

# When Special Needs Spark Sibling Rivalry

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It's natural for parents to focus their energies on children with special needs, health problems or exceptional abilities -- and feel the personal effects of raising them.

But it's also important not to overlook how their siblings are faring. On the sidelines of all that extra attention, these siblings can come under some major pressures, says pediatrician Scott Steinberg, MD.

"Parents are often emotionally drained or stressed, especially about the uncertainty of a diagnosis. They may be angry and frustrated that it happened," says Dr. Steinberg, with Northeast Cincinnati Pediatric Associates in Mason. "But the healthy child also has to adjust -- both to a sibling taking up more parental time and resources, as well as to a parent who's tired and stressed."

Siblings of children with special abilities or needs may act out to get parents' attention. But the impact on family dynamics can go much deeper, he says, particularly with siblings of special-needs children, who may:

- Feel alone or jealous about extra attention for their sibling and interpret it as rejection
- Wish they had medical problems to get more attention
- Worry they might "catch" what their sibling has
- Be overly helpful or noncompliant for attention
- Try to ease parents' burdens by not making demands or feeling guilty if they do
- Feel guilty for their own good health or have negative thoughts about their special-needs sibling
- Feel embarrassed or resent having to involve their sibling with neighborhood friends
- Resent having to care for a sibling or worry about their sibling's future



## Tactics for Reducing the Rivalry

Dealing with misperceptions and emotional responses starts with fostering communication, Dr. Steinberg says. "Try to be a good listener. Encourage siblings to express themselves, including negative feelings. Ask them what they like best and least about each other. Let your children know it's okay to get mad at their special-needs sibling and not to feel guilty if they sometimes resent the extra attention."

One good way to combat misperceptions, he says, is to describe to children their sibling's special needs or abilities, starting with simple explanations around ages 5 or 6. "Share with them how a health condition is evaluated and treated and what to expect. Talk about their sibling's strengths and weaknesses and the best ways to interact with that child."

It's impossible to treat all children equally, he says. But parents should be as fair as possible and take steps to prevent sibling rivalry.

"Have special-needs children do as much for themselves as they can and assign them tasks so everybody has responsibilities. Do chores together as a family."

Dr. Steinberg suggests setting siblings up to cooperate rather than compete, for instance by having them race against the clock as a team rather than individually to complete chores. He recommends devoting time to family activities that everyone enjoys.

"Let each child know he or she is special," he says. "Make sure they're able to develop their own interests and identity. Try to get a few minutes a day alone between each parent and child." Exclusive time with parents will be especially valuable to the sibling of the special-needs child. He also cautions against overburdening older children with care duties for their siblings. However, all siblings of the special-needs child can be enlisted as "partners" with parents in understanding and addressing their sibling's requirements.

### **When to Seek Help**

If sibling rivalry gets out of hand or parents see signs of depression or anxiety, counseling may be in order for children or the family, he says. Signs to watch for include sleep or appetite disturbance, hopelessness, poor concentration, low self-esteem, talk of hurting oneself, loss of interest in activities, frequent crying or worrying, difficulty separating from parents, perfectionism, or what can be physical symptoms of emotional distress, such as headaches or stomachaches.

"If you see these behaviors for more than a few weeks, seek counseling," Dr. Steinberg says. Sibling support groups can connect children with others who have similar experiences.

Despite the potential problems, being the sibling of a special-needs child can have plusses, too, he says. Research indicates they're more likely to develop such positive traits as maturity, social competence, ability to get along with others, insight, empathy, tolerance of differences between people, pride in family accomplishments and loyalty.

"They have more negative issues to deal with," he says, "but they have opportunity for personal growth and character development."

Source: Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center