

Siblings of children with disability

Growing up with a brother or sister with disability can present a child with a unique family environment. Often, having a sibling with disability can lead a child to develop positive attributes such as empathy and understanding. Children can also have feelings of embarrassment, guilt and jealousy.

It is important to recognise and acknowledge these feelings in your child as early as possible. This will increase their ability to cope with the ups and downs of having a sibling with disability.



Some issues for siblings

Certain issues occur as part of any sibling relationship but others are more specific to having a sibling with disability. These include:

- Being teased or bullied at school
- Feelings of embarrassment about their sibling
- Resentment because more time is spent with the sibling with disability
- Restrictions on family activities and outings
- Worry about bringing friends home
- Feeling isolated and alone
- Feeling pressure to be good and do the right thing
- Imitating behaviour of the sibling with disability
- Missing out on having a playmate and someone to learn from
- Having to take on extra responsibilities.

Not all children will experience these issues and with support, those that do, can learn how to cope with these feelings and adjust to their situation.

Children also report positive aspects of having a brother or sister with disability, including:

- Pride in their sibling's achievements
- Feelings of family loyalty and closeness
- Being responsive and sensitive to needs of others
- More mature, responsible and independent
- Appreciation of their own good health

- Tolerance and compassion
- Adults often say that their brother or sister with disability brought something special to their lives.

Signs that my child may not be coping

You may see a range of different signs in your child to suggest that they are finding it difficult to cope with their sibling with disability. In younger children this may include:

- Not wanting their brother or sister to be involved in their activities
- Reluctance to ask friends over
- Complaining of illnesses to avoid outings as a family
- Seeking frequent time out from brother or sister
- An increase in tantrums or withdrawing
- Trying too hard to please.

Obviously this will change depending on the age of your child. Other factors such as whether the sibling is older or younger as well as how many other children there are in the family can affect a child's behaviour and coping mechanisms.

What can parents do?

Being a parent of a child with disability can present a range of challenges and it can be difficult to balance the needs of all family members. Being aware of the issues that your children may face is a good place to start. There are also a few simple things you can do to help. These include:

- Talking to them about their brother or sister. This could include providing simple information on the disability and how this might affect their brother or sister as well as the whole family.
- Sharing feelings. Encouraging your children to talk about their feelings about their brother or sister; both good and bad.
- Where possible, presenting children with choices and involving them in decision-making. Discuss family matters with your children, especially if it affects them personally.
- Regularly set aside some special time to spend with each of your children. It is important to every child to have some special time with each parent, if possible. This could be an hour spent in the park or a special shopping trip.
- Trying to find family activities that everyone can enjoy.
- Providing children with an area of their own where they can have their own time and space and keep their possessions safe.
- Arranging opportunities for children to spend time with their friends outside the home, if possible. This will enable them to develop a sense of independence as well as have their own space.
- Finding out if there is a Sibling Group held in your local area. It is important for children to meet others who are in similar situations so that they can talk about common feelings and issues and reach out for help when problems arise.

Resources about siblings

Recommended resources on this topic for children include:

Alden Carter A, 1997, *Big Brother Dustin*, Morton Grove, IL: A Whitman & Co.

A boy with Down syndrome helps his parents and grandparents get ready for the birth of his baby sister and chooses the perfect name for her.

Davies J, 1995, *Children with Autism: A Booklet for Brothers and Sisters*, SI: Mental Health Foundation.

Edwards B, 1999, *My Brother Sammy*, London: Bloomsbury.

A boy describes some of the many feelings that he has about his brother Sammy, who has autism.

Gifaldi D, 2001, *Ben, King of the River*, Morton Grove, IL: A Whitman & Co.

Chad experiences a range of emotions when he goes camping with his parents and his five-year-old brother Ben who has many developmental problems.

Katz I, 1993, *Joey and Sam: A Heart-warming Storybook about Autism, a Family, and a Brother's Love*, Los Angeles: Real Life Storybooks.

Although it is sometimes hard to have a younger brother like Sam who has autism, Joey is proud when Sam's special class performs at a school assembly.

Rheingrover J S, 1996, *Veronica's First Year*, Morton Grove, IL: A Whitman & Co.

Nine-year-old Nathan helps welcome his baby sister, who has Down syndrome, into the family and eagerly anticipates the day when she will be able to ride his tricycle.

Steiger C, 1998, *My Brother has Fragile X*, Chapel Hill, NC: Avanta Media Corp.

An eight-year-old boy describes his twelve-year-old brother's Fragile X syndrome. Includes information for parents and carers.

Stuve-Bodeen S, 1998, *We'll Paint the Octopus Red*, Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House.

Emma and her father discuss what they will do when the new baby arrives, but they adjust their expectations when he is born with Down syndrome.

Thompson M, 1996, *Andy and His Yellow Frisbee*, Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House.

The new girl at school tries to befriend Andy, a boy with autism who spends every recess by himself, spinning a yellow frisbee under the watchful eye of his older sister.

Recommended resources on this topic for parents and carers include:

Burke P, 2004, *Brothers and Sisters of Disabled Children*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers London.

Harris S L, 1994, *Siblings of Children with Autism: A Guide for Families*, Rockville, MD: Woodbine House.

Lobato D J, 1990, *Brothers, Sisters and Special Needs: Information and Activities for Helping Young Siblings of Children with Chronic Illnesses and Developmental Disabilities*, Baltimore, P H Brookes Pub Co.

Strohm K, 2002, *Siblings: Brothers and Sisters of Children with Special Needs*, Kent Town, South Australia, Wakefield Press.

Tozer R, 1996, *Brothers, Sisters and Learning Disability: A Guide for Parents*, Plymouth, England, British Institute of Learning Disabilities.

More information online:

- Siblings Australia Inc: www.siblingsaustralia.org.au
- The Sibling Support Project: www.siblingsupport.org
- Contact a Family—Siblings: www.cafamily.org.uk/media/380059/siblings.pdf

