Growing Up As The “Other” Child: A Typical Sibling’s Perspective

A PANEL DISCUSSION BY PARENTS AND SIBLINGS

FACILITATED BY:
MARIA ADAMS, M.A. MFT-INTERN
When I returned home from the hospital with my new baby boy, my three-year-old ran out to greet me. "My mommy is home!" she cried. Then, noticing the baby in my arms, she said disdainfully, "Where's his mommy?"

One minute they get along and the next minute they are at each other’s throats.

Playmates
Confidante
Partners in Crime
“I look at the world quite differently from my friends, who have no experience of being a sib. As I put it once, “normal” family life and parenting is a country I will never be able to visit and whose language I will never understand. My experience doesn’t compute. When my nonsib friends talk about their childhoods, I stay silent for the most part because even when I tell them the bare facts about my brother, the facts can’t convey the anguish, the resentment, the fear, and everything else mixed in: the childhood experiences I never got to have or that were ruined by my brother’s outbursts. There’s no way they will ever comprehend.”

Lenore (20 years old)
Being the Other One- by Kate Strohm
Growing Up with a Sibling with Special Needs

Positive Traits

- Empathy
- Insight into coping with challenges
- Patience
- Acceptance of differences
- Compassion
- Helpfulness
- Dependability
- Loyalty
- Kindness
- Supportive
- Caring
- Self-Sufficient
- Choose careers related to special education and health
Older sibling: They have to grow quickly and be responsible. During this process, they lose some of their childhood.

Siblings who are younger than the child with special needs have fewer opportunities to grieve. They were born into this role, and most of the time they don’t realize their need to grieve until adulthood.

When they are the only sibling, the feeling of loneliness and abandonment is more severe.
Challenges/Difficulties
“Darker Emotions”

- Jealousy/Resentment (Sibling Rivalry)
- Worried about sibling
- Embarrassment
- Inadequacy
- Sense of being judge
- Abandonment
- Withdrawal/Isolation
- “People Pleaser”

- Perfection
- Need for Approval
- Grief and Loss
- Guilt
- Fear
- Anger
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Eating Disorders
- Cutting
Preschoolers

- Most children are unable to express their feelings verbally. The younger the child the more difficult it may be for her/him to understand the situation.
- Feelings are expressed through behavior:
  - Tantrums
  - Excessive crying
  - Hitting, biting, kicking
  - Mimic the physical or behavioral actions of the sibling with special needs
- Some children may feel confused, afraid, anxious, and angry about a sibling with special needs
- “Mommy’s little helper”
- Social skills may be affected
Elementary School Age Children

- They are more aware of differences
- They understand explanations in proper terms
- They may worry that it is contagious
- They may experience guilt
- Embarrassment- reluctant to invite friends
- Some become overly helpful and extremely well-behaved
- “Teacher” role
- Non-complaint behavior
Teenagers and Young Adults

- They understand more in depth-explanations of the special need.
- They may wonder about their social life
- They may feel embarrassed about having a sibling with special needs
- They may resent responsibilities (chores, taking care of sibling)
- They may feel lonely
- They may wonder about their future (marriage, children, parents’ death)
- They may experience anxiety, poor coping skills, depression, suicidal thoughts, cutting, eating disorders.
Why do siblings need to be informed?

- Children should be given accurate, age-appropriate information regarding the special need so that they will not make incorrect assumptions.
- As a parent, we need to remember that children may be afraid of asking questions, express feelings; they may not want to upset the parent.
- Not able to discuss their feelings may have difficulty in their relationships with others, seek for constant approval and attention.
- Children can be involved in different support family groups to gain a better understanding of their feelings/emotions.
What can we do?

- Be open and honest
- Limit the caregiving responsibilities of siblings
- Use respite care and other supportive services
- Acceptance
- Schedule special time with each child
- Let siblings settle their own differences
- Praise all siblings
- Recognize each child’s strengths, unique qualities and family contributions
- Listen to siblings, validate their feelings
- Involve all siblings in family events and decisions
- Have a family meeting
- Recognize special stress times for siblings and plan to minimize negative effects
- Join sibling-related organizations
- Seek for professional help when needed
- Plan for the future – Guardianship, Estate Planning, Accommodation, Maintaining a log with health information, contact numbers, financial information.
“Siblings do best psychologically when their parents communicate their expectations and feelings openly, talk about the illness or disability honestly, do not overburden them with childcare and household responsibility, and manage to maintain pleasant and supportive marital relationships. While these family styles of coping do not make the sadness of a child’s illness or disability disappear, they do seem to enable brothers and sisters to develop some of life’s most admirable personal qualities.”

Debra Lobato
Brothers, Sisters, and Special Needs

Gurian, A. “Siblings of children with special needs” The Child Study Center.


Strohm, K. Being The Other One. Shambhala Publications, Inc. 2005