



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: The Special Needs Parent – Part 2

Guest(s): Dr. Joe and Cindi Ferrini

Air Date: September 24, 2026

Dr. James Dobson: You're listening to Family Talk, the radio broadcasting division of the James Dobson Family Institute. I am that James Dobson, and I'm so pleased that you've joined us today.

Roger Marsh: Well, welcome once again to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, the broadcast ministry of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh and joined for this conversation once again, Dr. Joe and Cindi Ferrini are our guests today here on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. They are the authors of a brand-new book that is going to be a huge help for parents who have a child with special needs or different needs, as we say in our family. The book is called *The Special Needs Parent: A Guide to the Life You Never Expected*. We have a link for the book up at drjamesdobson.org. In addition to other books that the Ferrinis have written including *Unexpected Journey: When Special Needs Change Our Course*, and also the book they wrote for parenting, or for the marriage part of that equation, *Love All-Ways: Embracing Marriage Together on the Special Needs Journey*.

Cindi, talk about this is a difficult journey. There's no question about it. But it does really take a certain measure of teamwork. And I loved your phrase; everyday life changes every day. You know, you kind of have to be flexible. Talk about, though, what that teamwork is like, because I'm sure there were days where you both kind of looked at each other across the coffee table and said, this really is not fair. I mean, why do we have this son who is in this situation? But then we had these daughters who came along afterwards. Was there any apprehension about continuing your family after Joey's diagnosis?

Cindi Ferrini: You know, yes and no. Yes, because there was a time, one time that we went, we visited a church and there were a family sitting in front of us with three special needs sons. They all seemed very much similar, different ages. They weren't triplets or anything. But I remember thinking, wow, like you're not exempt. Just because you had one doesn't mean you're not going to have two or three.

Roger Marsh: Sure.

Cindi Ferrini: But then when I was pregnant with Joey, I had a great pregnancy. I was healthy. I did everything I was supposed to do. I exercised even and everything from my point of view went really well. When I was pregnant, I remember one of my

students saying to me, she said, "Mrs. Ferrini, tell me, if you knew that that baby had something wrong with it, tell me you wouldn't have an abortion."

Roger Marsh:

Wow.

Cindi Ferrini:

And I clearly sensed the wording from the Lord, be careful how you answer, because there is. And then I thought, that's just me thinking this, everything will be fine, it's been a perfect pregnancy, everything will be fine. And so, oh, would I love to find out who that was. I wish I remembered that student. Wouldn't I love to just go back and have a chat with her? And so, you know, at that time, I just remember thinking, everything will be fine. But, you know, as time went on and we began to see the different things that were a challenge with Joey, we realized life was going to be a hard road.

And so when I got pregnant the second time, I just prayed. And if that was what the Lord was going to allow for us, then I suppose we would just, as we accepted Joey, we would accept this second child. And thankfully, Christina was healthy. Christina was a great kid, compliant, everything you could have asked for. I remember one time we had an emergency with Joey. He was having seizures, and Christina was like, what's happening? And we said, get your shoes on, get something to do, put it in a bag, and meet us at the door. And there she was at the door, you know. And on our way to the hospital, we went.

Roger Marsh:

Wow.

Cindi Ferrini:

And so you look at some of those moments along the way of what our girls had to go through to have a brother like that. But I will tell you this. Today, these girls, they love the underdog. They love the person who has challenges. Christina, of whom we just spoke, does foster care, is always open to the possibility of adoption through it, if that's what the Lord would lead. And then Kathleen, and she was the one who was unmercifully picked on by Joey. We thought if either of these girls have nothing to do with him, it will be her. But she loves her brother. Both of the girls stuck up for him through school. Nobody was going to take advantage of Joey or hurt him or his friends or his people in any way. And so, you know, we look back to the challenges, and there's still challenges every day. This morning, Joey was a challenge. He did not want to go to his program that he goes to that is a faith-based, wonderful program. He just gave us a hard time. It was like two hours of, I should be a psychologist is all I can say, because we got him out the door.

Dr. Joe Ferrini:

She did. It was amazing.

Cindi Ferrini:

But the girls have turned into such wonderful women. And we always say we think Joey raised all of us rather than we raised him.

Roger Marsh:

Interesting.

Cindi Ferrini: And one of our daughters at one point recently said, "I think what has helped us to work together as a team, not just us as a couple, but family as a team, is that we didn't always get our way." We had to learn that sometimes you get what you want, and sometimes you have to postpone it. Sometimes things go smoothly, and sometimes you're on the way out the door for something fun, and it doesn't go as planned. Or you take a vacation, and they're not always making memories, as I remember back in the day with Dr. Dobson and things that I had read. Ways to make memories with your family. You know well there were a few memories you know, we share them but they weren't ones we were planning on. So the Lord has been good and I would add one more thing to the fact that yes, we would keep Joey just the same and that is this. Just the other day at church and Joey was singing. We were singing some hymns and you know he's been with us at church every Sunday that we could possibly take him. He knew the words. They're slow enough on the screen that he can read them uh it's heavenly harmony but it's singing.

Roger Marsh: Yes, yes.

Cindi Ferrini: And he loves the Lord, he knows Jesus.

Roger Marsh: It's wonderful. I'm talking with Joe and Cindi Ferrini today here on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. They're the authors of a brand new book that will bless lots of people's lives as they bless mine and we're just meeting for the first time. The book is called *The Special Needs Parent: A Guide to the Life You Never Expected*. We've got a link for the book up at drjamesdobson.org. And you have a chapter in your book that I really appreciated, "Navigating Behaviors and Attitudes with Insight."

My wife Lisa and I got married and, got to meet Ryan, her daughter with different abilities and needs, I began to see the value of not just looking at, I mean, that behavior is real. When you talked about two hours, Ryan's in a work program too, and we know the drill. Absolutely know the drill. Okay, we have to be on the road at eight, which means we're up at 5:30 and see which Ryan wakes up this morning. I totally get that.

Cindi Ferrini: I like that, yeah.

Roger Marsh: And how are we packing for lunch and what are we doing?

Dr. Joe Ferrini: Exactly.

Roger Marsh: But the way she processes life is just different. It's not any better or worse. Talk about how, because that's a very real struggle. Sometimes you're wrestling an alligator with a child who's an adult, who's got a will, who's got, you know, they got some physical strength and they just don't want to go to work program or they don't want to go to church or they don't want to go to come have dinner with you. But at the same time, then you realize, well, okay, what's behind that? And sometimes when you get to the, you know, the why behind the what and

the how, it does kind of open your eyes. Talk about why it's so important for special needs parents, especially to have that different level, if you will, that sixth gear.

Cindi Ferrini: What you just shared was like perfection because it is exactly that. Sometimes you can go four or five days and life is like pretty smooth and then you get 10 in a row and you wonder like, well, who is this person?

Roger Marsh: Right.

Cindi Ferrini: And I will just say, you know, for us, we've kind of, we've been married almost 47 years. Joey's 45. And so we've really learned a dance. I am the one who can kind of get Joey going. I think it's a guy thing. I think Joe and Joey just butt heads a lot of times. Joey is a man. He is strong. He is obstinate sometimes. Sometimes he hasn't really hit us. Not that he hasn't tried, but there are times where he gets so mad that he has had enough of us. So we've had to learn the dance of when do you back off? When do you not go to church because he's misbehaving?

Now, I will say this about Joey, and this is not the case for every child with special needs, but about the age of 25 or 30, so it was a ways down the road, we were able to leave him home for a short time, for us to go walk around the block. We have a phone that he can pick up and push redial, and he can connect to us. We have cameras all over our house. So if we go for a dinner just down the street, we would never go very far. We can see everything he's doing. He can call us on the phone. He'll usually call us to tell us the score of a game. That is his favorite thing. But in terms of dealing with that, you know, it's not only Joey's attitude and behavior, it's ours too. And sometimes we fail. No kidding.

Sometimes, like even this morning, I just said to myself, I'm so frustrated. And there's times where, you know, Joe has said the same. And so I think in whoever's the most frustrated wins, you get out of the picture. The one who's least frustrated at the moment, you get to be the one to take care of Joey and deal with his attitude. There have been a few times where he's just given us such a hard time that I just say he's not going to his program today because I'm not sending him this way.

Dr. Joe Ferrini: Another disability is that he is 6'4".

Roger Marsh: Oh, my.

Dr. Joe Ferrini: And so you just can't put him in a timeout.

Roger Marsh: Yeah. And I'd like to weigh in on this, too, because Ryan, our daughter is 5'9". A lot of times people don't realize that when you have a young adult or an adult, you know, in Joey's case, who has that size and has that strength, but they're looking at life through the lens of maybe someone who's four or five or six years of age.

Dr. Joe Ferrini: That's right.

Roger Marsh: Not fun when you've got someone who's that size with that much strength. But they're having that kind of tantrum. And it can become to the point where you're like, okay, wait a minute. I mean, they're flailing and doing whatever they're doing. And, you know, you don't feel like you're in real danger, per se, but still you realize, hey, this person in our care has the capacity to do something like that and so I have to try to protect them. I like your who's the least agitating one. Sometimes well and for in our family sometimes it's usually Lisa winds up getting the short stick because that's biological mom and I'm you know legal guardian dad papa type of thing, and sometimes though there's a little jealousy going on between you know she'll look at the two of us having a moment and she gets a little jealous and so it's like okay mom you got to take care of that because I can't be the one dealing with that.

But you figure out the rhythm. And I love the dance that you were describing because it is something that we all have to process. And I think that as those who are on the outside looking in, maybe if you're listening to this broadcast right now and you don't have a special needs child, but you're looking for ways to help to minister to. Joe, Cindi, give us a couple of suggestions that you have found to be battle-tested, that where people can really say the right thing as opposed to saying something that seems like it's the right thing but it really comes across as like no if you knew what you were talking about you wouldn't have just said that to me right now or you wouldn't have offered that. Talk about that if you would.

Cindi Ferrini: Sure like, uh you know if you just disciplined your child they wouldn't act like that.

Roger Marsh: Mm boy, yeah.

Cindi Ferrini: Ever heard that one?

Roger Marsh: Yeah. Why are they so out of control? You know I mean, I just said, well I mean come live in our house for a week and we'll show you.

Cindi Ferrini: Yeah well you know...

Dr. Joe Ferrini: Or we'll give him to you for a week.

Roger Marsh: There you go.

Cindi Ferrini: Yeah, here's our son, when you bring them back, you bring them back the way you think he should be.

Roger Marsh: There you go.

Cindi Ferrini: And you let us know how it works for you, because we would love to take that advice. And I will say this. There have been times people have given us good advice, things we could try. But I think for others to be able to be very careful about what you say. You know, just as an example, and this, think outside the box for your own life, whoever's listening. Joey loves his sports teams, and if they lose, he is not happy. So when someone says to me, oh, that's just how my husband is, oh, no, no. Is your husband pounding on the floor and pounding his feet and yelling at the TV in a not very nice way, and then yelling at you? And you have to understand that this is a little child in a big body.

And actually, this is interesting. I still carry this article. It's called "A Child Forever." And it was from a magazine that was from Dr. Dobson. And I kept that because that article was exactly Joey. And what it reminds me of and what it reminded me of is the fact that we can so easily tell people what they need to do and not walk in their shoes. If you're going to tell Joey, "now, Joey, that's enough. Don't yell anymore." He's not going to respond to that. You might as well just change the station on the television because their brain is not wired like ours. And so my suggestion to other people is to take the suggestions that we might give. If I step in and say, Joey, come on over here, don't take over from me. Let me be the mom or let Joe be the dad. And we know how to de-escalate him most of the time.

Roger Marsh: That's good.

Cindi Ferrini: And probably, he doesn't know you, he probably isn't going to respond.

Dr. Joe Ferrini: Well, I would just add the fact that one of the things you want to try to do is to try to get into your child's world and try to be able to relate to them as best you can. And fortunately for me, Joey loves video games. And so one of the ways I can de-escalate sometimes Joey is just say, let's go watch, let's go play some games. And we're still doing PlayStation 2 or Wii games, and that's his world. And if I want to connect with my son, I need to enter into his world. And that's the way I can do it.

Cindi Ferrini: And also, you know, when years ago, probably about 10 years ago, we had our daughter Christina and her husband and at the time three-year-old son. So our three-year-old grandson lived with us when they had moved home from Florida. And, you know, it didn't really hit me as much as it did in this situation how low-functioning Joey was. When our three-year-old went into Joey's room. And took one of his games or toys or, you know, he has like plastic swords or, you know, that kind of stuff.

Roger Marsh: Mm-hmm.

Cindi Ferrini: Joey was not going to have any of this because this is mine. And so I looked at my three-year-old grandson and I said, "Jeremiah, if you want to play with one of Joey's games or stuffed animals or his plastic swords, ask him." And then Joey would say yes because he knew he was going to get it back. Jeremiah would say,

can I play with this and then I'll put it back. It really showed me that even at 6'4", and this little 3-year-old, like just up to his knees, he was so far behind, even this 3-year-old. And so it was a good lesson for me to realize how behind he is. You know, you live with your child, and you see what you see, you're used to it. And so when you see something so different, and it was such a vast difference. It's shocking sometimes. And so to teach other people, whether they're little children or adults, to teach them, if you approach Joey in this way, you'll have a better result than if you approach, you know, maybe just taking his toy or whatever to a child or something different to an adult.

Dr. Joe Ferrini: I think one of the challenges for special needs parents is having some unrealistic expectations as to what your child can do and not do. And the sooner you begin to come to reality with, you know, these are the limitations that your child has, the better off everyone's going to be at that point. And I think that's just really critically important that you begin to become part of a team. And I think that the real value that why our girls are the way they are, and Cindi had played a major role in disciplining our girls, obviously, is that we recognize the value that our children have in raising Joey. And, you know, we use the acronym, Team, T-E-A-M, Together Each Accomplishes More as part of our parenting strategy with our whole family. And our girls can, at this stage of the game, they can take care of Joey very well. And so we're very thankful that. We have now developed this really team approach to raising Joey.

Cindi Ferrini: And if I could just add, too, in this team approach, the one thing we really wanted to make sure is that we did not have our girls taking over our job. That they still had their life, their friends, their activities. We did not hinder them from the best that we could provide for them as well. You know, did we do it perfectly? No. But both of those girls love Joey, have offered to care for Joey someday when we're not here. It would be perfect because when they want to go on vacation, the other family can have him. And there's a lot of things that would work out nicely.

But the team approach, it's not just team as a family. It's team with your doctors, team with your therapists, your teachers, your bus drivers. I think if there was something we did really right amongst things that weren't perfect, is we really had good contacts with people who then treated Joey well, took care of him in our absence at school or in other places, and it took time. And I was thankful I could be, you know, Joe would be at work every day, and that would really be my role. As many of us know, it becomes your life. Many of us can't go back to work because this becomes our duty and our caregiving.

Roger Marsh: Dr. Joe and Cindi Ferrini have been our guests today here on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk as we are winding down our conversation about their new book called *The Special Needs Parent: A Guide to the Life You Never Expected*. I want to commend you guys for a couple of things that I heard, first and foremost, which was, hey, let's get an honest assessment of where our special needs child is. You know, I mean, whether they are, you know, delayed in development or, you know, cognitive, physical, whatever it is, to have that realistic expectation, I

think is so key because I'm sure that's got to be devastating for parents who don't come to terms with that. And secondly, you already have, I call it an exit strategy, you know, which I'm sure a lot of parents, when you're in the thick of it, you don't realize, okay, Joey's 45. And he has a life expectancy. You have a life expectancy. But he has a team of his sisters and their spouses and extended family. And you've already made that preparation that says, as Joey's life continues, if God calls us home, he still is going to be cared for. And that's a very realistic need that special needs parents have to work on, too, isn't it?

Dr. Joe Ferrini: Absolutely.

Cindi Ferrini: It is. And let me share the story, too, because I think it's so touching. Christina was 12 when she asked us, what are you going to do with Joey someday?

Roger Marsh: Wow.

Cindi Ferrini: And I didn't want that burden on her heart. Like, well, hopefully you'll take him. And all along life's way, we've had things that could take place if something should happen to us suddenly. And I said to her, "We do have things in place, but that is not for you to worry about. We'll talk about those things more when you get older." And then she said, "Well, I just want you to know, I would take Joey." And I can assure you at 12, that wouldn't have been my line of thinking about life, you know, where I was as a 12-year-old. And I said, well, "Honey, that is wonderful. We'll keep that all in mind. But you don't know who you're going to marry. Will they want to have Joey? Will they want to have a person in their home that has the kind of special needs that Joey has?" And she said, "Well, why would I marry them if they didn't like Joey?" I thought this girl is beyond her years, you know?

Roger Marsh: Yes, yes.

Cindi Ferrini: Well, she's married a wonderful man who loves Joey, and Kathleen has a wonderful husband who loves Joey. Often, they're holding hands. They're not ashamed to hold Joey's hand, and they get into Joey's world. And the interesting thing was recently, as we are getting older, we're putting certain things in place, talking about end of times for us, what do we want? And it kind of occurred to me, we're talking about us, we have to include Joey, too, in these plans. So we happened to be with our two older grandsons and our daughter, Christina. The grandsons are now 16 and 13. And I said, yeah, we never thought about it, but what if Joey outlives Christina and Kathleen? And the younger of the two boys looked at us and said, "I'll help." He's 13. And I said to him, I said, "Just so you know, there's provisions for Joey. The goal would be to make sure he's well cared for if you can't, or perhaps for whatever reason, don't want to. You just make sure he's well cared for." And I thought to myself, the Lord has been good. And here, the two ladies that we talked about before, you know, the Lord's been good. The Lord's been good.

Dr. Joe Ferrini: They were right.

Cindi Ferrini: They were right, after all.

Roger Marsh: What an inspiring story and what a phenomenal resource to share with people. Joe and Cindi Ferrini, thank you for the time that you've put into these resources. And we've got a link for your website also at drjamesdobson.org. The brand-new book is called *The Special Needs Parent: A Guide to the Life You Never Expected*, written by Dr. Joe and Cindi Ferrini. Joe, Cindi, thank you so much for your heart, for the journey that you've been on and sharing it so openly and honestly with so many different people. And thank you for blessing our constituents, our listeners, our family members here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute too. We really appreciate you too.

Cindi Ferrini: Thank you so much. Thank you for your time and for your share of the story too. We appreciate that.

Dr. Joe Ferrini: Thank you so much.

Roger Marsh: Well, you've been listening to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk and the conclusion of my conversation with Dr. Joe Ferrini and his wife, Cindi, about walking the special needs journey together. Their honesty about planning for Joey's future and the way the Lord has surrounded him with people who love him is a picture of God's faithfulness across all generations. And as a father of a daughter with different needs, I can wholeheartedly agree with their testimony. Again, the brand-new book by Dr. Joe and Cindi Ferrini is called *The Special Needs Parent: A Guide to the Life You Never Expected*. And you'll find a link for that along with the link for today's program when you go to drjamesdobson.org. Or if it's easier, just type in jdifi.org.

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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 right here for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, the voice you trust for the family you love.

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