

Tip Sheets

Navigating Sibling Dynamics: Supporting Siblings of Children with Special Needs

Siblings of children with special needs may encounter unique challenges. By offering support and understanding, educators can become a resource for families navigating this experience.

Because siblings often have the longest-lasting relationships of their lives with each other, they are uniquely positioned to support their sibling(s) with disabilities to lead self-determined lives.

More Alike Than Different

We know that all families are unique, and that no single book or resource will prepare us for all we might need to know. Many variables within the family system need our consideration as well, such as the family's culture, the make-up of the family, economic supports, and siblings with or without disabilities. However, by considering how families are more alike than different in the ways they cope and function, we will better serve all children and their families.

Benefits of Being a Sibling to a Child with Special Needs

Learning new skills

Many siblings acquire new skills such as first aid, sign language, parenting skills, using communication aids, mediation skills. These can be a real asset for siblings for later parenting and career roles.

Improved social competence

Siblings may be more accepting of people who are different, developing tolerance at an earlier age

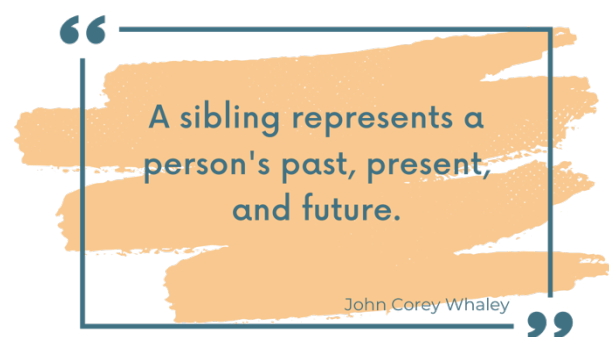
than their peers. They may also be more caring towards others.

Appreciation

Siblings may appreciate their own health and abilities. They may appreciate their brother or sister's progress and achievements and the way their parents care for their brother or sister.

Advocacy

Siblings often explain their brother or sister's needs to early childhood educators. Listening deeply and learning about their needs is critical. Be their advocate!



How Can You Help?

Talk to parents!

Ask if they are seeing concerning behavior. Make sure that parents recognize needs of the sibling are as important as the child with a disability. Some questions may be hard, and you will need to be prepared for a courageous conversation.

Example questions to ask:

1. Do you have any concerns about the siblings' behaviors or mood?

2. Does the sibling help you with caring tasks at home?
3. Does the sibling have trouble with routines at home?
4. How is the relationship between the child and their sibling with a disability?
5. Are you (the parents) able to spend enough time with the sibling?
6. Is the sibling able to spend enough time with friends and doing leisure activities?
7. What questions does the child ask about their sibling with a disability's condition?

Now that you have gathered information from the family...

Give attention

For siblings, being included is a way of seeing all children as belonging in their communities alongside peers, typically and not typically developing. Giving attention doesn't have to take lots of time. It is better for a sibling to have your full attention for a short amount of time, than a lot of time with distractions. You can do this in different ways:

- Engage in quick 10-minute activities.
- Have one-on-one time.
- Look for sibling support groups to recommend.

Be a safe person

Let the child know you are open to communication to talk about the disability. Ask questions and let the child ask questions. Listen and encourage feelings by acknowledging a child's feelings about the situation and helping them identify the feelings behind their words. Name the feeling(s) and let the child be sad, angry, scared, or anything else they may be feeling. Remember this can be a grieving process for siblings of children with disabilities as well as families.

Children of siblings with special needs may also feel worried or even embarrassed.

Worry

- It is ok for the sibling to be worried.
- Help identify what they are worried about.
- Problem solve with them.
- Let them be a part of the solutions.

Embarrassment

- Yes, the child may be embarrassed. Their friends may not have siblings "like theirs."
- Talk about this but don't shame them.

Be a role model

What can you do to feel more easygoing about being with children with disabilities? You don't have to completely understand the disability, but acknowledging the child's feelings and understanding the family dynamics or challenges the child is facing at home, such as less attention, can help the child succeed to their fullest potential when they are in your environment.

Additional Resources

The Center for Siblings

<https://siblingcenter.org/tools-and-resources>

Sibling Resources

<https://www.siblingresources.org/course/sibling>

The emotional impact of disability on siblings

<https://covey.org/the-emotional-impact-of-disability-on-siblings>

For more information, visit www.inclusivechildcare.org.

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