

Helping when a sibling has a disability

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Acknowledgement that this situation is unique

“All siblings of kids with disabilities have to find a way to cope, and there is no one right way to do it.

Sometimes it can lead to negative consequences, like feeling isolated or a need to be perfect in order to make up for the sibling’s challenges.

But there are also positive consequences that have been documented such as an increased capacity for empathy, greater tolerance for individual differences, and resiliency.”

Siblings spend more time with each other in childhood than anyone else. More importantly, siblings tend to be in the life of the disabled family member longer than anyone, including parents.

(Braaten, 2022)

Stages as siblings age

“Younger siblings tend to worry about how their brother or sister will impact the ability to fit in with peers.

There can be a mixture of emotions that range from jealousy (“why does *he* get all of the attention?”) to protection.

At a very young age, siblings start to worry about who will care for their disabled sister or brother if mom or dad aren’t around.

These issues tend to become more important as the siblings”

(Braaten, 2022)

Benefits

Learning to understand differences

Learning empathy and recognizing cruelty

Learning independence

Enhanced adaptability

Understanding tolerance

Appreciation for the diversity of individuals

Interpretations

Sibling's interpretation of the situation will be modeled based on the parent's interpretation

Suggestions for parents

Ensure that the sibling who is typical does not inadvertently take on additional responsibilities (parentification)

Sibling need to engage in perfectionistic behaviors to minimize additional stress for parents

Age appropriate discussions about their sibling and needs while being honest and informative

Reassure sibling who is typical about the future for the family and their sibling's need for care

Let them be a kid for as long as possible!

Equal expectations around chores, though differentiated by level

Landman (2020)

Suggestions for parents

Events and social engagements beyond just the specific needs of student such as involvement in faith based or community activities

Sibling may have increased emotionality such as anxiety

Sibling may experience isolation, so be sure to find time for the sibling and parent together

Seek peer support groups

Sibling rivalry may still exist which is completely typical

Suggestions for parents

Your child needs to feel as important as the sibling with disabilities.

Talk with them about their feelings

Help find ways to connect the siblings together in shared interests

Listen without judgement to how they are feeling

Resources

<https://siblingsupport.org/>

The Sibling Support Project, created in 1990. The website has publications, resources and other useful information.

Books: <https://siblingsupport.org/publications/>