

Siblings of Children with Chronic Illnesses or Disabilities

Parents are not the only ones who must adjust to a child's illness or disability. Life changes for the entire family.

Parents have to pay extra attention to a child with a chronic illness (<http://www.healthychildren.org/english/health-issues/conditions/chronic/Pages/default.aspx>) or disability (<http://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/developmental-disabilities/Pages/default.aspx>), and brothers and sisters (<http://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/family-dynamics/Pages/Brothers-and-Sisters.aspx>) may often feel neglected. They might also have difficulty learning to live with the stresses of having a sibling with a chronic health problem or disability.



How Siblings Might Feel:

- Guilt that they are not sick ("*Why him and not me?*")
- Wonder whether they might have caused their sibling's illness
- Anxious about becoming sick themselves
- Jealous and wish could become the center of the family's attention
- Angry if they are asked to assume more household chores (<http://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/family-dynamics/communication-discipline/Pages/Chores-and-Responsibility.aspx>) than their sibling with a chronic health problem
- Guilty when they resent the additional responsibility they are tasked with
- Embarrassed or even angry when strangers stare at their brother or sister in a wheelchair, or when other children tease their sibling because he or she looks different

What Parents Can Do:

Be aware that while attending to the needs of your child with a chronic illness or disability, you may be neglecting – or creating unfair expectations for – your other children. At times, siblings may feel invisible unless they demand attention. However, siblings can learn to participate in the family and feel pride and love in helping their brother or sister with his or her health problem. The presence of a family member with a chronic illness provides opportunities for increased empathy, responsibility, adaptability, problem solving and creativity.

- Try to establish some balance between the needs of your child with a chronic health problem or disability and those of your other children.
- Spending some time with each child individually may help.
- Develop a special relationship with each one of your children.
- Keep in mind that siblings need to have honest information about the condition and to have their questions listened to and answered.

Signs Siblings Are Having Trouble:

When there is a child with a chronic illness or disability in your family, your other children may experience negative effects.

Warning signs the siblings of your child with a chronic health condition or disability may need some extra attention:

- Anxious (</English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Anxiety-Disorders.aspx>)
- Depressed (<http://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Childhood-Depression-What-Parents-Can-Do-To-Help.aspx>)
- Withdrawn
- Angry
- Losing interest in friends
- Doing poorly in school (<http://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/teen/school/Pages/Poor-School-Performance-How-Parents-Can-Help.aspx>)
- Pushing too hard to achieve (<http://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/young-adult/Pages/The-Problem-with-Perfectionism.aspx>)
- Rebellious
- Losing interest in activities that once brought pleasure, such as sports (</english/healthy-living/sports/Pages/default.aspx>) or music lessons
- Acting out in other ways to get attention

If you are concerned, ask your child's pediatrician for help. He or she can guide you to local psychologists (<http://www.healthychildren.org/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Pages/Mental-Health-Care-Who%27s-Who.aspx>), social workers, family therapists (<http://www.healthychildren.org/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Pages/Mental-Health-Care-Who%27s-Who.aspx>), child life specialists, and/or support groups for siblings of children with chronic health problems or disabilities. You should not expect or attempt to solve these concerns related to the siblings of your child with a chronic illness or disability by yourself.

Developing Resilience in Your Family:

Every family will learn how to embrace and show love for a child with a chronic health problem or disability. There is no right way or wrong way for siblings to live and grow together; rather, every family should strive for its own balance and determine what are some strategies and supports that help the child with chronic health problems and her siblings to thrive and be resilient.

The ultimate goal is to build internal strengths and coping skills in your child with a chronic health problem or disability and in all of the members of your family. Many factors will influence this process, including the course of the chronic condition and the external and internal supports and resources available to the child with special needs, her siblings, and the rest of the family.

While most families with chronic health problems or disabilities struggle through times of fear and despair, many also develop an internal resilience (</English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/default.aspx>), a creativity, and a closeness or cohesiveness that helps the children with and without chronic health problems and rest of the family to manage and cope together with the many stressors that may develop over time. Often as a result of these experiences, adults and children learn about their strengths and limitations, talk more openly, and learn new ways to solve problems which fosters mastery and pride.

In the months and years ahead:

- Continue to reassess the needs and goals for your child with chronic illness or disability, their siblings, and your family.
- Be willing to learn new skills, search for supports and make changes as needed that serve both the child with the chronic health problem, their siblings, and everyone else in the family.
- As much as possible, involve all of your children in shared decision making about any health care that affects them.
- Stay informed and give yourself credit for all the hard work you and your family have done and the resiliency you have developed in your family.

Additional Information:

- How Chronic Illness or Disability Affects a Family (</English/health-issues/conditions/chronic/Pages/How%20Chronic-Illness-Affects-the-Family.aspx>)
- How to Support Your Child's Resilience in a Time of Crisis (</English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/How-to-Support-Your-Childs-Resilience-in-a-Time-of-Crisis.aspx>)
- When Things Aren't Perfect: Caring for Yourself & Your Children (</English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/When-Things-Aren't-Perfect-Caring-for-Yourself-Your-Children.aspx>)

- Recognizing & Managing Stress in Children (</English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/Recognizing-Managing-Stress-in-Children-Video.aspx>) (Video)

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