



## Support for Siblings of a Special Needs Child

Families tell us that managing family life with a special needs child is tough. Parents say that caring for the ill or disabled child takes so much time and energy that they can't always pay as much attention to their other children as they might like. This can make siblings feel neglected even when mom and dad are doing their best to pay equal attention to everyone.

We hope these tips will help you better understand what happens when a family member requires special care and attention, and give you ideas to help make things easier for everyone in your family.

### Understanding your healthy or typically developing children (By age\*):

#### Preschoolers (before age 5)

Young children can't understand what is actually wrong with their sibling and

- Can't express their feelings with words and may act them out
- Notice *some* differences between what their sibling can and can't do and may try to teach their sibling how to do things

#### School Age Children (6-12)

Children of this age can understand that their siblings have special needs, however they may

- Worry that the disability or illness is catching
- Feel guilty about having negative thoughts and feelings about their sibling
- Become either over-helpful and well-behaved or badly behaved to get attention
- Have confusing, mixed feelings about their sibling (love, resentment, anger, loyalty)

## Teens (13-17)

Older children can understand explanations of the disability or illness and may

- Ask detailed questions of parents
- Be embarrassed in front of friends and dates
- Be torn between their freedom and wanting a special relationship with their sibling
- Resent the amount of responsibility they have for their sibling

## At any age...\*

### Your healthy or typically developing children may feel:

- **Embarrassment** over the way siblings act or look
- **Anger or jealousy** over the amount of attention their siblings get
- **Pressure** to “make up” for a sibling’s disability by being perfect at home, in school or at a sport or music, etc.
- **Guilt** about being healthy

### But they may also develop:

- **Maturity** that is greater than their age
- **Pro-social behaviors** (helping others, kindness, etc.)
- **Understanding** of challenges of others and the advantages most people take for granted
- **Tolerance** for differences
- **Pride** about the disabled sibling’s accomplishments
- **Loyalty** and **caring** towards their sibling

## Parenting Tips

- Try to give each child a regularly scheduled special time with each parent alone and together. If you are a single parent, try to give each child regularly scheduled special time with another adult family member or friend who the child is close to.
- When planning family activities, remember that not everything has to be done with the whole family. If an activity is too much for the special child, arrange for his care while the family is out.
- Encourage each child to have their own interests and give each one a special space for personal things.
- Recognize each child's unique strengths and accomplishments and make sure they develop friendships outside the family.
- Have the special needs child do as much as she can for herself and any other chores she is able to do.
- Keep the same rules for the special needs child as the others whenever possible.
- Listen to brothers' and sisters' worries about their disabled sibling.
- Establish and keep daily routines as much as possible.
- And, of course, let all your children know they are loved and valued.

## Things to watch for

These behaviors may mean that your typically developing child could use some more help:

- Unusually aggressive language, fighting words
- Refusing to attend school or fear of school
- Depression
- Sleep or eating changes
- Lack of interest in things they usually enjoy
- Increased Anxiety or worries
- Loss of self-esteem or confidence
- Lowered achievement
- Frequent complaints of not feeling well

If you see any of these signs, please discuss them with your child's doctor.

## MassGeneral Hospital *for* Children Sibshops

MassGeneral Hospital *for* Children runs a support group for siblings of special needs children called Sibshops. Sibshops provide opportunities for siblings to get peer support and education in a lively and fun setting. We mix interesting information and discussion with games as well as special guests.

### Additional Resources

- <http://www.siblingsupport.org/sibshops>
- <http://www.kindering.org/>

For more information, or for help connecting to mental health guidance for your typically developing child, call the Social Service Department: 617-643-2166.

*\*Source: "Sibling of your Special Needs Child...", Kaiser Permanente, Department of Genetics, <http://www.permanente.net/homepage/kaiser/pdf/44897.pdf>. Their sources: The Siblings Support Project of the Arc of the United States; ARCH (National Resource Center for Respite and Crisis Care Services; Derenda Timmons Schubert, Ph.D. (2004); Meyer and Vadasy (1994); Steinberg (2004)*