



THE UPLIFT EDUCATIONAL SERIES: **Siblings**



Parents of siblings of children with emotional and behavioral issues are often concerned about the affect of being raised in a home that is often chaotic and stressful. Siblings feel many of the same things that parents feel, with less understanding of how to deal with those feelings. The following ideas on siblings may help with some of those concerns.

Awareness:

Siblings are aware of the differences between themselves and their siblings and between their family dynamics and others, but are often unsure of what the disability “means”. Explain the disability to siblings. Plan one-on-one time with siblings to talk about their concerns. They often feel left “out of the loop”. BUT also give them time where the child with emotional/behavior issues is NOT the main issue. As parents, it is easy for us to become over-focused on the child with the most obvious needs, but siblings need time to relax and feel they are important in our lives as well. Get books and video tapes about the emotional/behavior issues (see resources list). Arrange time for siblings to interact with other siblings that are dealing with disabilities. Siblings of children with developmental and physical disabilities are often dealing with many of the same issues.

Feelings:

Encourage siblings to talk about and understand their feelings— both positive and negative. Children with behavior/emotional issues are often frustrating and embarrassing for their siblings, just as they are for parents. Siblings often feel as though they are the only one dealing with the highly charged emotions that seem to follow the child with emotional or behavior issues. Siblings may feel anger and jealousy because their parents are distracted. Disciplines may not be consistent with all children in the family. There may be an imbalance in the praise parents give the siblings. It is natural to “expect” the sibling to behave. They may feel grief over the loss of a “normal” family. They may feel guilty about their feelings toward the child with emotional or behavior issues. Allow and encourage siblings to share their feelings without judging them. Realize that the feelings a sibling may express today, may not be the same feelings they express later. Allow the siblings and peers to tell their siblings how they feel. Encourage positive comments and gestures. This is an effective way of shaping behaviors of the child with emotional or behavior issues that may not be socially expectable. Listen carefully and if necessary explain that parents don’t always have all the answers. Parents may not be able to “fix” the sibling’s feelings. Don’t assume that siblings are upset because of the child with emotional or

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behavior issues. Siblings have lives that are beyond their sibling with emotional or behavior issues. Some children are more comfortable than others in expressing their thoughts and feelings.

Expectations:

It is “normal” (and easier) for parents to expect siblings to be “little adults”. Siblings tend to react to this by either becoming the “perfect” child (top grades, peacemaker, etc.) or the “problem” child (argumentative, acting out behaviors, etc.). Allow siblings to be themselves without the adult expectations. They may be confused about their place in the family. Arrange for the sibling to have “alone” time with their friends without the child with behavior or emotional issues.

Helping:

Include siblings in strategies for dealing with the child with emotional and behavioral issues. They can offer a new perspective and are aware of the “outside” environments (school, social time, etc.) which needs to be taken into consideration. This allows siblings to feel as though they are “a part of”, rather than “a part from”. Explain that “raising” the child with emotional or behavior issues is the parents job and that responsibility is not for the sibling. Pay close attention to how often you ask siblings to help, as well as what you ask them to help with. Use babysitters, rather than always depending on the sibling.

Advocacy:

Siblings can offer a new perspective and should be allowed to share their opinions when they are ready (family plans, Individual Education Plan meetings, social interactions, etc.). As parents, it may not always be what we want to hear, but it should be valued. DO NOT put the sibling in the position of informer or expect them to always want to talk about their sibling. They need their time apart from the issues, as do parents.

Forgive yourself:

As parents, we often realize that we have made mistakes when raising all of our children. That is part of the process. Make an effort to change or correct your mistakes and realize that you will probably fall back into “old” patterns. People under stress say and do amazingly stupid things. Dwelling on those mistakes only creates more stress. Train yourself to value each child’s individualism. Realize that parents go through a grief process and that is normal.

Take care of yourself:

Children learn how to take care of themselves by watching their parents. Re-evaluate “family” outings. What works for family members? There is nothing wrong with admitting that some time alone or with your spouse is needed. When with your spouse, take time to keep in touch with each other, without always dwelling on your children and their problems. Take time to understand your partners feelings. Fathers

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deal with issues in completely different ways than mothers and often feel left out and unnoticed. Family counseling may be needed for family members to understand and learn coping skills.

Maintain your sense of humor:

Having a child with emotional or behavior issues is like looking at your hand one inch from your face—that’s all you can see. Consciously, move your hand as far as you can reach and you’ll realize that there is a whole world out there. Your child with emotional/behavior issues is a small part of the world, community and family.

Realize that the stress and problems are natural under the circumstances, but that there is more “out there”. Laugh often—it’s therapeutic. Find joy in life and hang on to that joy. Value each family member for their individualism.

Learn all you can learn:

Take advantage of conferences and workshops available on disabilities to learn new strategies. There are many overlapping issues between the disabilities. Read books and magazine articles to gain a new perspective. Pick up related brochures in doctor offices. Talk with other parents dealing with similar issues. Join a support group.

Research the Internet , but realize that not all information is accurate—check it out!

Re-evaluate often:

Are your expectations realistic? Do you assign roles to the sibling that aren’t consistent with their personalities? Do you demand your children always like each other and not share their feelings? Do family members respect each other? Do your children realize that “fair” is a different concept from “equal”? Do you expect the sibling to give in to make life easier? Are “family” times fun or stressful? How could they be altered? Is a family dinner or vacations necessary for your family? Are your expectations for your family based on unrealistic concepts? Are you valuing all members of the family, including yourself? Keep a journal to see progress in behaviors.

Resources:

UPLIFT

(307) 778-8686

1(888) UPLIFT 3

www.uplift-wyoming.com

Wyoming Sibshops

Sibling Periodic Newsletter

Lending Library

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Sibling Support Project

(206) 527-5712

www.chmc.org/departmt/sibsupp

Sibling Need & Involvement Profile (SNIP)

www.chmc.org.departmt.sibsupp

Family Village

www.familyvillage.wisc.edu

Parent Soup

www.parentsoup.com

Books:

Brothers and Sisters: A Special Part of Exceptional Families. Thomas Powell, Peggy Gallagher, 1993, Baltimore: Paul H. Brooks.

Profile of the Other Child: A Sibling Guide for Parents. Frances Dwyer McCaffrey, Thomas Fish. Publications Office, Nisonger Center UAP, 434 McCampbell Hall, The Ohio State University, 1581 Dodd Drive, Columbus, OH 43210

Views from Our Shoes: Growing Up with a Brother or Sister with Special Needs. Donald Meyer (ed.), 1997, Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House

Siblings Without Rivalry. Adele Faber, Elaine Mazlish. 1998, 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, Rex Dickens. 1998, New York: Puttnam

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

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