



Brothers and Sisters

Meeting the needs of siblings who have a brother or sister with a disability - how parents can help

Having a child with a disability has an impact on everyone in the family, including brothers and sisters (siblings). Many siblings report having both positive and negative experiences in relation to growing up with a brother/sister with a disability. Some siblings adjust well, while others have a more difficult time. As parents, you can have a major impact on how well siblings adjust by being aware of some common concerns and having some practical strategies about ways to help.

Common Concerns of Siblings

Although not all siblings will experience these concerns, these are some of the more common ones that have been raised:

- **Strong feelings -**

A sibling may experience a variety of strong feelings such as anger, jealousy, guilt, anxiety, embarrassment and loneliness for a variety of reasons including:

- Perceiving that parents spend too much time and attention with the child with the disability and not spending enough quality time with them.
- Feeling that they are not able to get involved in as many activities as their friends due to extra demands placed on family time e.g. frequent medical/therapy appointments.
- Believing the child with the disability may be allowed to 'get away with' behaving in ways that the sibling is not i.e. acting out and breaking family rules.
- Not knowing how to deal with negative feelings they have about their brother/sister with a disability.

- **Different sibling relationship -**

A sibling might have difficulty developing as close a relationship with their brother/sister with a disability due to aspects of the disability such as communication difficulties, physical disabilities, and/or challenging behaviour.

- **Pressure to achieve, to be the 'good child' -**

Siblings may feel that they have to be successful in order to compensate for the child with the disability's limitations. Or they may feel they have to be the 'good child' and not want to cause trouble, so as not to worry you as their parents.



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- **Extra responsibilities -**

Sometimes siblings can feel overburdened with extra responsibilities that their friends don't have, such as caregiving for their brother/sister with a disability or additional household chores.

- **Reactions of others -**

Dealing with people's reactions toward their brother/sister with a disability, such as staring and teasing, can be very difficult for siblings, as they may be unsure of how to handle these situations.

- **The Future -**

Siblings often have concerns about themselves and their brother/sister with a disability, as to what will happen when their parents are unable to look after him/her.

What Parents Can Do

The following strategies may help you as parents to deal with concerns that may be raised by your children.

- **Open communication -**

Take the time to listen to your children's feelings about having a brother/sister with a disability. Provide them with reassurance and support that it is alright to have these strong feelings from time to time.

- **Information -**

Provide simple and clear explanations to your children about their brother/sister's disability. The type of information you give them will depend on their age. You may need to have a number of discussions which are more detailed as your children develop.

- **Quality time and valuing the sibling -**

- Spending some regular quality time with siblings individually helps build good family relationships and is important for their self esteem. This may mean organising respite care for your child with a disability, especially for events that are important to your other children.

- Your children may want to be involved in family discussions and decisions about the child with a disability, particularly when it may have an impact on them (e.g. future plans when you as parents are unable to look after the child with a disability). Including siblings by asking for and respecting their opinions, shows them that they are valued family members.

- **Realistic Expectations -**

- Remind yourself that your children are still children and should not take on excessive household chores or caregiving responsibilities for their brother/sister with a disability that they are uncomfortable with or cannot manage. Praise and acknowledge them for any contribution to helping out.

- Try to be fair and consistent when dealing with all of your children's behaviour. Teaching your child with a disability to behave in ways that fit in with the family's rules will help them to be more accepted by your other children. However, explain to your children that expectations can sometimes be different for each child.

- **Skills for coping -**

- Teaching and demonstrating (modelling) ways to express strong feelings appropriately; how to manage negative reactions of others and how best to relate to their brother/sister with a disability will help your children learn skills to positively cope with these situations.

- **Independence and social/support network -**

- Encourage your children to have their own friends, interests and ambitions.

- It can sometimes be helpful for your children to have contact with other siblings who have brothers or sisters with a disability in other families to share their experiences and feel they are not alone.

