



- Supporting Siblings -



Information taken from:

Supporting Siblings Report



Siblings Australia website

Sibworks

Facilitators Manual

Clip



We see Erika feel sad and rejected when Thomas pushes her away. We see her try to make sense of it all when she looks at us and says, “Thomas not talk, Mummy.”

“When she was about 2, she started to pull on me (just as Noah does to communicate with us). At first I resisted going with her. She is normal. She does not have to communicate this way. It represented too many issues for me, but then I realised this was her normal. I followed her around for 2 weeks. Then slowly she realised she didn’t have to communicate this way. But she needed to know I would respond to her in the same way as I did to Noah, that she was just as important.”

I asked Youssef, my 3 year old, if he wondered why Sarah was different. He replied “what Sarah different?” So I tried to explain the differences to him, knowing full well he wouldn’t understand.

I explained to him about the facial features. He told me, “No! Sarah is like me !”

Sibling relationships last a lifetime and have a significant effect on our development ...

They provide us with opportunities to -

- Openly express a range of emotions, including love, loyalty, anger and rivalry
- Gain companionship and support and learn to give and take
 - Practise conflict resolution
- Learn social skills and confidence which can be taken out into the wider world
 - Develop our own identity

When one sibling *has* special needs this relationship can be significantly changed ...



Siblings of a Child with a Disability

- May feel a sense of responsibility beyond that felt by their peers
- May lack the normal 'give and take' in a relationship – “you don't always get what you give”
- May have feelings of anxiety for themselves, their sibling and other family members
- May experience loss and grief as they grow older and become more aware of the impact of their siblings disability

Emotional Responses of Siblings

Fear & Anxiety
Anger, Resentment & Justice
Jealousy
Embarrassment, Guilt & Shame
Loss & Sadness
Loneliness & Isolation
Emotional Intelligence



Fear & Anxiety

- Did I make this happen ?
 - Will my friends think I'm disabled too ?
- How can I be myself and be responsible in the future ?
- Fear of physical strength – may fear for their safety

Anger, Resentment & Justice

- Unequal time or attention
- Disruption of family routine (resentment)
- Child with special needs treated differently (fair & just)
- Anger at child with special needs, parents, and also at people outside the family whose reactions cause a sibling to be uncomfortable.

Jealousy

“My sister gets all the best presents, I am always helping her but no-one ever thanks me.”

- Small children jealous of time/attention
- Independent teenagers jealous of peers whose lives are less complex – more freedom
- Open communication is important as feelings of jealousy often lead to feelings of guilt and shame

Embarrassment, Guilt & Shame

- Embarrassment over appearance or behaviour
- Guilt in conflicting need situations (protect sibling vs peer acceptance)
- Guilt about own good health and opportunities in life
 - Listening to children and helping them understand they are not bad for having angry thoughts, accepting them and supporting them will help to offset feelings of guilt and shame

Loss & Sadness

- Closely tied to child's stage of development
- Loss of family life prior to sibling being born (calm, security, time & attention)
- Loss of predictability and perceived safety (lots of upheaval due to hospital visits etc)
- Siblings may cope by asking lots of questions and seeking assurance
- Loss of service support when a sibling dies or move into care/group home

Loneliness & Isolation

- Young child may feel anxious, abandoned, that no one understands
- Teenager may feel empathy for their parents and not want to trouble them with their own stuff so become isolated
- May feel alienated from their peers as peers don't understand

Emotional Intelligence

“Whenever Mummy and Daddy argue, we go downstairs and play real quiet. Then she can’t go bother them and get ‘em more mad.”

- Being helpful when Mum is upset
- Putting aside their own needs if they sense it will be difficult for Mum and Dad to meet them
- Pressure to be perfect to make up for limitations of the child with special needs

What signs might indicate stress ?

- Withdrawal
 - “Acting Up” behaviour
- Being the ‘good child’, a people pleaser
 - Perfectionism, overachieving
 - Anxiety, depression, low self-worth
- Stomach aches, headaches, sleep problems
- School, social difficulties “no-one understands”

What do siblings need ?

Information

Inclusion

Opportunities to express feelings

Skills to deal with difficult situations

A sense of being special too

Feeling valued

Independence

Contact with other siblings

A wide social network



Information

- Knowledge about disability
- How will this affect my brother or sister ?
 - How will this affect me ?
 - How will this affect my family ?
- How can I explain my brother or sisters disability to others ?

Inclusion

- Involve siblings in discussions about family routines and roles
- Involve siblings in therapy – “create a game” so everyone feels special
- Not all children will want to be involved but they need to be allowed the opportunity

Opportunities to express feelings

- Being open about feelings (good & bad) helps children to cope
 - It is okay to have a mix of feelings
 - It is okay to feel angry, sad, fearful, embarrassed. This does not mean they do not love and care for their sibling with a disability
- Teach siblings to cope with feelings in ways that do not harm themselves or others

Skills to deal with difficult situations

- Children cope better if they have skills to deal with situations (eg. teasing)
- Sibling groups can help children feel stronger and more able to influence what happens around them

A sense of being special too

- All children in the family need to be helped to feel important and special
 - Ask family/friends to make the sibling feel extra special during family get togethers, etc
- Try to allocate time for 1:1 with each child in your family

Feeling valued

- Assisting in the care of a child with special needs and being appreciated can add to a sibling's sense of competence and self-worth
- Is there a skill that they have that they could teach their sibling ?
 - Remember to keep this in balance !

Independence

- Siblings need their own space and privacy
- Siblings need to develop some independence through spending time with their peers doing a range of activities (team sport, craft activity, etc)
- Siblings have the right to their own life ...

Contact with other siblings

- Siblings can share experience with other siblings and learn they are not alone
- Bring all your family along to Kurrambee events – discos, Walk for Autism, Open Days, etc ...

[Chat Site](#)

A wide social network

- A wide social network of adults and children gives siblings a sense of value
- Leads to a wide support network when it is needed !

Strategies to Think About ...

- Give honest and simple explanations regarding the disability or illness,
- Reassure young siblings that they did not cause the disability, nor can they catch it,
- Explain the reasons for differential treatment and for the different rules and expectations that may be applied to the child with a disability,

Strategies to Think About ...

- Encourage children and adolescents to participate in interests outside of the family. Praise them for their efforts,
- Acknowledge siblings for their efforts in being a 'good' brother or sister. This is an important way of supporting the development of their identity and self-esteem,
- Discuss future plans for the care of the child with the disability,

Strategies to Think About ...

- Provide siblings with an opportunity to explore and express their feelings, both positive and negative,
- Reassure siblings that their needs, experiences, feelings and concerns are valid,
- Give siblings simple strategies to help them cope with difficult situations (eg. teasing in the playground)

Finding the Positives

Many siblings are able to take very positive things from their experiences.

They can gain inspiration, competence and independence leading to improved self esteem, and a range of human qualities that add not only to their own life but also those around them.

They often contribute to the community in very useful ways.

In terms of resilience, when children go through difficult experiences, are given support, and learn skills to deal with their difficulties, they are able to become stronger adults.

Some positive effects that can manifest in siblings, mentioned by families and practitioners, include:

- being more tolerant of differences
 - more compassionate
 - more reliable and responsible
 - high achieving
- siblings often go into helping professions
- pride in brother or sister's achievements
 - more insight, maturity

Support for siblings allows them to feel less isolated and it helps them build resilience. As a result, not only are they more likely to develop to their full potential, but also their relationship with a brother or sister with special needs is likely to be stronger.