

Why siblings?

In Australia, there are over 200,000 young people under 25 years of age with a severe or profound disability. Many more have a chronic illness or mental illness. Understandably, significant resources are spent on addressing the needs of these young people. But other children in the family have needs too. Research shows that illness and disability affects the lives of ALL family members.

Certainly, many millions of dollars are put into parent support programs; maybe not enough, but we understand that parents need support. Whilst many parents are able to say they have been enriched by their experience of parenting a child with disability or illness, we recognise that there are still challenges and would never question their need for support.

So why would we not support these 'other' children in the family, who share many of the experiences, at a young age when they may lack the cognitive and emotional maturity to cope?

If we think about sibling relationships in general, they usually last a lifetime and have a significant effect on our development. They provide us with opportunities to openly express a range of emotions, including love, loyalty, anger and rivalry; gain companionship and support and learn to give and take; practice conflict resolution; learn social skills and confidence which can be taken out into the wider world. Siblings also help us to develop our own identity. When one sibling has a disability this relationship can be significantly changed.

The mix of sibling experience

Most siblings of a person with a disability will be able to say there were good and not so good aspects to their experience. Those who can look back and see benefits in their situation say they have found inspiration through their brothers and sisters, become more tolerant, more compassionate, more aware of their blessings and, in many ways, more mature than young people who have not had these experiences. They say growing up with their brother or sister gave true meaning to their lives, that "they made me who I am".

Some children, however, have a more difficult time. They can experience confusion over the feelings that arise. On the one hand, a child may feel loving and protective toward their brother or sister, but at the same time feel a mixture of more difficult feelings such as resentment, fear, guilt, embarrassment and sorrow. As children, they are likely to lack the understanding, emotional maturity and coping skills required to deal with their experiences. As a result, they can feel isolated and confused and become 'at risk' for a range of emotional, mental and physical health problems, which can continue into adulthood.

NOT ALL siblings will experience these concerns and, with an increased understanding of the issues for siblings, it is fairly easy to support children so their adjustment can become more positive. Most children can deal with stress better if they feel listened to and understood.

Why siblings?

The benefits of support

For siblings

Support for siblings helps them to feel less isolated and to be more able to manage any challenges. They will feel more important in the family and be less likely to develop their own health problems down the track. Support, in fact, contributes to siblings being able to gain inspiration, competence and independence leading to improved self esteem.

In terms of resilience, when children go through difficult experiences, are given support, and learn skills to deal with their difficulties, they are able, in fact, to become stronger adults and develop a range of human qualities that add not only to their own life but also those around them. For example, some of the outcomes for siblings, mentioned by families and practitioners, include:

- being more tolerant of differences
- more compassionate
- more reliable and responsible
- high achieving
- development of skills that help with a career
- pride in brother or sister's achievements
- more insight, maturity

For parents

Parents may feel overwhelmed with their responsibilities to their children, especially when one has a disability or illness. Support for siblings can help to strengthen relationships between family members. Parents report that support for siblings has helped them to communicate more effectively together – parents are more aware of what all their children need. This leads to parents feeling more competent in their parenting role.

For the person with disability

Siblings are likely to have the longest relationship of any with the person with disability. If we can nurture that relationship from early on then it is likely that the sibling relationship will be more enduring and mutually sustaining. Many parents report that siblings interact more with their brother or sister after they attend a sibling support program. In the longer term, a sibling can play an important role in the social and emotional wellbeing of the person with disability.

For the community

If siblings are supported they are less likely to develop longer term problems such as depression or anxiety, which cost the community through medical and social services. Also, siblings may learn a lot of skills through their childhood experiences and, if supported, are likely to contribute to the community in very useful ways.