



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: The Special Needs Parent – Part 1

Guest(s): Dr. Joe and Cindi Ferrini

Air Date: September 23, 2026

Dr. James Dobson: Hello, everyone. You're listening to Family Talk, a radio broadcasting ministry of the James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Dr. James Dobson, and thank you for joining us for this program.

Roger Marsh: Well, welcome to Family Talk, the broadcast ministry of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh, and we have a special program for you today. And of course, the emphasis is on special because of a brand new resource that's going to help literally hundreds of thousands, if not millions of families all across the country. Dr. Joe and Cindi Ferrini know what it's like to care for a child with special needs. They know that it's a full-time job. It's an undertaking that really can't be imagined until you're thrust into that life that you never saw coming. It can feel overwhelming. It can feel a little bit isolating at times. And oftentimes, if you are the parent of a child with special or different needs, as we like to say in our household, you don't have a lot of free time. You don't have a lot of energy left at the end of the day and sometimes it can be a financial strain as well.

Well, the Ferrinis have been ministering to families and couples for years, and they have been talking about this very issue of special needs parenting for quite some time. They have a brand-new book out that just came out recently called *The Special Needs Parent*. It's a guide to the life you never expected. We have a link for the book up at drjamesdobson.org. And today, Dr. Joe and Cindi Ferrini joined me to talk about this very important issue. Joe and Cindi Ferrini, welcome to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

Cindi Ferrini: Thank you so much.

Joe Ferrini: Great to be with you.

Cindi Ferrini: We appreciate it.

Roger Marsh: Now, I was teasing you as we were getting our mic set up that Joe, knowing that you finished your dental school, The Ohio State University, I had to get special dispensation from the Dobson family to let you guys on the program. I'm kidding, I'm kidding. Doctor, of course, a tried and true USC Trojan. But he would, trust me, he went home to be with the Lord and if he were still here and in the studio, he'd be elbowing me out of the way and saying, this is the kind of topic that we need to have a conversation about because as you write about in

your books, and you've got a couple of them that we'll talk about throughout the course of our conversation today, this is a journey that parents don't choose and yet you say that there's a joy that you didn't expect. I mean I'm going to start with Cindi first because I want to get mom's perspective but you are the parents of three children and one of those deliveries turned out to be a "special delivery" tell take us through the process of what it was like knowing that God had blessed your family in a way that you really didn't think was a blessing at first.

Cindi Ferrini:

Well, we have three children. Joey is our oldest, and he's the one that has special needs, and he just turned 45. And then we have two daughters, Christina and Kathleen, who came a little bit after him. And they have developed typically and wonderfully and are just wonderful young ladies, which we'll probably get into a little bit later as we talk about this journey. But, you know, when I was pregnant with Joey, Everything went really, really well. My delivery was long, but the delivery was not the problem. I don't think it helped, but I don't think it was the problem because Joey's diagnosis is pachygyria, which is a brain abnormality.

And so he, you know, he came into this world looking perfect. He was just really a beautiful baby. His head was a little large. And so we thought, you know, Joe's head is a little bit larger. My dad's head is a little bit larger. And so we just thought, well, that's what it was. But yet, you know, as time went on, we began to see he was not hitting his milestones. And it began pretty early to be able to see in his eyes that he wasn't tracking with us, and it was hard. You know, it was a hard thing to see because both of us, both Joe and I, we look to our past, and we don't have anything in our past that would directly link to a problem with pregnancy or having a baby with this kind of abnormality. And, you know, two Joe's, you mentioned, Joe is formerly a dentist but still a dentist and is smart, you know, he's smart. So we thought all of our kids would be smart and develop fine and everything would be great. And when Joey wasn't doing anything for a long time, we had great concerns. From a mother's heart, you know, it was not going to change my care or love or devotion to him, but it was a shock to us, to us both.

Roger Marsh:

Joe, how did it resonate with you knowing this is your firstborn child. It's a son, too. I mean, I know for fathers to bring a son into the world, that's a big deal. Did it ever occur to you that something like this might have happened?

Dr. Joe Ferrini:

Not at all, Roger. Just to give you a vision on this one, when we brought Joey home from the hospital, he was wearing a sleeper from the Ohio State University.

Roger Marsh:

Oh I'm sorry to hear that.

Dr. Joe Ferrini:

And I had an autograph Kevin brown's football stuffed in the corner of his crib and I had an autograph Cleveland Indians baseball in the other corner of his crib and so you can imagine I had some pretty high expectations.

Roger Marsh: You did.

Dr. Joe Ferrini: Yeah, about my son where he was going with this thing. And anyways we began this journey just with real high expectations. And as Cindi said, some of these milestones were not being met. And so at that point in time, we began the process ourselves because you have to remember this about 50 years ago. The medical-legal environment was real high at that point, and everyone was afraid to make a diagnosis of anything that might cause some legal ramifications. And so Cindi, what she did one day, she decided to go to the library and pick up this old medical book or old biology book and she gave it to me, and she said do your research and so I began the process of just beginning to line up what Joey's symptoms were at the time and became and got to a point of saying I think I know what he might have here. So we went to the doctor and he sat down with us and I said, you know, I think this is what my son has. And I said, "I think he has cerebral palsy. He's going to have epilepsy. He's going to be mentally challenged." And the doctor looked at us and he says, yeah, you're right. And he just got up and walked out the room.

Roger Marsh: Oh, wow.

Dr. Joe Ferrini: And that was it. And so we, Cindi, we just kind of looked at each other. We just kind of burst into tears because we realized that our life was not going to change forever at this point.

Cindi Ferrini: And we realized that some of our worst thoughts became manifested right at that moment in our minds, that we were going to have a totally different life based on this new diagnosis that we somewhat wondered about. And I'd just like to add, when we share this diagnosis, the diagnosis was mental retardation and I think it's really accurate. And I do see that being used periodically now these days. But I think, you know, we drifted away from that diagnosis for a long time because there were so many negative connotations to the way people used that term. But really, for Joey, I mean, to say that he is mentally retarded is really accurate because he's very slow, he's very behind, and it's mostly mental but also physical and certainly intellectual as well.

I mean, he's probably between a three- and five-year-old on behavior and the ways he understands things, but then also, wonderfully, he can read. Verbally, he's very slow verbally. He kind of needs us to interpret for him most of the time. And yet if you put like a children's book in front of him or even the sports from the newspaper, he can kind of gather things that are happening from it because he can read. So the mental retardation, I just want to clarify that for people who are listening, we don't mean that derogatorily at all but it does suit him for his abilities and disabilities.

Roger Marsh: I really appreciate that explanation and the use of the term because it's too easy for people to weaponize it and make it something that is such a derogatory statement instead of an actual factual statement. We've jumped right into Joey's birth and the original diagnosis. We didn't really get a chance to hear your

love story, Joe and Cindi, because, I mean, we're going to talk in just a moment about how things changed for you guys and changed very dramatically but up until that point, I mean, there was courting, there was dating, there was marriage, there was dental school. Who wants to take a swing at talking about describing what your life was like prior to the gift of Joey coming into your family?

Cindi Ferrini: So each of us, we went to high school together. But I always said, I would never have dated you in high school. And he says, that's okay. I wouldn't have asked you.

Roger Marsh: I love that.

Cindi Ferrini: But the truth is, we had high school sweethearts. For me all through high school, for Joe toward the end of high school, that we each became engaged too. And then the Lord redirected our lives. I became a Christian, and then I called off my engagement. And Joe, through some different things, he had some things happening within his relationship, and then he called off the marriage and then became a Christian. While we did not ever keep in touch over all those years through our college years, the Lord had us on a direct path to meet each other. All of those things I just described happened sort of simultaneously.

Roger Marsh: Wow.

Cindi Ferrini: And we re-met in the summer, August, actually, of 1978. And Joe's motto was, "find a mate in '78." And there I was at church, and I was happy, single. I was doing fine, walking with the Lord. I loved my life. I was a teacher. I taught high school home economics. And so I'll let Joe pick it up from there. Find a mate in '78.

Dr. Joe Ferrini: That's right.

Roger Marsh: Love it.

Dr. Joe Ferrini: Yeah, I graduated from Ohio State in in '78 and actually one of the things I applied for was full-time staff with Campus Crusades medical ministry, agape ministry, and actually I was assigned to go to Iran 1978 and if you know your world history, in 1978 Iran was not quite a vacation destination point.

Roger Marsh: That's for sure.

Dr. Joe Ferrini: And God miraculously just, He closed that door I wasn't sure if it was God completely or the government. But anyways, I just came home. I started my practice. And one of the first Sundays I was home, my friend invited me to a local church. And so I go to it, and there in the front of the church was what I thought was the most beautiful woman I ever saw. And I said, I need to get to know this person. And so I start working our way up towards her. As I get closer, I realize that this was Cindi Kamilic. And I'm thinking, Cindi, she married one of

my friends, and so I said my first question to her was, so where's your husband? And she said to me, "Well, we never got married." And she knew my fiancé, and she said to me, "So where's your wife?" And I said, "Well, we never got married." And so, you know, immediately at that point, you know, fireworks and balloons were popping in my head.

Roger Marsh: Sure!

Dr. Joe Ferrini: And so I'm thinking to myself, this is really a good thing going on happening here. And so as I was walking out the church, I really received, I think, from the Lord the fact that, you know, she's the one. She's the one that I'm married. But Cindi, she had actually before that invited me over to her place to have lunch.

Cindi Ferrini: Yes, I was having friends over for lunch, all single women. And my roommate and I, she and I, we would just invite people over. Our home was an open home. So I said, why don't you just come on over for some brunch? We'll continue chatting. And I was clueless. It was Joe Ferrini from high school, a nice guy. I had nothing going on in my head like he's the one. And so I just proceeded to tell him that I was just happy in the Lord, and we just had nice conversation. And then I think it was just a few weeks later, he invited me to go out to dinner, and the rest is history. We were married a year later.

Dr. Joe Ferrini: A year later, that's right.

Roger Marsh: As you began to navigate married life and the honeymoon and everything, family starts to become a conversation. And then, of course, here comes Joey. And what an interesting turn of events for you guys to go from young newlyweds starting out together. You know, you can hear the Carpenters singing, we've only just begun in the background. And then here comes childhood. And you're thinking, Okay, well, you know, first son. And this is all according to God's plan. But as you were describing what it was like when you first came to terms with the fact that this is Joey's, this is the way he's wired. I mean, this is the way he's put together. Talk about what it was like to basically, I mean, you have a chapter in your new book called "Death of a Vision." Talk about what it's like for parents with special needs kids to have to say, I think we need to see where we are really and realize that some things aren't going to happen. And Joe, you can talk about that if you will.

Dr. Joe Ferrini: Sure, exactly. You know, everybody, when you first get married, you walk down that aisle with an invisible set of blueprints tucked underneath your arm. And upon those blueprints you set off to build your marriage. And for both Cindi and I, we both were very positive people and we were sure that, you know, for better or worse, it's going to be better. You know, for richer or poorer, it's going to be richer. You know, so we're thinking all the very positive things and, you know, all my life, my life revolved around sports. And so I was really looking forward to someday at least being able to play catch with my son. And, you

know, if I had a chance to coach them, boy, that would be great too. But again, those dreams came crashing down around us.

And as far as the marriage is concerned, we realize that this is the very fork in the road point where many people either they decide we're in or we're out. And, you know, a lot of people basically say at that point, hey, I didn't sign up for this one. And so I'm bailing out and I'm just going my own way. And, you know, it was a tough time, I'll be honest with you. I mean, Cindi, thankfully, she jumped in, you know, both feet forward on this one and I came in kicking and dragging my feet because I was just having a hard time realizing that, you know, I'm going to have a son who I'll never be able to play catch with at the minimum or just spend time with him like I thought I might be able to. And, you know, that was difficult to accept.

And I remember this one time I was, Cindi's father, he too was quite the outdoorsman, and he had a fishing pond in the backyard. We went fishing one day and he said to me that, you know, "Someday, Joe, you're going to realize that joy is a blessing." And I had to say, you know, "Well, that may be true, but I'm telling you right now, I don't feel that." And so I was having a difficult time, obviously, at that point, because we were beginning to get into parts of his diagnosis of having epilepsy and Joey had many seizures when he was younger. And whenever Joey would have a fever and he would spike in that fever, he would just roll right into a grand mal seizure. And so it was not unusual for Joey to have one or two grand mal seizures an hour. I think his record for one day was 37 grand mal seizures.

Roger Marsh: Incredible.

Dr. Joe Ferrini: That's in addition to many petite mal seizures as well. And so, I mean, trying to look on the sunny side of things was not easy for me at this point. But again, Cindi was the trooper on this one, and she just plowed ahead, and she began engaging with therapists and doctors. And I can't remember exactly the day it was, but I just, as I looked at my wife as she was going through all these things and realizing, you know, this is difficult for her. I need to step up and just be the husband that she needed me to be. Yeah, and I needed to be that father that Joey needs.

Roger Marsh: Yeah, Cindi, what was it like for you as you kind of put your nose to the grindstone and said, we're going to get through this, and I don't know how, but we're going to figure it out? Did you ever take moments to stop and look up and say, this would be a lot easier if Joe was actually in this paddle with me?

Cindi Ferrini: That's excellent, the way you just put that.

Dr. Joe Ferrini: Yeah, that was good.

Cindi Ferrini: You know, honestly, no, because I feel like a lot of what was happening was in his head. And when he came home, I feel like one of the things he was really

good at was not bringing his dentistry home. Maybe on occasion he'd bring a chart home or something that needed a little bit more work. But most of the time I would say when work was done, he came home and there wasn't a lot yet to do at home. And I was thankful for that. So I don't remember feeling that way. But I can understand that, what he was going through emotionally, and thinking, you know, like, this is just so hard.

And, you know, even in marriage, you know, if we could share our every thought with each other, it would be wonderful, but I don't think we even do that all the time. And I probably had times where I was just frustrated, not because of him, just life, you know, this is hard. And I do remember in those early days, I had two women that I reached out to that were in our church that had older children, sons, actually. One who I could see would be Joey and I would say, wouldn't you say that that person is exactly who Joey is? And we kind of could, like we looked in that book, we could kind of foresee where he was going to wind up, what he would be like, what his limitations and abilities and lack of abilities would be. So I reached out to these two moms who were probably a good 15 or 20 years older than us, I would say. Both of them had the same response, individual from one another, and that was, God is good and everything will turn out okay. And I remember thinking, hmm, it's not happening here every day.

Roger Marsh:

Right.

Cindi Ferrini:

It is hard. And if we fast forward a number of years when we spoke for FamilyLife, one of the things that was wonderful for us was how many people would come to us after one of our talks. And it's a marriage conference, so we didn't overemphasize Joey or our girls or anything. We had just had one short session on being a parent. But so many people would come up and they'd be like, I can't believe we get to be here when you're here to tell us and help us through this journey. So we would give people surveys to fill out for us to then write a book. Not this particular book, but a different book. Nonetheless, it was something that was real and raw. And through everything that we've written, particularly on the special needs journey, we wanted it to be real and raw. And we wanted people to understand that it is hard. It is hard. One of the chapters in this book is called "Every Day is Different Every Day." And it's like Groundhog Day, you know, but the same. It's the same and it's different. You know it's not going to be easy, and yet sometimes things change. So it was one of those things where we just felt like if we're going to write about this, if we're going to speak about this, it's got to be real. We are not going to stand up and talk about, you know everything turns out just great. Well you know day to day we have wonderful moments and we have many times of great memories but I've got some doozies that are not are not the kinds of things that, we share them, but they're not the kinds of things that are like everything's fine.

Dr. Joe Ferrini:

Yeah, you know writing that book was one of the things I did not ever want to do.

Roger Marsh: Yeah.

Dr. Joe Ferrini: Because it was one of those things that required us to you know cut back open those scars that we thought were all closed up and We forgot about it. But as Cindi said, you know, if we were going to be really helpful for people and get some practical knowledge, then we had to be real and raw with them. And so that was, it was not easy, I'll just say that, to write the book, especially the first book, which is *Unexpected*.

Cindi Ferrini: Yeah, *Unexpected Journey*.

Dr. Joe Ferrini: *Unexpected Journey*. But it was one of those things that it had to be done and written the way it was written. And just going back a little bit, those two beautiful ladies from our church, at the same time, I had one of the elders come to our home who knew that we were kind of entering into this arena now. And his concluding comment to me after about an hour's interaction with him was, you know, you can be assured that God made Joey just the way He wanted him made. And I have to tell you, I wasn't too happy with that comment at the time.

Roger Marsh: Right.

Dr. Joe Ferrini: You know, because I was just in that early stages, just not having a hard time with things. But looking back, he was absolutely right. And we're just so thankful that God has brought us to the point where we are in this journey that we can be realistic and straight up with people and just not hold any punches back and just tell people just the way it is. And there are many blessings to having a child with special needs, but it really takes a surrender of your life. The spirit-filled life really is necessary at this point to really begin to enjoy the journey that you're on. And we can tell you honestly, if God came to us right now and said, hey, I'm going to heal Joey for you right now, I think we can both confidently say, that's okay, God. We're going to keep Joey just the way he is. In fact, you can give that blessing to the young parent that's just beginning to hear about this. Give that blessing to them. But for us, we have been blessed and we have learned so much from him. He has taught us so much without him obviously even knowing that he's teaching us things. But it has brought us closer to the Lord as we began to step out in faith and surrender our will to God's will.

Roger Marsh: Well, amen. What a beautiful sentiment. This is a very rich and fulfilling conversation, but unfortunately our time for today's program has come to an end. We've still got more to talk about with Dr. Joe and Cindi Ferrini about *The Special Needs Parent: A Guide to the Life You Never Expected*, which is up at drjamesdobson.org. Joe and Cindi, can you join us again next time as we can continue this conversation?

Dr. Joe Ferrini: We'd love to.

Cindi Ferrini: Thank you so much.

Roger Marsh:

Well, what a picture of surrender that truly is. To say if God offered to change everything tomorrow, they would keep Joey exactly the way he is? Boy, that is really amazing. You've been listening to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk and part one of my conversation with Dr. Joe and Cindi Ferrini about parenting a child with special needs. Their brand-new book is *The Special Needs Parent: A Guide to the Life You Never Expected* and we have a link for this book up at drjamesdobson.org and there is a link to today's broadcast as well. Again, drjamesdobson.org is the website or if it's easier, just type in jdfi.org.

Here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, we are committed to preserving and promoting the institution of the family and the biblical principles upon which it is based. Whether you are raising children, right now you're in that season, or if you're looking to strengthen your marriage, or maybe you're walking a road you never expected to walk, we want to come alongside you regardless of your situation with biblical truth and encouragement. Your tax-deductible donation of any amount right now helps us keep bringing trusted biblical wisdom to parents and families all over the world. And these are families that desperately need this help. You can give a gift online through our secure website at drjamesdobson.org, or if it's easier, jdfi.org. You can also speak with a member of our constituent care team. That number is 877-732-6825. Or if you'd like to send your donation through the U.S. Postal Service, our ministry mailing address is the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, P.O. Box 39000, Colorado Springs, Colorado, the zip code 80949.

Well, I'm Roger Marsh, and on behalf of all of us here at Family Talk and the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, thanks so much for joining us today. Be sure to tune in again next time for part two of my conversation with Dr. Joe and Cindi Ferrini discussing the special needs parent. That's coming up right here on the next edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, the voice you trust for the family you love.

This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.