



Supporting Siblings of Children with Disabilities

Factsheet for Virginia's Parents

Having a brother or sister with a disability can shape a child's life in many positive ways. Siblings often develop compassion, patience, acceptance, maturity, and strong advocacy skills. At the same time, siblings may also experience stress, worry, confusion, embarrassment, jealousy, sadness, or feelings of being overlooked.

Every sibling relationship is different, and siblings may experience many emotions at different times. Families can help siblings feel supported, included, and valued by creating opportunities for open communication, connection, and understanding.

Common Feelings Siblings May Experience

Siblings of children with disabilities may:

- Feel proud and protective of their sibling
- Worry about their sibling's future or safety
- Feel embarrassed or uncomfortable in social situations
- Feel left out because parents spend extra time addressing medical, behavioral, or educational needs
- Feel pressure to "be the easy child"
- Experience guilt for feeling frustrated or resentful
- Take on caregiving responsibilities at a young age
- Feel confused about the disability or how to explain it to others

These feelings are normal and do not mean a sibling does not love their brother or sister.

Ways Families Can Support Siblings

Talk Openly and Honestly: Provide age-appropriate information about the disability and encourage siblings to ask questions. Children often imagine situations to be worse when they do not understand what is happening.

Signs a Sibling May Need Additional Support

- Withdraws socially
- Shows increased anxiety or sadness
- Experiences behavior changes
- Struggles academically
- Becomes overly responsible or perfectionistic
- Frequently expresses anger or resentment
- Seems overwhelmed by family stress

Support might include counseling, sibling support groups, mentoring programs, or school-based support.

Supporting Siblings of Children with Disabilities

Acknowledge Feelings: Let siblings know it is okay to have mixed emotions. Avoid dismissing feelings such as frustration, embarrassment, or jealousy.

Spend Individual Time Together: Even small amounts of one-on-one time with a parent or caregiver can help siblings feel valued and connected.

Avoid Putting Too Much Responsibility on Siblings: While siblings may naturally help, they should not feel responsible for parenting or constantly supervising their brother or sister.

Celebrate Each Child's Strengths and Interests: Make sure siblings have opportunities to pursue their own activities, friendships, and goals.

Teach Self-Advocacy and Responses to Questions: Help siblings learn simple ways to explain their brother or sister's disability to friends or classmates if they choose.

Connect with Other Siblings: Meeting other children who have siblings with disabilities can help reduce feelings of isolation and help siblings feel *understood*.

Books for Siblings and Families

Some families find books helpful for starting conversations about disability and sibling relationships. Examples include:

- *Views From Our Shoes* edited by Donald Meyer
- *Thumbs Up for Teddy* by Sarah Mathias
- *My Brother Charlie* by Holly Robinson Peete and Ryan Elizabeth Peete

Siblings of children with disabilities often develop resilience, empathy, and lifelong bonds with their brothers and sisters. With support, understanding, and opportunities to express their own feelings and needs, siblings can thrive alongside their family members with disabilities.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Autism Speaks – Sibling's Guide to Autism

Center for Siblings of People with Disabilities

Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services – Supporting the Sibling Experience: A Parent's Guide to Starting the Conversation

The Sibling Support Project

Virginia Sibling Network

PEATC's mission focuses on building positive futures for Virginia's children by working collaboratively with families, schools, and communities to improve opportunities for excellence in education and success in school and community life.

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