

BUILDING BLOCKS® Early Intervention Service

Parent Information Sheet

Issues related to siblings of children with exceptional needs

In any family, it is difficult to accommodate everyone's needs. When there is a child with a disability such as autism in a family, it can become even more challenging. It becomes difficult to manage the priorities of other children in the family when, by necessity, many decisions revolve around the child with a disability. However, as parents, it is essential to be aware of issues related to siblings of children with disabilities, as well as some practical suggestions for addressing these issues.

Understanding possible feelings of your children

It is important to remember that all sibling relationships are individual. A disability is only one of the factors that effect relationships between siblings. Brothers and sisters may experience a number of different reactions to their sibling's exceptionality. Some children may not exhibit any reaction or outward feelings about their brother or sister's differences, while others may go through phases of feeling guilty, anxious, confused, envious, angry, embarrassed, or isolated. These emotions are a normal part of childhood and a normal part of the adaptation process. Most emotions fluctuate, and children usually work things out for themselves. There are also many positive effects on siblings and families of children with disabilities. Siblings of children with exceptional needs tend to have increased empathy and compassion. Due to additional responsibilities, they can also be more adaptable, have good problem solving skills, and have a broader knowledge of some issues than their similar aged peers.

What can parents do to assist?

- Ensure some individual time with each child when possible.
- Talk openly with your child about what it feels like to have a brother or sister with a disability. Listen to what they say and understand that their feelings are normal.
- Try not to become too concerned or overreact to any feelings your child may have about their sibling with autism. Your own fears can exaggerate what may merely be a simple childhood emotion.
- Explain your child's exceptional needs to your children as clearly as possible; this may require a number of discussions. Be guided by your children's responses as to how much to explain, what is relevant and of interest to each child.

- Include siblings, when possible, when making family decisions by asking for and respecting their opinions.
- Remind yourself that your children are still children and should not take on responsibilities that they cannot handle.
- Remember that not every problem your children or family face is due to the demands of your child with autism.
- Let them be kids, which may include fighting at times, as well as enjoying growing up.
- Encourage your children to have their own friends, interests and ambitions.
- If you have particular persisting concerns or problems, you may want to talk to other parents in similar situations or seek professional advice.

Research suggests that providing children with access to age-appropriate information and open communication about their sibling's disability can assist them to adjust, understand and relate to their brother or sister. Ask your children what they want to know; it may not be necessary to provide very much information. Communicating with your child about your child's disability may be as simple as explaining that "James understands best if we show him what to do" or "Jane needs some extra help to tell us what she wants." There are also a number of books designed specifically for children about autism and other disabilities that may be helpful.

Recommended reading for children:

Amenta, C. A., (1992). *Russell is extra special: A book about autism for children*, New York: Magination Press.

Bishop, B. (2002). *My friend with autism*. Arlington, Texas: Future Horizons

References:

Miller, N. B. (1994). *Nobody's perfect: Living and growing with children who have special needs*, Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Glasberg, B. A. (2000). The development of siblings' understanding of autism spectrum disorders, *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 20, 2.

Learning Links News (1999). *My brother or sister has special needs, what about me?* Learning Links: Peakhurst, NSW.