

Parent tip sheet: Supporting siblings

Below, you'll find tips on how to best support a sibling of someone with a disability. The following was developed in collaboration with parents and siblings of Holland Bloorview clients.

Ideas on how to support your sibling child:

Tips	Reasons	How-to
<p>Provide information about the diagnosis or medical condition</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides knowledge of what the disability or medical diagnosis is, and what to expect • Helps to reassure the sibling and to answer the questions they get from others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give clear, understandable information and explanations • Make sure they understand that no one is to blame for their sibling's disability • Figure out when and how to explain a diagnosis
<p>Encourage open family discussions about siblings' feelings and concerns</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows siblings to talk about both positive and negative feelings, in a safe space • Provides a chance to talk about ways to handle stressful events such as: stigma, discrimination and bullying 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize their feelings and concerns • Expect and acknowledge that they may have different emotions related to their sibling's disability, and that it's okay • Try to share your time equally between your children
<p>Set reasonable expectations for all of your children in the family</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows each sibling to learn and get involved when they are ready • Helps your child to reflect on similarities and differences to their sibling with a disability • Prevents them from feeling like they have to do/achieve more for their sibling with a disability • Helps teach independence in the child with a disability so that each child can be an individual 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask each child what they think you can expect from them – include them in the process • Understand that each child has different strengths and needs • Give clear expectations to ALL of your children (including the child with the disability) and explain that expectations can change • Recognize the accomplishments of each child • Keep the door open to conversation

<p>Encourage siblings to be children, and let them know they can find a balance between being a kid and a caregiver too</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Siblings are children too and could use time to play and live their own lives • Helps them feel that they are not the only one responsible, especially in the future • Allows them to see the importance and value of taking time for themselves • Helps them to develop their own identity and interests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure there is dedicated time that is just for the sibling (whether it is time with their friends or time with you) • Discuss different roles in the family and relieve any pressure they might feel about having to be an 'adult' all the time • As a family, you can all talk about what their sibling's life can look like in the future.
<p>You can also find appropriate ways to have siblings take part in medical appointments</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your child can provide valuable ideas • They are an important member of the sibling with a disability's care team • Siblings will be in the lives of the sibling with a disability longer than anyone else 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share up-to-date information in a simple way with your child so that they can be involved in family decisions • Your child can observe their sibling with a disability in therapy or in a learning setting • Prepare your child for changes in home life before they happen
<p>Your sibling children might want to talk to another sibling. If they do, you can help them connect.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your child will share many of the same concerns as parents, but also have their own concerns or worries as siblings • The chance to discuss feelings with other siblings is important – it might be hard to talk to their family about it right away • Many siblings often grow up without resources to support them • Siblings need the same kind of peer support that parents get from parent support groups • Siblings need to understand that it is okay to take care of themselves as well 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask them if they want to meet other siblings of people with disabilities and let them decide if this is something that they want • If the child does not want to join a group yet, keep the door open to discuss it when they're ready • Provide opportunities for your sibling child to receive support – going to sibling workshops or a Young Carers Program if they wish • Let teachers know what is happening so that they can also provide appropriate supports to your children • Model self-care as a parent

Do you have a suggestion or resource for this tipsheet? We always welcome new ideas.

Let us know at resourcecentre@hollandbloorview.ca

This list was last updated by a Family Support Specialist in July 2023.