

Siblings of Youth with Disabilities



Centre for
Youth & Society  UVic

While families of youth with a disability are unique in terms of their child's specific needs, families often share a commonality of experiences.

Why This Matters

Up to 31% of children have a disability, and the majority of these children have a brother or sister. Having a sibling with a disability has a profound effect on other children in the family. Supporting and acknowledging siblings of youth with disabilities is vital to the siblings' emotional health and well being.

Key Facts

- ❖ Of the 31% of children who have a disability, 66% have mild conditions, 29% have moderate conditions, 5% have severe conditions, and almost all have a sibling.
- ❖ The prevalence of individuals diagnosed on the Autism spectrum is rising 10-17% every year in North America.
- ❖ 84% of siblings of youth on the Autism spectrum report having difficulties dealing with their brother or sister's aggressive behaviours, and may therefore see their sibling as detached and dehumanized.
- ❖ Although the effects of having a sibling with a disability on peer relationships are mixed, one study found that 70% of youth with a sibling with a disability had been teased or bullied at some point due to this relationship.

What the Research Says

The typically developing sibling may experience “disability by association” and negative experiences such as increased responsibility, less attention from parents, and feelings that their family is different.

Many siblings report reluctance to acknowledge their own feelings within the family because of the sibling with a disability. Among feelings that are reported, unease and worry are mentioned the most.

Siblings may also feel guilt about being “normal,” and others report feeling stressed when parents expect them to treat their sibling with a disability normally.

Siblings of children with a disability often have more household, family, and caretaking responsibilities than those without a sibling with a disability.

It is important to determine the balance, or tipping point, between a sibling taking on responsibilities sufficient to assist the family, and when or if these responsibilities become a burden on the child.

What the Research Says

One study found that the majority of 12-15 year-old siblings of youth with disabilities felt their responsibilities were too much.

It has been consistently reported that sisters of children and youth with a disability are especially vulnerable to the emotional demands of the family. They also take on a more parental role compared to brothers, and account for a higher incidence of emotional problems among non-disabled siblings.

Peer support groups for siblings of youth with disabilities can offer knowledge about their siblings' disabilities and can cultivate an understanding of their own role in the family.

Family support groups are reportedly the most effective type of program in helping siblings and can be used alongside peer support groups. Family centred groups are especially vital for siblings who cannot understand all of the information received from peer support groups alone.

Helpful Resources:

- www.youth.society.uvic.ca to access the full report on Siblings of Youth with Disability
- www.communityoptions.bc.ca
- www.siblingsupport.org (Sibshops)

What You Need to Know

- ❖ When exploring adjustment outcomes, it is important to consider the age and developmental level of children or youth when they become aware of their siblings' differences and difficulties.
- ❖ Both positive and negative effects of being a sibling of a youth with a disability have been reported. These effects are contingent on interrelated factors such as gender, culture, disability type, peer relationships, family size, family functioning, and the emotional availability of parents.
- ❖ While most siblings are well-adjusted, they may be subject to increased risk of negative externalizing and internalizing (e.g., anxiety, depression, guilt) behaviours and lower social competence.
- ❖ Mediators of positive outcomes of having a sibling with a disability are linked to the family's socio-economic status, family's connectedness, and consistent household routines.

As adults, siblings of a sister or brother with a disability were found to have higher tolerance of people, more compassion towards others, an awareness of the impact of prejudice, and stronger bonds with their families.