

COMMON CONCERNS OF SIBLINGS

Not all siblings will experience negative feelings towards their brother or sister with a disability. Some children adjust well, while others have a more difficult time. Some children may even appear to be coping well but there may be some signs that they are feeling stressed by the situation, for example, they may lose their temper easily, withdraw, have nightmares or show 'clingy' behaviour. There may also be different reactions depending on whether the sibling is younger or older than the child with the disability. While these individual differences do exist, many siblings have similar concerns from time to time. These include feeling:

Anger, jealousy and resentment

A sibling may feel anger, jealousy and resentment at times, for a variety of reasons including:

- not being able to join in as many activities, or go to as many places as their friends because of the extra demands placed on family time, for example, frequent medical and therapy appointments
- feeling that parents give the child with the disability too much extra time and attention
- finding it 'unfair' that the child with the disability can get away with certain behaviours, or is not expected to carry out certain chores and activities.

Guilt

A sibling may feel guilty because:

- they have had negative feelings, such as anger, jealousy and hostility towards their brother or sister with a disability
- they may have better health, stronger abilities and more successes than their disabled sibling.

Embarrassment

The child may be embarrassed about:

- their brother or sister's behaviour or appearance, usually because of the reactions of others, such as staring or teasing
- bringing friends home to play because friends may ask what is wrong with their brother/sister.

Fear

Fear may take many forms. For example, the sibling may believe that they will 'catch' the disability. This may be caused by not having accurate information about the disability.

Loneliness

The sibling may:

- believe that no one understands their feelings or has the same experiences
- feel left out of the family because of extra time that parents have to spend with the disabled child
- feel left out of discussions about their brother or sister because of the amount of time parents spend talking with doctors and other health professionals.

Sadness

This feeling may come about because:

- their brother or sister is unable to do the same things that they can do
- their brother or sister is unable to share in some activities that they enjoy, such as rough and tumble play
- their parents may be grieving or are under stress as they adjust to the disability themselves.

Frustration

Having a brother or sister with a disability can at times be very frustrating for some siblings:

- A sibling may have difficulty building a normal relationship with their disabled brother or sister because of the disability, for example, communication or language difficulties.
- A sibling may not be able to talk to their parents about their brother or sister's disability or how they feel about it.
- A sibling may have difficulty explaining the disability to their friends.

Pressure from parents and others

This feeling may be due to:

- feeling that their parents expect them to be the 'perfect' child, or to be the 'good' child and not cause any trouble
- pressure to achieve in order to make up for the things that a disabled brother or sister's is not able to do, for example, must be good at sports or school work.

Overburdened with responsibilities

Sometimes siblings of children with disabilities become overburdened as they may be expected to:

- do more jobs around the house
- 'grow up' more quickly than their peers- having to take on care-taking or parenting roles for which they aren't emotionally ready.

Worry about the future

Some siblings may:

- worry about what will happen to the child with the disability when the parents can no longer look after him or her
- be concerned about what will happen to themselves later on, especially when they decide to have children.

Disclaimer: This information is for general use and you should talk to a relevant therapist before using it yourself or with a particular child.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

Most siblings cope very well with their childhood experiences and sometimes feel strengthened by them. They seem to do best when parents, and other adults in their lives can accept their brother or sister's disability and clearly value them as an individual. The following suggestions may help parents deal with worries and difficulties that are bound to arise from time to time.

Focus on the sibling

- Let siblings know that they are important family members by spending regular special time with them on an individual basis, for example, playing games, going for a walk, reading a book together, talking to them about their schoolwork, friends.
- If the care of the child with the disability is very demanding, try to arrange some respitecare especially if there are important events for siblings, such as sports days.
- Recognise the sibling's own strengths and things they have achieved.
- Provide the sibling with praise for helping with family matters.

Have realistic expectations and provide support

- Remind yourself occasionally that the sibling who may often help with the care for your child with a disability is also a child.
- Don't demand or expect a child to take on responsibilities for which he or she is unprepared.
- Reassure siblings of their importance in the family by including them in decision making, for example, how they want to help out around the

household or the responsibilities that they feel they can take on with their brother or sister.

- Encourage siblings to become involved in activities that are right for their age and help them to have their own social life.
- Don't demand or expect siblings to always include the child with a disability in their play or activities.
- Avoid making comparisons among siblings.
- Try not to tolerate behaviour in the disabled child that you do not tolerate in your other children (however, let children know that you can only expect what each is capable of, and that this will sometimes be different for each child).

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Listen to your child and encourage open communication

- Try to recognise the rights of the sibling to their thoughts and feelings as they arise – it may even be helpful for the child to write down thoughts and feelings in a diary or a journal.
- If decisions must be made that inconvenience the sibling in favour of the disabled child, discuss them openly before any action takes place.
- Take time to ask siblings how they feel about having a brother or sister with a disability.
- Share some of your feelings with your children to help them feel safe in discussing their own feelings.
- Discuss ways to cope with stressful events such as peer and public reactions, unexpected disruptions to family plans, and extra home responsibilities.

Provide Information

- Provide accurate and clear information to siblings about their brother or sister's disability so they don't develop unnecessary fears or worries - for example, what the disability is, how it occurred, how it affects them, what their needs are, and so on.
- The type of information provided will depend on the child's age and as the child grows he or she may need to know more about the disability and how it will affect them.
- Children's books about kids with disabilities can be a helpful resource to families as they may discuss the disability and sibling feelings.
- As siblings get older discuss what can be expected in the future, for example, in the areas of care, advocacy, accommodation, and the medical needs for their brother or sister.

- Provide information about their own, and other people's risk of having a child with a disability.
- Recognise that the sibling might want to talk with someone outside of the family, such as friends, teachers or health professionals.

Use activities

- Look for family activities that everyone can enjoy for example, swimming and picnics.
- Check out holiday programs the sibling or disabled child can take part in.
- Encourage contact and support from other siblings and families.

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