



Sibling Information for Parents

As a parent of a child with special needs, it can be difficult juggling the needs of all members of your family. You may be dealing with a range of mixed emotions about what is happening. And it is likely that the brothers and sisters of your child with special needs will also have a mix of feelings and experiences. They may need support to manage any challenges they may face.

The benefits of support

If you are able to support siblings they are likely to develop stronger self-esteem, feel more able to deal with experiences, be more compassionate, tolerant of differences and more responsible. They are also likely to develop a stronger relationship with the child with special needs. In fact, family relationships in general are likely to be stronger.

Concerns of siblings

Brothers and sisters of children with special needs (disability or chronic illness) may face a number of challenges. As a result they may:

- Lack understanding about the disability or illness
- Develop various fears and anxieties
- Feel isolated and confused
- Feel resentment if a brother or sister receives more attention or is allowed to behave in ways they're not
- Be embarrassed about their brother or sister's appearance or behaviour
- Experience shame about negative feelings
- Feel they need to achieve, to be the 'good child'
- Feel guilt over their own abilities, successes
- Feel like they have extra responsibilities
- Struggle to manage the reactions of others
- Have concerns about the future

How might these concerns affect my children?

If your children don't have a chance to talk about their concerns, their feelings may turn inward leading to withdrawal, anxiety, or lowered self-esteem. Your children may 'act out' their feelings with aggression and attention seeking. They might develop sleep problems or physical complaints. They may also have social difficulties.

Siblings need:

- Information about the special needs
- To feel listened to and understood
- Opportunities to express a mix of feelings
- To feel special themselves
- To feel competent and valued
- Not too much responsibility
- Strategies to deal with difficult situations
- Contact with siblings in a similar situation
- Social support
- Help with independence

Most children will cope better with stress if they feel listened to, understood and supported by caring adults.

How can I help my children?

Many factors affect how a sibling adjusts. However, children's reactions are most influenced by the responses of people around them, especially you as a parent. In order to support your children try to:

- Find support for yourself- both emotional and practical
- Give children information about the disability/illness
- Listen to your children and acknowledge their feelings
- Set an example by showing it is ok to share difficult feelings
- Watch for behaviour that might indicate stress
- Help them learn skills to deal with difficult situations
- Enable each child to feel special, spend 'one-on-one' time with them.
- Acknowledge their contributions to household activities but avoid giving them too much responsibility
- Encourage children to have contact with siblings in other families. Help them take part in a sibling group or join an internet forum through Siblings Australia
- Read books about sibling concerns – there are a number on our website, including books for children

Checklist re sibling needs

- **Understands bro/sister's special needs**
- Responds appropriately to questions about bro/sis
- **Expresses range of feelings re bro/sis**
- Sometimes chooses to include bro/sis in family/friend activities
- **Does not take on too much responsibility**
- Is not the 'good child' all the time
- **Free from ongoing physical complaints eg stomach aches / headaches**
- Free from sleeping problems
- **Does not show anxiety or seem withdrawn**
- Does not show behavioural problems
- **Spends time with parents alone**
- Has contact with other siblings
- **Involved in activities outside home, has friends**
- Enjoys school; progresses well at school
- **Invites friends over to your house**

If you are able to answer 'yes' to most of the above, it is likely that your child is well supported in their role as a sibling of someone with special needs.