

While it can be difficult to watch, expect teasing, name-calling, arguing, and other forms of typical sibling conflict.

- Treat the child who does not have a disability appropriately for his/her age.
- Teach siblings to interact.
- Let siblings settle their own differences.

**Find Support for Siblings:** Brothers and sisters like to know they are not alone with their unique joys and concerns. Meet other families who have a child with a similar condition, perhaps through a support organization or a sibling related organization. Be a catalyst to get support and activities started in the sibling's community and school.

**Confront Fears:** Siblings fear that they may develop the disability. Children (and sometimes even adults) think that disabilities (such as mental retardation) are contagious. Look for signs that your child is concerned or frightened (their words, their physical actions, interactions with their sibling, sleep patterns, etc.). Ask your child if they are scared and specifically what frightens them. Provide accurate and understandable information regarding the sibling's disability.

**Diminish Isolation:** For siblings, isolation can occur when typical activities are neglected because of ramifications of the child's disability. Isolation can also come from feeling like no one else understands or has the same situation. Make sure the sibling's friends are welcome in the home. Offer to explain to a sibling's friends about a brother's or sister's disability or help the sibling with the words to do so themselves. Make the household setting as comfortable as possible when the sibling does have friends over and continue family outings and social activities. Provide other adults to accompany the sibling to activities. Provide the child with stories and articles written by other siblings.

**Plan for the Future:** Siblings who do not have a disability may be concerned about the future of their brother or sister with a disability after the parents die, especially if this brother or sister still lives at home. Talk over plans for the care of the child with a disability when they are old enough. Siblings have a right to decide whether or not they will be involved in the lives of their sibling who have disabilities.

## Books

**Brothers and Sisters: A Special Part of Exceptional Families.** Thomas Powell, Peggy Gallagher, and Cheryl Rhodes 2006, Baltimore: Paul H. Brooks.

**Views from Our Shoes: Growing Up with a Brother or Sister with Special Needs.** Donald J. Meyer and Cary Pillo , 1997, Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House.

**Siblings Without Rivalry.** Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish. 2004, New York: Avon Books.

**How to Cope with Mental Illness in Your Family: A Self Care Guide for Siblings, Offspring and Parents.** Diane T. Marsh and Rex Dickens. 1998, New York: Puttnam.

**When Madness Comes Home: Help and Hope for the Children, Siblings and Partners of the Mentally III.** Victoria Secunda. 1997, New York: Hyperion

## Resources

**Sibling Support Project** [www.siblingsupport.org](http://www.siblingsupport.org)

**Family Village** [www.familyvillage.wisc.edu](http://www.familyvillage.wisc.edu)

**University of Michigan Health System**  
[www.med.umich.edu/1libr/yourchild/specneed.htm](http://www.med.umich.edu/1libr/yourchild/specneed.htm)

**For more information contact:**

**UPLIFT:** Provides a newsletter, lending library, resources, and advocacy and support for families in Wyoming and a lending library. See contact information on the front of this publication.

**This brochure is intended for informational purposes only and not to replace professional evaluation and treatment.**

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# Supporting Siblings

**EDUCATIONAL SERIES**



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## Sibling Issues

**Brothers and sisters will be in the lives of family members with disabilities longer than ANYONE else.** Throughout their lives, brothers and sisters share many of the concerns that parents of children with disabilities experience. These concerns include isolation, a need for information, guilt, concerns about the future and care-giving demands.

### All siblings have a right to:

- A safe environment
- Feel valued and respected
- Be children

It is critically important that parents are aware of their own attitudes and feelings about their children and the disability. If parents view the disability as a curse, a family shame or a burden to bear it is likely the sibling will view the disability in the same way. If parents demonstrate a range of healthy emotions, good coping skills and keep a sense of humor, it is likely children will share the same perspective. **A parent's perspective is more important than the actual disability.** Siblings tell us one of the most important things a parent can do to support them is to **accept the disability.** Recognize that the sibling of a child with disabilities is that child's most important, most powerful teacher.

**Offer Time and Attention:** A child with disabilities demands much of a parent's time. Siblings often find themselves feeling jealous of the amount of attention a brother or sister with disabilities requires or receives. Protect certain times to spend with siblings (bedtime, movies once a month, etc.), Occasionally put the needs of the sibling first and do what they need or want.

**Provide Information:** Siblings often are not given thorough information about why a brother or sister has a disability, its treatment and implications on how it affects him or her, and what the family can do to help this family member. Parents and professionals have an obligation to provide helpful information. Understanding diminishes fear; not knowing can be more worrisome. Give them information about their brother or sister's disability in a variety of formats (books, videos, newsletters, verbally, etc). Make sure siblings are aware of the arrangements made for care for everyone in case of an emergency.

**Limit Caregiving:** Do not let the burden of primary caregiving fall onto the shoulders of any individual family member, especially siblings. More communities are now providing resources to ease the family's caregiving burdens. Caregiving responsibilities should be shared by all family members. Do not let caregiving responsibilities conflict regularly with plans with friends or other activities or the responsibility will become overly burdensome. Ease the emotional burden of caregiving by accessing support groups, parent mentors, on-line connections, and other networking opportunities.

**Keep Communication Open:** Anxiety producing feelings are not often expressed in day-to-day family interactions and are shared even less at school. Communication is crucial to sibling's well-being. Talk! No matter what age the child is, encourage open communication about the sibling's disability.

- Be open and honest, sharing personal feelings to the degree it is age appropriate.
- Take time to ask about feelings related to having a sibling with a disability.
- Allow siblings to express their anxiety and concerns and validate them.
- Listen to siblings without offering advice or shame.

**Acknowledge Guilt and Anger:** A sibling may experience guilt about not having a disability or even feel they are to blame for their brother's or sister's disability. Siblings may feel pressure to achieve and excel in school, athletics, music, etc., in order to "make up for" a brother or sister's disability. Emphasize that no-one is to blame for a brother's or sister's difficulties.

- Encourage siblings to see a brother or sister as a person with similarities and differences.
- Make it clear that it is all right to be angry sometimes strong feelings are part of any close relationship.
- Teach siblings what to do with anger and strong feelings by setting limits and boundaries.
- Be authentic and share mixed feelings about the child with disabilities.
- Encourage siblings to talk to someone outside the family.

**Recognize Embarrassments:** Fitting in can be difficult even if they don't have a sibling with a disability. To avoid embarrassment, the sibling who does not have a disability may avoid contact with a brother or sister, or not invite friends home. Talk over and practice how to explain a brother's or sister's disability to friends. Invite

friends over when the child with a disability is away. Welcome other children into the home. Don't always expect siblings to include the child with a disability in their play or activities. Help siblings realize that family members without a disability can be embarrassing also, especially parents. Find social situations where the child with a disability is accepted to set a good example for siblings.

**Reduce Stressful Situations at Home:** Stressful situations at home are unavoidable. These can impact everyone in the family in many different ways. Siblings under stress identify that sleep and normal daytime routines are disturbed and find it is difficult to complete work.

- Encourage siblings to develop their own social life.
- Get informed about appropriate caregiving tasks for siblings and how siblings can be included in handling difficult behavior.
- Provide a break for a sibling by accepting the offers of friends or relatives to take either the sibling or child with a disability for brief periods.

**Be Aware of Teasing or Bullying:** It is a real possibility that siblings may have to deal with some teasing or bullying related to their sibling with a disability. Parents can help by being proactive and teaching the sibling how to deal with these situations. Watch for signs of distress such as sleeplessness, isolation, aggression, etc. Talk to the school staff about encouraging and working on positive attitudes towards people with disabilities. Practice with the child how to handle unpleasant remarks.

**Identify Expectation Levels:** It is important for a child with disabilities to have goals, develop feelings of self-worth and self-trust. It is equally important for siblings to develop these qualities. Set clear and high goals for **all** children in a family. To every extent possible, require the child with disabilities to do as much as they can for themselves and participate in family chores, (yard work, cleaning, etc.).

**Expect Typical Behavior:** Typically developing siblings deserve a life where they sometimes misbehave, get angry, and fight with their siblings.