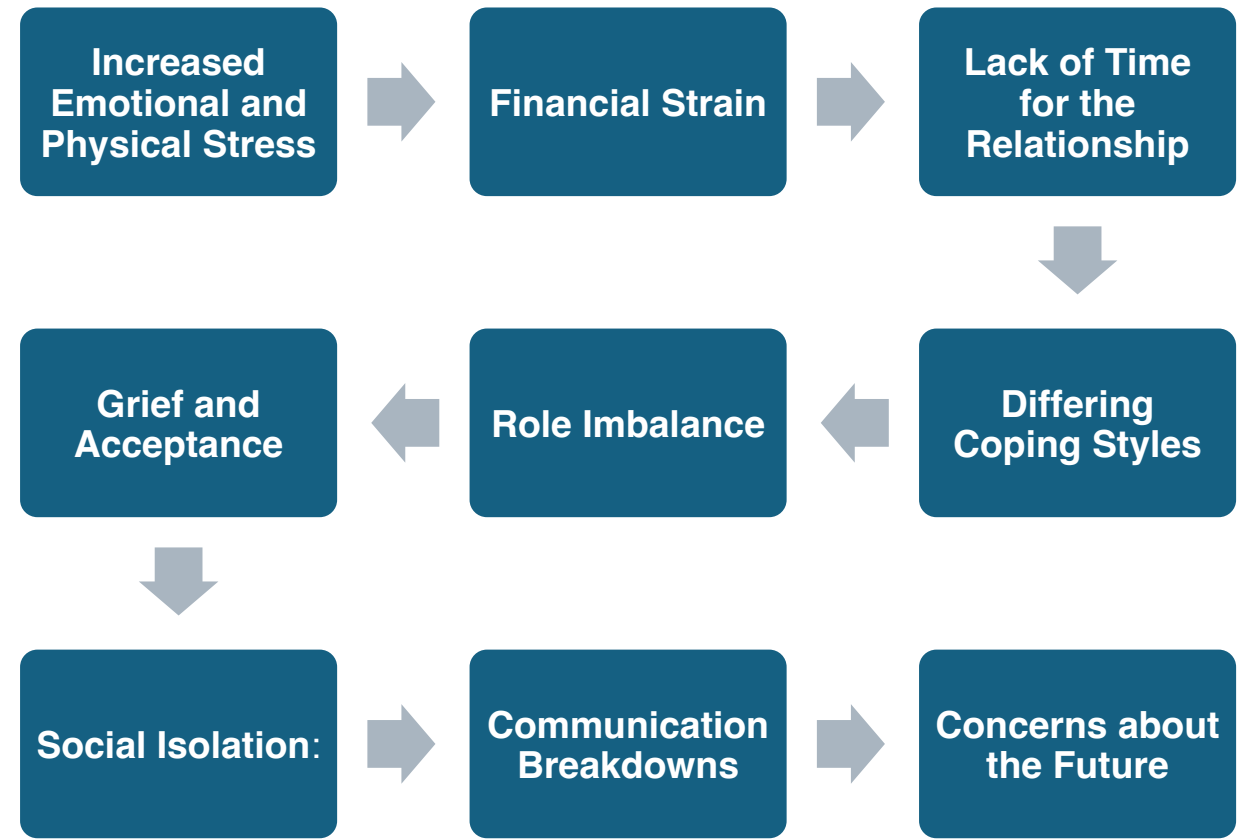


# Life is a Rollercoaster



# Unique Struggles on the Couple / Marriage

Couples raising children with special needs often face unique and complex challenges that can place significant stress on their marriage.



# Divorce Rate among marriages with Children with special needs

- Studies on this topic are mixed.
- If you google search the topic, you will usually hear that there is an 80% higher divorce rate among marriages with special needs child
- Yet, when you dive into the rates, the evidence seems to be contradictory
- Some studies indicate that there is not a significant difference in divorce rates except in small families with a special needs child. More children often does give protective factors for the marriage.

[Namkung EH, Song J, Greenberg JS, Mailick MR, Floyd FJ. The Relative Risk of Divorce in Parents of Children With Developmental Disabilities: Impacts of Lifelong Parenting. Am J Intellect Dev Disabil. 2015 Nov;120\(6\):514-26. doi: 10.1352/1944-7558-120.6.51](#)

# The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

## THE FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE IN RELATIONSHIPS AND HOW TO STOP THEM WITH THEIR ANTIDOTES

### CRITICISM

Verbally attacking personality or character.

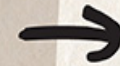


### GENTLE START UP

Talk about your feelings using "I" statements and express a positive need.

### CONTEMPT

Attacking sense of self with an intent to insult or abuse.



### BUILD CULTURE OF APPRECIATION

Remind yourself of your partner's positive qualities and find gratitude for positive actions.

### DEFENSIVENESS

Victimizing yourself to ward off a perceived attack and reverse the blame.



### TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

Accept your partner's perspective and offer an apology for any wrongdoing.

### STONEWALLING

Withdrawing to avoid conflict and convey disapproval, distance, and separation.



### PHYSIOLOGICAL SELF-SOOTHING

Take a break and spend that time doing something soothing and distracting.



# Strong Communication

Open and honest communication between partners is critical. When couples regularly express their emotions, concerns, and needs, they can prevent misunderstandings and foster a sense of connection, helping them navigate the complexities of raising a child with special needs.



# “I” Statements

## How to Structure an “I” Statement:

*An “I” statement typically has three parts:*

1. **“I feel...”** (State your emotion)
2. **“When you...”** (Describe the specific behavior or situation without blame)
3. **“Because...”** (Explain why the behavior affects you)

## Example of an “I” Statement:

- **Instead of saying:** “You never listen to me!”
- **Say:** “I feel frustrated when I’m talking and you’re looking at your phone **because** it seems like you’re not paying attention.”



## “I” Statements Gone Wrong





# Using Active Listening Skills

▪ Handout

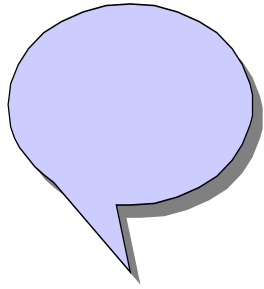
- **Focus on the Speaker**

- Make sure family members practice active listening by giving their full attention to the person speaking, maintaining eye contact, and avoiding distractions like phones or TV.

- **Reflect Back What You Hear**

- Encourage each person to summarize what they've heard before responding to ensure they understood correctly and to show that they are truly listening.

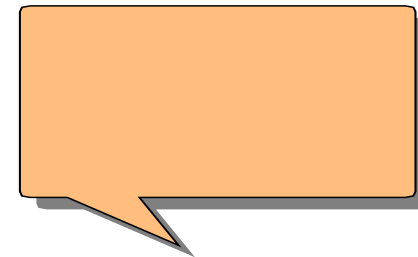




# “It is not about the Nail!”

## Reflection Examples

- Simple Reflection: “You are pretty upset about all this. It seems like you are really struggling”
- Double Sided Reflection: Yes, you have an issue here that is visible to everyone around, but some people just don’t understand your struggle right now and what you want is some understanding”
- Reframe (positive spin) “You are not happy about everyone trying to fix you, but so far you have been able to deal with the condemnation and you keep on going and looking for solutions”
- Amplified Reflection: “That is right, the nail doesn’t contribute to any of your issues”
- Shifting Focus Reflection (side stepping) “You are hurting right now and no one seems to understand you right now. Can you tell me more about what you think is causing these issues for you?”



# Mutual Support and Empathy with shared Goals and Vision

- Offering emotional support and empathy to one another can strengthen the marital bond. Understanding that both partners are under stress and being patient with one another is key to maintaining a supportive relationship.
- Couples who align on long-term goals for their child and family can feel more united in their journey. Having a shared vision and setting realistic goals (e.g., educational milestones, future planning for the child) provides direction and purpose, helping to ease anxiety about the future.

- To provide good emotional support and empathy, one needs to know their partner's inner world – Love Maps
- Turning toward each other instead of turning away – Bids for connection



# Enhancing Love Maps

- A Love Map is simply understanding your partner's inner world. It is crucial to maintain a deep understanding of each other's thoughts, stressors, and joys especially when dealing with the challenges of caregiving.



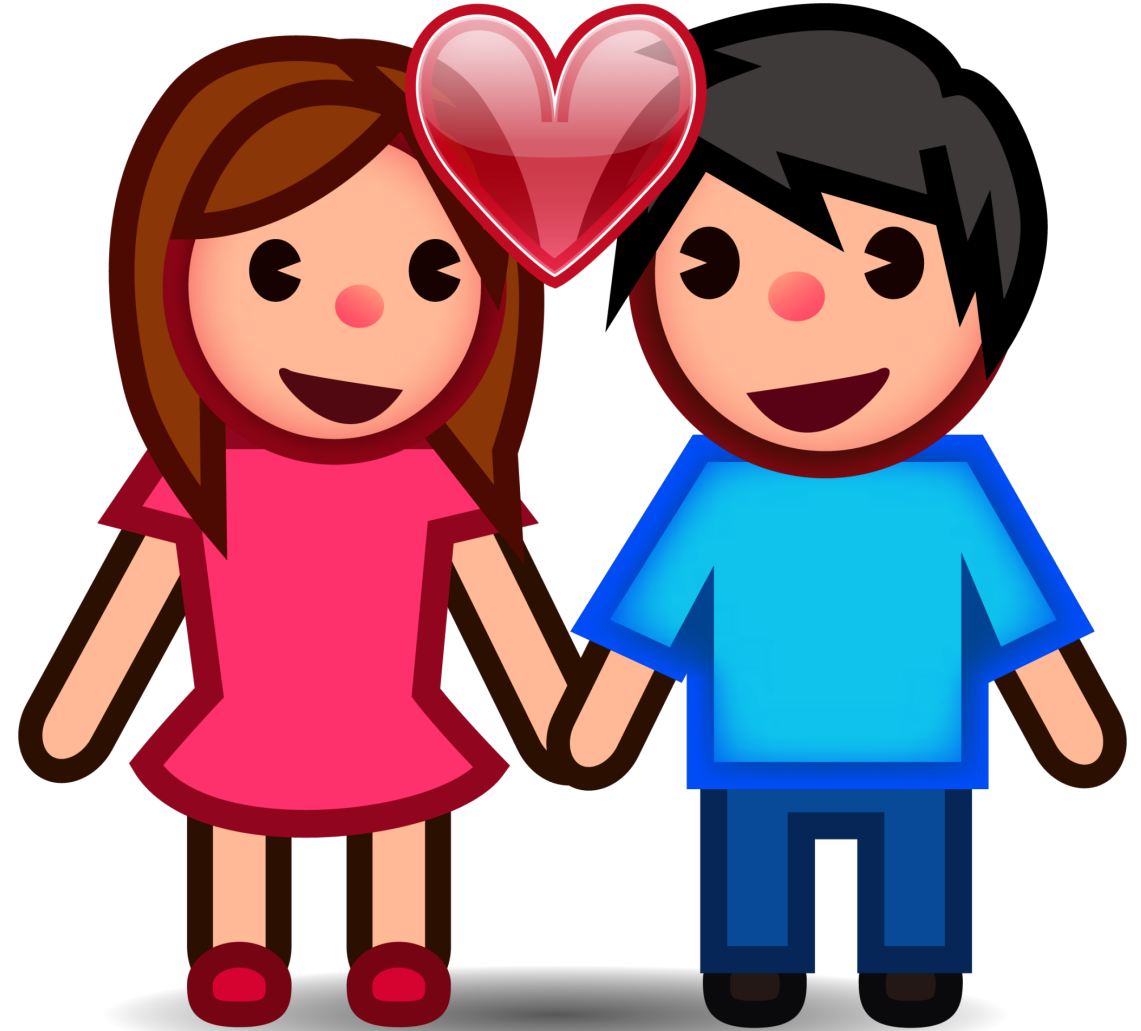
## Love Map Exercise

- Review questions on the following slide (e.g., “What is your partner’s biggest current worry about your child’s care?”)
- Each partner answers the questions and then shares their answers with their spouse.
- **Debrief:** Couples reflect on how this exercise can help them feel more connected.



# Love Map Questions

- What is one thing your partner worries about the most right now, especially regarding your child's care?
- What is something your partner feels proud of when it comes to their role as a parent?
- What is your partner's favorite way to unwind or relax when they have a moment to themselves?
- What is a current goal or dream your partner has for the future (personally or for the family)?
- What is one thing your partner has been finding difficult recently (aside from caregiving)?



# Being Vulnerable

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- Being vulnerable in a relationship means taking a risk. There's a chance of getting hurt, but there's also a chance for real connection, growth and intimacy.





**Turning Away**

# Turning Toward Each Other Instead of Away

## Bids for Connection

- Small moments of connection, such as responding to bids for attention and support, strengthen the relationship over time. This is especially important when caregiving tasks create emotional distance.
- Each couple should reflect on a recent moment when one of them reached out for connection (a “bid”), but it was missed or dismissed. Discuss how they can better turn toward each other in future moments of stress.
- **Debrief:** Discuss how small acts of acknowledgment and attention help build emotional closeness.



A man with short brown hair, wearing a blue and white checkered shirt, is leaning over a table. He is holding a string of colorful beads (orange, green, red, blue, yellow) and looking intently at a young girl with long blonde hair, wearing a pink lace top. The girl is looking up at the man with an open mouth, appearing surprised or excited. The background is a blurred indoor setting, possibly a playroom or classroom, with a blue wall and some toys.

## Shared Responsibility

Equitable division of caregiving tasks can reduce feelings of resentment and burnout. When both partners are involved in decision-making and caregiving, it strengthens the sense of teamwork and mutual support.

A man in a light blue button-down shirt is smiling slightly but looking uncomfortable. A woman with long, wavy brown hair is looking at him with a concerned and slightly angry expression, her mouth open as if speaking. The background is a blurred indoor setting.

ROMCOMS

the  
break-up

# Letting Your Partner Influence You

- **Mutual Influence:** The importance of listening to each other's opinions and making decisions together, especially regarding their child's care, cannot be understated. It's crucial for both partners to feel their perspective is valued.



## Joint Decision-Making Discussion

- Couples should identify at least one ongoing issue related to their child's care (e.g., balancing caregiving tasks, school decisions) and discuss how they can work together to address it. Encourage active listening and compromise.
- **Debrief:** Reflect on how shared decision-making can reduce tension and increase partnership.

# Quality Time Together: Nurturing Fondness and Admiration

## Appreciation Moment

- Despite the demands of caring for a special needs child, setting aside time for each other as a couple is crucial. Regular "date nights," vacations, or even simple moments of connection (e.g., talking, walking together) help maintain intimacy and strengthen the relationship.
- **Fondness and Admiration:** It is important to express appreciation for each other, especially during stressful times. Recognizing each other's efforts helps maintain a positive perspective.
- Think of something each partner appreciates about the other in terms of how they support the family or care for their child. Take turns sharing appreciation with each other.
- **Debrief:** Reflect on how practicing gratitude can strengthen the emotional connection and reduce stress.





# Creating Shared Meaning

- It is important to create rituals, values, and goals as a family because it is essential for couples to feel united in their purpose. Even in challenging times, having shared meaning gives strength.



## Creating a Ritual of Connection

- Brainstorm one new simple couples ritual (e.g., a weekly walk, special meal, or a morning coffee chat together) that you can start incorporating into your daily lives to foster connection and joy.
- **Debrief:** Rituals help build meaning and support emotional connection.

Mommy left for work  
Without giving him a  
Kiss goodbye! ❤️😂



TikTok  
@furious\_stylestv

## Rituals of Connection

# Humor, Positivity and Mindfulness

- Maintaining a sense of humor and focusing on positive aspects of life can provide emotional relief. Couples who find joy in small moments, celebrate progress, and stay optimistic despite difficulties tend to have stronger relationships.
- For some couples, mindfulness or spiritual practice can serve as a strong protective factor, providing comfort, hope, and a sense of purpose in their journey. Regular practices like prayer, meditation, or attending services together can create a source of unity.



Kramer CK, Leitao CB. Laughter as medicine: A systematic review and meta-analysis of interventional studies evaluating the impact of spontaneous laughter on cortisol levels. *PLoS One*. 2023 May 23;18(5):e0286260. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0286260. PMID: 37220157; PMCID: PMC10204943.

# External Support: Community and Counseling

- Couples who seek out external resources, such as respite care, support groups, or therapy, can reduce feelings of isolation and relieve some of the burdens. Support from extended family, friends, or professionals allows couples to recharge and spend more time on their relationship.
- Professional counseling, both individually and as a couple, can provide valuable tools for dealing with the emotional and relational challenges of raising a child with special needs. Therapy offers a space to work through conflicts and build stronger communication patterns.



# Conclusion and Reflection

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