



New Families - Helping You and Your Family Adjust

Brothers and Sisters

The ripple effect

Having a child with a disability in the family affects every family member, including your other children. Although it can sometimes be difficult for siblings of children with disabilities, there are many strategies you can use to help them through the tough times.

At many stages throughout their lives, you may find your other children have questions about their brother or sister and need help to make sense of what is happening.

Development

Your child with cerebral palsy might achieve milestones at a different pace. For example, they may start walking at five years of age after some surgery and physiotherapy support, compared to your other children who may have walked at 12 months of age. Siblings can find it hard to understand why their brother/sister can't keep up with them or move as quickly.

Most parents agree that acknowledging this as a reality is important but placing a positive slant to this can be helpful. For example, 'they may not move as quickly but they really want to stay close to you'.

Isolation

Your child who has a sibling with a disability may feel very isolated as they may not have friends who are comfortable with their brother/sister. You may also find that your child does not feel they have a right to speak up about their needs or make demands because they are very aware of the amount of energy and time their sibling takes from you. Your understanding of these challenges and your encouragement of communication will help your child to feel listened to and important.

Coping with other people's reactions

Being in public with their sibling who has a disability can be confronting not because of their sibling but because of the public's response to them. Siblings are often painfully aware of people who stare, suddenly stop talking or speak inappropriately to their brother or sister. Some parents find that talking with their children about a strategy to manage this and most families work out something that works for them.

Dealing with challenging behavioural responses in their brother/sister

You might see your other child be on the receiving end of challenging behaviours and they are physically hurt. Siblings can sometimes feel disempowered from telling on their sibling because they have learnt to keep the peace. All parents have to find their own discipline practice but supporting a culture of fairness, love and limits on negative behaviour can help families to find the balance between encouraging the taking of responsibility in each child, but also making adjustments for special needs.

Often a sibling has to wait for their parent's attention as their brother or sister's needs have to have priority. You might find that your child seems more mature than his/her peers so encouraging them to act their age and just have fun can help them to let go of this - even being a little silly yourself can help them to loosen up.



February 2009

Siblings often find that their lives are impacted by their brother or sister's behaviour. For example, caring for their sibling can take up all the time in the evening and can impact on their activities and homework time. Also their sleep can be disturbed by the sibling's behaviour. You may be in a situation where your other child is the next best person to care for your child with a disability because they are the most familiar with the routines but are also the most trustworthy to their sibling. This often places pressure on the sibling to feel like it is hard to take time out. Having another carer or support service that is trusted for your child could help you and your other children to take some time out.

The privilege of caring

Despite some of the challenges, most people who are carers often will say that it is a privilege to be in that special caring relationship with another person. Siblings report that having a brother or sister with a disability gives them a much more empathic and sensitive view of the world which prepares them better for the realities of life.

How you name the disability

One of the challenges in having a child with a disability is the idea that their circumstances are a disability. There was recently a campaign that promoted taking the 'DIS out of DISABILITY'. The whole purpose of this was to dispel the negative way disability can be viewed in our world. Siblings can really benefit from parents helping them to reframe or rename the disability- using fun, creative and respectful words such as happy fee,; special abilitie,; sweet signing, tiger talk and the list can go on and on – really wherever your imagination takes you. As your children get older you might find they need the diagnostic definitions to better help them to understand the nature of their sibling's disability.

Family stories

Lee

Our other children interact with him well. They act like normal brothers and sisters. There was stage in their development where he and the other children were on the same mental level and became closer. I call this stage 'twins', because they interacted really well. It is a trying time though, because the sibling eventually grows out of this stage and ... (moves on) without them.

Jessica

The only negativity for my other children is when other people don't accept her as they do. They get upset. It happened once when they were at camp. A girl made a comment like, 'what's up with her? Why is she like that?' They turned around and said 'She's fine. What's wrong with you?'

How you can help

- Encourage your other children to talk about her feelings. Let them know that it's OK to feel the way they do.
- Discuss the future. Let them know what is likely to happen to their sibling, and what you want from them. Try to be both positive and realistic about the future.
- Encourage questions, and answer them honestly and in a way your children can understand. Likely questions include 'Did I cause it?', 'Will I catch it?' and 'Will it go away?'
- Talk about how other people might react to their brother/sister and how that might make them feel. Help them figure out how to talk about their sibling and respond to other people's reactions. Talk about how sometimes people say hurtful things because they don't understand disability.
- Share information about your family situation with teachers, child care staff and other adults with whom your children might be involved, so they can deal with your child more sensitively.

