

This handout provides information to help you better care for siblings of children with special needs

Why Worry About Brothers and Sisters of Children with Special Needs?

Parents and care providers can sometimes become so focused on helping children with disabilities achieve their goals that siblings' needs are overlooked. While there are usually a host of community support programs for their parents, brothers and sisters of children with special needs often don't have services that help them understand and cope with their situation (even though they may be the ones who end up having the longest lasting relationship with the sibling who has special needs). Siblings need support and care, too.

What Kind of Special Problems and Challenges do Siblings Face ?

Brothers and sisters of children with special needs may feel:

- Rejected because their parents spend more time and attention on their disabled sibling
- Jealous of all the attention their brother/sister receives
- Angry at their parents and sibling
- Resentful of their brother/sister
- Isolated because they can't go places or spend time with friends due to the family demands of their brother/sister or because they feel "different"
- Scared that their sibling will die or their parents may divorce
- Helpless to do anything to change their situation
- Guilty because they feel that they somehow caused their sibling's illness/disability or because they don't feel allowed to be jealous or angry at their brother/sister
- Depressed because of family and personal stress combined with not enough attention

Siblings may also have to deal with public responses to their brother or sister that can be rude or unkind.

Younger brothers and sisters may become more needy and clingy while older children may become more distant and argumentative

Are there any benefits to being a sibling of a child with special needs?

YES! Research has shown that brothers and sisters of children with disabilities are usually more mature and independent than their peers. Siblings often use the experience of growing up with a disabled brother or sister to become more compassionate, caring, empathic and appreciative of the little things in life like good health and family closeness

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How Can Parents and Providers Help Special Needs Siblings?

1. ASK ABOUT THEM

Ask parents about how the other children in the house are doing. If a sibling accompanies their family to an office visit, ask them, too. If you don't ask, you'll never know.

2. EDUCATE THE SIBLING

- Provide brothers and sisters with age-appropriate information
- Let them know what the disability or disease is and what to expect
- Outline the strengths and weaknesses of the child with special needs
- Invite siblings to office visits and therapy sessions but don't drag them there against their will if you can help it
- When appropriate, assure them that they did not cause their siblings condition

3. PROVIDE BALANCED TIME

While the child with special needs may require more time, try to spend special time alone with the sibling(s) and let them know how much you care about them

4. LET KIDS BE KIDS

Don't make siblings have to be little mothers and fathers.

Try to avoid giving the brother or sister too many caregiver tasks/responsibilities for their sibling's health and welfare.

5. FIND AND USE SUPPORT GROUPS AND SPECIAL RESOURCES

Use the references and resources below to help the sibling understand and enjoy their place in life.

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REFERENCES and RESOURCES

- <http://www.seattlechildrens.org/sibsupp/ussiblingprogramslist.htm#northcarolina> Listing of directors of programs in North Carolina for siblings of children with special needs
- <http://www.seattlechildrens.org/sibsupp/> A national program dedicated to the interests of brothers and sisters of people with special health and developmental needs
- <http://www.seattlechildrens.org/sibsupp/sibkids.htm> Listserv for Young Brothers and Sisters of Kids with Special Needs
- <http://www.nichey.org/pubs/newsdig/nd11.htm> "Children with Disabilities: Understanding Sibling Issues"
- <http://www. chtop.com/archfs23.htm> "Siblings of Children with Special Health and Developmental Needs- Programs, Services and Considerations"