



Information Bites...

**Bite sized chunks of information for families
that include a member with a disability**

Supporting Siblings of Children with Disabilities

My sibling has a disability - but what about me?

Being the brother or sister of someone with a disability has its own set of challenges. Parents can sometimes be so focused on caring for their child with special needs that they don't give their other children as much of their time and attention. It's important to remember that every child in your family is important and needs to feel special and valued.

What siblings have to say

Here are some comments from adult siblings about the experience of growing up with a brother or sister with a disability:

"I felt guilty because I could do things my sister couldn't."

"I always had to look after my sister. I wanted to go on my own sometimes."

"I wish my parents gave me more one-to-one attention."

"It helped me become a more patient and understanding person."

"I worry about my parents passing away -- I'll be responsible for my sister."

Let siblings express their feelings

Most siblings of children with disabilities experience both good and bad feelings about having a brother or sister with special needs. Guilt, jealousy, resentment, worry, embarrassment, love, joy, protectiveness are all typical emotions.

It is important that the siblings' feelings are heard and understood. Encourage open discussion in the family where both positive and negative feelings can be talked about.

What siblings need to know

Brothers and sisters need information about their sibling's special needs. Don't assume that because they don't ask, they don't want to know. Information helps to reassure them and to answer the questions they get from others. As they get older, siblings need to know about their sibling's future and what role they will play in it.

Give children information appropriate to their age, keeping explanations as clear as possible and make sure that young children understand they did not cause their sibling's disability nor can they 'catch' it. Help them work out how to explain the disability to their friends.

Consider inviting siblings to meetings regarding your child's care, school or medical appointments. Siblings can provide valuable perspective and by including them sends the message that they are important members of the child's team.

Siblings are kids too

While it's important to keep siblings in the loop regarding their sibling's needs and care, remember that they are children and need plenty of time to play and live their own lives. Some siblings say they feel burdened with having to care for or play with their sibling with a disability.

Allow siblings to be children. Don't expect them to assume adult roles, particularly in caring for their brother or sister with special needs. And don't give young children the impression that they will be responsible for the sibling with special needs one day.

Spend time with siblings

It's common for siblings to feel some jealousy or resentment because of the time and attention the sibling with the disability gets. Some say they feel like their parents make a big deal of their sibling's achievements, and very little of their own. Here are some suggestions for making each child in your family feel special.

- going to church, sports, outings, community activities
- spend time with each child individually, even if it means getting respite care or help with looking after your child with a disability sometimes
- be sure to recognize the strengths and accomplishments of each child - when you talk to friends, talk about each child's achievements
- encourage your children to be proud of their sibling's achievements as well as their own
- allow siblings to be involved with your child with a disability - for example, let them help to choose clothes for their brother or sister
- encourage each of your children to participate in their own special interests and activities and support them by going to events or asking questions

(Living with a Brother or Sister with Special Needs: A Book for Siblings. Donald J. Meyer and P. Vadasy, 1996, Seattle: University of Washington Press.)

Sibling Resources

For more information about sibling resources: <http://www.siblingsupport.org/>



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