

Disability Campaign.org

Parenting Siblings of Kids with Special Needs



Image: Family at a Joni and Friends Family Retreat

The *U.S. Census 2000 Special Report: Disability in American Families* reported that 20.9 million American families have at least one member with a disability. For you, that family member may be your child. In parenting and caring for the needs of your child with a disability, it is equally as important to address the unique needs of your other children. Siblings of kids with special needs will be in your child's life longer than anyone. Furthermore, the brothers and sisters may share some of the same concerns you share, as well as similar challenges, though unique in that they experience them from a sibling's standpoint. Below are some reported experiences of siblings of kids with special needs, and recommendations and considerations for you to address as you parent your children without disabilities.

Positive experiences of growing up with a sibling with special needs

- empathy for others
- patience
- acceptance of people's differences
- helpfulness
- ability to cope with challenges
- insight into flexibility
- close relationships with siblings and parents
- maturity
- consideration for the needs of others
- sense of purpose or usefulness when helping others

Difficult experiences of growing up with a sibling with special needs



Image: ChildAndFamilyMentalHealth.com

- jealousy at the amount of attention or sibling receives
- difficulties completing homework
- being teased or bullied at school
- resentful of having to explain to others their sibling's disability
- resentful of not being able to do things at home because of their sibling's needs
- feelings of lack of attention
- worry about their sibling or appearance
- fear of losing their sibling
- disturbed sleep
- guilt associated with the negative feelings they have toward their sibling

How to provide support to your child

1. **Acknowledge your child and his or her experiences are unique.** Your child has a right to his or her own life. She has her own dream, plans for the future, and likes and dislikes. Foster her talents and wishes by providing opportunities for her to engage in sports, the arts, music, or other activities. Moreover, even though she may experience similar feelings to those of other siblings of kids with special needs, factors such as her age, cultural background, personality, and family situation make her experience unique. Do not compare to her other siblings or to other children nor force your own expectations or dreams upon her.
2. **Acknowledge your child's concerns.** It's important that you acknowledge the emotions and concerns you may be experiencing. Although as an adult and parent you may not fully understand him or relate to him, remind your son that you are there for him. Let him know that you wish to help and talk over some of these issues. If he is not open to speaking with you about these matters, asked if he would be open to speaking to someone else.
3. **Dedicate time to your child.**

Having a child with a disability or special needs can take up a lot of your time and resources. Remember to set time aside to spend with your child one-on-one and as a family. He needs to know that he is valued and he needs to see it through your actions, not just your words. Go watch a movie with him once a month or ask him what he wants for dinner.

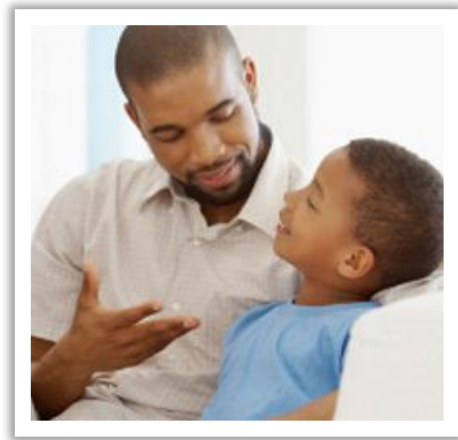


Image: ChildAndFamilyMentalHealth.com

4. **Set rules and chores that apply to your children.**

Depending on the needs of your child with a disability, some rules or chores may not apply, such as no driving after 10pm or setting the table. Sometimes, rules and chores may not be equal or fair before the eyes of all your children, but all your children should know they are expected to speak in a respectful manner, obey their parents, be courteous to others, etc. Letting one child get away with misbehaviors will allow for negative feelings to be experienced by siblings.

5. **Provide a safe environment for all your children.** If one of your children displays challenging behaviors at home, do not place your other children in vulnerable situations. Whether this means allowing them to go to their rooms if they feel unsafe or having to temporarily remove your child that is posing a threat, you may have to make some difficult decisions for the sake of the well-being of your entire family. Speak to your spouse, a trusted friend, or professional about what steps to take in order to care for the safety of your family. Furthermore, if your child is being teased at school, address this matter with his teacher and a school administrator. Do not assume that the school will take care of the problem; follow-up and watch out for signs of bullying. You are your child's advocate.
6. **Provide opportunities to meet peers and make friends.** Your child, like other children, should have opportunities to make friends. This is not always easy, especially when having a sibling with a disability. Your child may experience teasing or feel that he is unable to bring friends to your home. Allow him the opportunity to make friends with other siblings of special needs kids in addition to his existing friends. Nonprofits and local organizations host summer camps, family events, and programs for siblings that may be helpful to your child.
7. **Maintain your child informed about their sibling.** With time, the needs of your special needs child may change. It's important that her siblings understand her disability, her individual needs, and how they can help as well as what they can expect for the future. For example, it's important for siblings of a child with Celiac disease to understand the hazard associated with their sister eating a cupcake. In some cases, you may wish to seek professional help in dialoguing with your family, especially if your child has life-threatening or terminal illness.
8. **Address the negative feelings.** Emphasize that no one is to blame for his sister's illness or disability. Encourage him to see the similarities, rather than the differences. Do not assume the negative feelings will pass with time, such as with age or with greater familiarity with the disability. Make sure to check-in regularly with him to see if any of those feelings are improving, worsening, or changing.
9. **Reduce the stress at home.** Find ways to improve your marriage if it is adding stress in the home. Keep a sense of humor even when you are under the pressures of caring for your family. Allow your child some distance if needed, such as a weekend at her grandparent's house or some quiet time in her bedroom if things get too challenging at home.

When to seek professional help for your child



Image: ChildTrends.org

Negative or challenging feelings associated with being a sibling of a child with a disability are common, but that doesn't mean you should take them lightly. Seek the advice of a counselor or physician if you notice the following warning signs and maintain a journal to chart the development of these signs:

- feelings of helplessness
- frequent crying or worrying
- changes in eating habits or sleep
- poor concentration
- low self-esteem
- low grade school or concerns from teachers
- the need for perfection
- increasing health problems, such as frequent colds, headaches or stomachaches
- abuse towards siblings, classmates or parents
- signs of self harm, such as cutting or use of drugs and alcohol

As a parent, do what you can, but in the process remember to care for you. You need to be there for your family, and the fact that you are there for them now means a lot. Thank you for caring for your family!

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