

# What do siblings need?

*In order for siblings to grow up feeling strong and secure they need the following:*

## Information

Children need to know about the disability or illness and how it will affect their brother or sister and the whole family. This will prevent siblings developing unnecessary fears and worries about the disability or illness. It will also help them explain the disability to others. The level of detail can increase as children age. If the information is unclear or difficult to explain, professionals can help families with this.

## Inclusion

Children can be involved in discussions about family routines, the changes that might occur because of the disability, and the role each family member plays in creating a strong, caring family. This can add to their sense of value as contributing members of the family. Of course, not all children will want to be involved but they need to be allowed the opportunity.

## Opportunities to express feelings

Being open about feelings – the good and not so good – helps children to cope. They can learn that it is ok to have a mix of feelings, that all brothers and sisters have mixed feelings from time to time. They can learn that it is okay to feel angry, sad, fearful, embarrassed, and that such feelings do not mean they do not love and care for their brother or sister. However they need to know that not all behaviours are okay. They need help to cope with feelings in ways that do not harm themselves or others.

## Skills to deal with difficult situations

Children cope better if they have the skills to deal with situations that arise (eg teasing or other reactions from peers or the community). Sibling groups can help children feel stronger and more able to influence what happens around them. Other resources, like books and the internet, can also help.

## A sense of being special too

Most children will understand the extra attention given to a child with disability if they are helped to feel important too. Parents, professionals or extended family/friends can all show interest in a sibling, and help them to feel special.

## Feeling valued

Assisting in the care of a child with disability and being appreciated can add to a sibling's sense of competence and self-worth. They can feel especially important if they contribute in meaningful ways, e.g., teaching skills, helping to play; rather than just caregiving. However, it needs to be kept in balance.

## Independence

Siblings need to develop some independence and social connection through spending time with peers doing a range of activities. At home, they need their own space and privacy.

## Contact with other siblings

Siblings can share experiences with other siblings and learn they are not alone. Just as parents gain support from other parents, siblings also gain from this type of interaction.

## A wide social network

A strong social network, including adults and children, gives siblings a sense of value. It also provides people to whom they can turn for support.