

Supporting Siblings

This toolkit is for parents or carers of a child with a physical health condition or difficulty.

Here are some ideas and strategies ***around supporting siblings of children with chronic health conditions***



With special thanks to the **ABUHB**
Helping Hands Psychology team for
Children with Additional Needs for
the original content of this resource.



Contents

What it Means to be a Sibling Page 3

Acknowledging Difficulties Page 4

Talking About Differences Page 5

Coping with Teasing and Bullying Page 6

Planning Quality Time Page 7

Identity Page 8

A Celebration Page Page 9

Supportive Sibling Certificate Page 10

What it means to be a Sibling

Being a sibling of a child with a physical health condition can be challenging, but can also have many upsides. Often, it may feel to you like siblings take a 'backseat' to the difficulties that can come with another

child's physical health condition. This is a normal feeling, and likely something that siblings will feel themselves. Having a child with a physical health condition can sometimes mean that their sibling requires additional support as well. They may experience many different and conflicting feelings. Remembering that siblings of children with additional needs have their own needs, strengths, and difficulties, can help with staying in tune to a sibling's emotional wellbeing.

What's the upside of growing up with a sibling with a physical health condition?

While being a sibling of a child with a physical health condition presents challenges, it also comes with opportunities. Kids who grow up with a sibling with physical health needs may have more of a chance to develop many good qualities, including:

- kindness and supportiveness
- acceptance of differences
- compassion and helpfulness
- empathy for others and insight into coping with challenges



Acknowledging difficulties

As we mentioned earlier, there are many positive things about being a sibling of a child with a physical health condition. However, to better understand and support them, it is also important to acknowledge the difficulties they may experience.

While every sibling — and every family — is different, there are some common difficulties that siblings may be going through. Normalizing these feelings can be reassuring for your child and is likely to help them feel supported and understood.



Common difficulties may include:

- ❖ Feeling isolated, lonely, guilty or selfish – thinking “why them, and not me?”
- ❖ Feel worried about their sibling
- ❖ Feeling like they have to be perfect and aren’t able to make mistakes that might cause upset
- ❖ Feeling left out or jealous e.g. not getting to spend as much time with their parents as their sibling does
- ❖ Feeling resentful that they have to support and/ or take care of their sibling
- ❖ Feeling embarrassed or confused about their sibling’s differences
- ❖ Feeling like they can’t express their feelings
- ❖ Feeling as though their problems are minimised
- ❖ Feeling different to their peers who don’t have siblings with a physical health condition
- ❖ Feeling like they’re missing out on opportunities
- ❖ Feeling upset and distressed at witnessing the impact of illness

When caregivers tune in to the *individual needs of each child* in the family, they can help ease the difficulties. Where possible, for example via support groups, it can be helpful to introduce siblings of children with physical health problems to other siblings in the same position. Having a peer with a shared experience of difficulty can be really powerful.

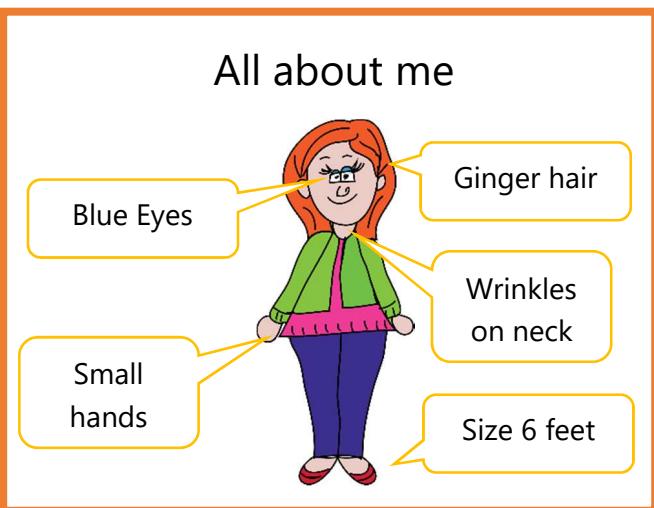
Talking about Differences

Many parents put off telling siblings about their brother or sister's physical health condition as they worry this may be too upsetting. However, talking about the differences within your family can improve understanding, yield better relationships and maintain trust.

Siblings may ask you questions about their brother or sister's health which may be difficult to answer such as "Will their problem ever go away?" It can be helpful to answer questions as ***honestly*** as possible, using simple language and visual aids such as story books for support.

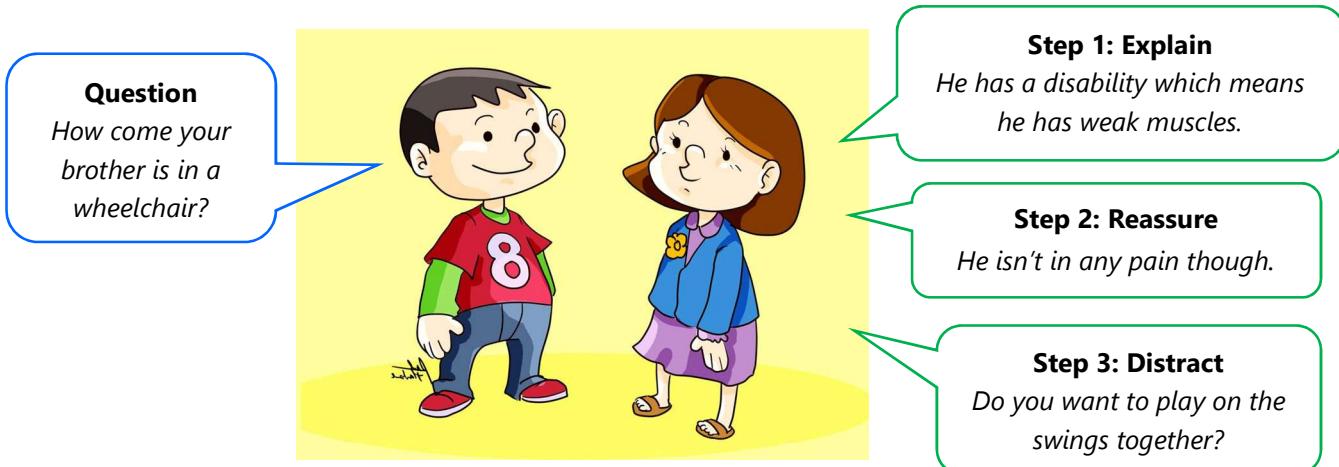
Celebrate Differences

It can be helpful to remind siblings that we are all different and each have unique characteristics. It may be useful to reinforce that differences don't have to be negative. You could try **activities** such as creating an "all about me" poster, where each family member could either draw or write about themselves, highlighting their own differences.



Responding to Comments and Questions

Sometimes siblings can be asked curious questions from others about their brother or sister's physical health condition. It may be helpful to encourage your child to use this 3-step approach to answering tricky curious questions; 1) Explain, 2) Reassure, 3) Distract.



Coping with Teasing and Bullying

Bullying is always unacceptable and should be dealt with by an adult.



Bullying can include things like calling someone a mean name, telling lies about someone or hurting someone physically. Bullies can sometimes pick on things people might get upset about, such as someone in your family being a bit different or having a physical health condition. Being aware that there is a possibility your child could be bullied, and knowing what signs to look out for may help you to respond to situations earlier.

Tips to Help Your Child Cope with Teasing and Bullying

Talk to your Child's School

It may be useful to talk to your child's school about fostering positive attitudes towards difference. This could be done through awareness days or reading around certain topics. Some children may also want to share their own experiences and this should be welcomed if desired.



Rehearse Responses

It may be helpful to do some role play with your child, to ensure they have some rehearsed responses if they are ever teased or picked on. Here is an example:

Bully: "Your brother looks stupid in his wheelchair!"

Person: "Why would you want to tell me that?"

Bully: "Because I don't like you"

Person: "Then why are you speaking to me?"

Act Calm and Walk Away

It can be normal for a child to feel angry or worried when they are being teased but it can be good not to show the bully this.

Bullies often tease others to get a reaction, so if a child can show a bully that their insults do not bother them the bully will probably get bored and give up.

It might be helpful to teach your child the importance of telling a responsible adult if they are being bullied.

Encourage Positive Self-Talk

Bullying can have a negative impact on a child's self-esteem and confidence. It is important to encourage positive self-talk in children to help them cope with their negative feelings. Examples of positive self-talk include:

- 1) My family is great and they love me.
- 2) It is the bully's problem, not mine.
- 3) I have lots of kind friends to play with.

Planning quality time

Quality over quantity

Understandably, sometimes siblings might not get as much of your time or attention as their brother or sister. Being a parent of a child with any additional needs bring extra demands on your time and this is something parents and carers can sometimes feel guilty about.

You cannot change the amount of time you need to meet the needs of your child with a physical health condition but you can put steps in place to ensure that you make the most of the time you do have to spend with siblings. This does not mean spending a lot of money on days out but just protecting time to spend with them by planning in advance. The importance of this activity lies in providing quality time for them.

These quality times with your child do not have to occur frequently but having this time repeatedly helps validate siblings as important individuals. We have included a few ideas below.

Ten minute activity jar

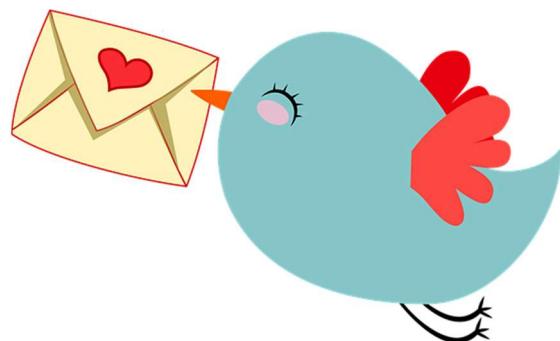
Help your sibling child to write/draw fun activities on pieces of paper, which only last ten minutes for you and a sibling to do together. Put them in a small jar with a lid. When you have a ten minutes spare, ask your sibling child to choose an activity from the jar and do it together.



Send notes



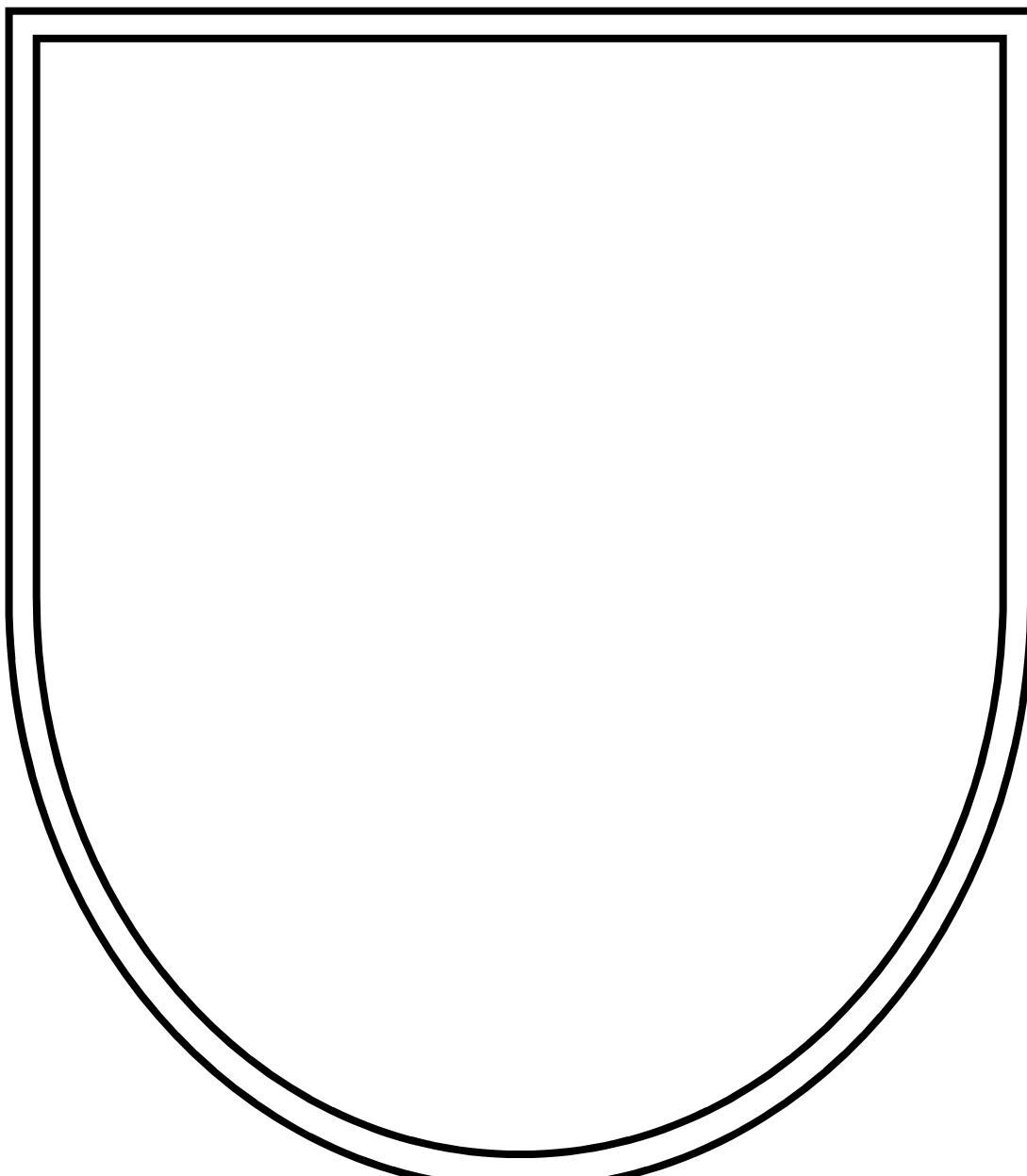
Write a note or a postcard to your sibling child. Make sure to write something fun and positive, like 'I am thinking about you today' or 'Have fun at football club'. Post it, or put it somewhere for your sibling child to find. Your sibling child could then write a note for you to find!



Identity

It is important that siblings of a child with a physical health condition have their own identity. A sense of who they are, what they would describe themselves as and what do they enjoy. **They are a sibling of a child with a physical health condition but most importantly they are a child too.**

INTERACTIVE TIME: Now it's over to you... use this personal shield template to help your child explore their identity. The shield might include: a picture of me, my family, my favourite things, my strengths, my favourite subjects, my goals and what would I like to be when I grow up.



A Celebration Page

Dear sibling, now it's over to you!

This is a page for you to celebrate being an amazing sibling. It's important to think about what feels good about being a sibling, and what makes you proud. It's also important though, to notice things that are sometimes feel tricky, and to be kind to yourself around those things. Use this page to recognise what a brilliant, supportive sibling you are!

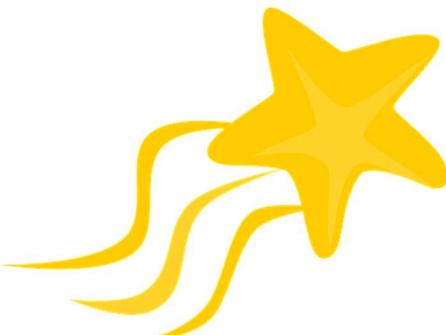
One thing I **like** about being a sibling is...



One thing that is **tricky** about being a sibling is...



One thing that makes me **proud** to be a sibling is...



The Super Sibling Award

This certificate certifies that



is a super sibling!

