

Five Tips to Help Children Through Their Sibling's Chronic Illness

January 11, 2023 [Diane Morrow-Kondos](#)

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"Mom, he got more than I did!" "Why did she get new clothes, and I didn't?" "You like him better than me!" Those complaints probably sound familiar to you if you have more than one child. Having more than one child requires skills in doling out your time, attention, and energy, but you know there is no way to keep things perfectly evenly divided. As a parent of multiple children, you do the best you can to keep things equitable, but you also resign yourself to the fact one child will inevitably feel they got less of your time, attention, love, and resources. The imbalance is harder to avoid in a family where a child

has a chronic illness, disability, or mental health concern.

Because I have a brother with intellectual disabilities, I experienced these family dynamics firsthand. My parents loved all four of their children and were great parents to all of us, but my brother had needs that demanded more resources. I've always suspected the dynamics in a family with a child with a chronic illness, any type of disability, or a mental health problem would be similar. Friends who grew up with siblings with mental health issues confirmed we had many shared experiences. I recently read an article about children with siblings with chronic health conditions, which further confirmed my suspicions.

An article in the [Washington Post](#) discussed the sibling situation when one child has a chronic health condition. In the case discussed, the four-year-old child had cancer. When one person is ill, the entire family is impacted. In this case, the six-year-old sister was deeply troubled as she watched the family struggle through her little sister's cancer. The older sister was worried, confused, and often felt adrift without being able to play with her little sister. She sometimes even felt jealous of her sister's illness as her parents' attention (justifiably) focused on her sibling's medical needs. In this case, her feelings manifested in regressive behaviors such as wetting her pants at school. According to one study, siblings of children with a life-threatening illness have a 68 to 70 percent higher chance of health care issues, diagnoses, and prescriptions compared to siblings of children without a life-threatening condition.

As the parent of a child with a serious health condition, a mental health issue, or a disability, your plate is full. Here are five ways to help the other kids feel seen and important.

1. Communicate

Be honest with the other kids. Let them know what is happening and what to expect. Even when the news is difficult to hear, kids need to know the truth. Without information, their imagination may be constructing even worse stories. Your healthy child may be wondering if they're to blame for their sibling's illness, if the illness is contagious, or if their sibling is going to die. What may seem obvious to an adult may not be apparent to a child.

2. Acknowledge their feelings

As a parent, it may be painful to hear that your other child is feeling sad, left out, or angry because of the disruptions caused by their sibling's illness or condition. Still, allowing them to express their feelings openly and honestly is important. Feelings *will* find a way out. Providing a safe emotional environment for them to talk is critical. It's OK to let them see your emotions and for you to admit the situation is challenging for you also.

3. Time

That's our most precious commodity as parents and the one in the shortest supply when a child is sick or has a disability. Having one-on-one time is essential for the "healthy kids" in the family, even if it's a trip to the grocery store or talking while cooking a meal together. They need to be heard and seen.

4. Fun

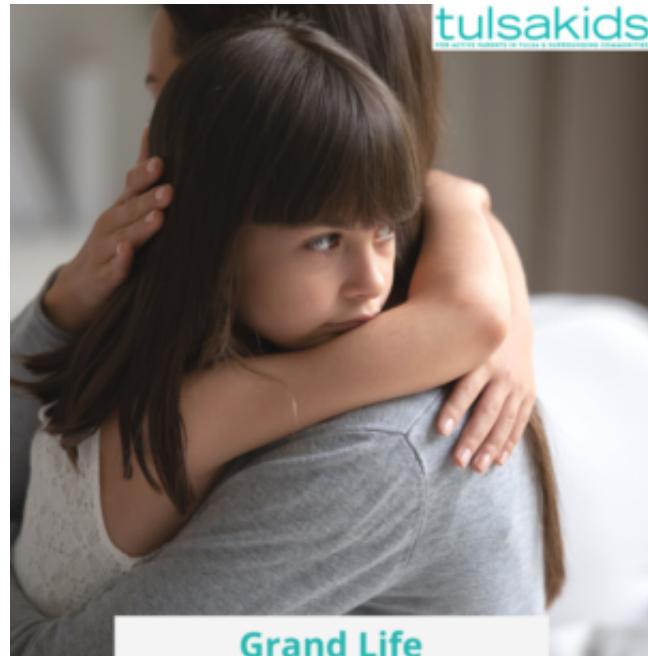
It may be a challenge to want to have fun when one of your kids is ill or requires most of your time, but your other kids are still kids and need to have some family recreation. A game night, a walk, a visit to the park, or a trip to the zoo can be a nice reprieve from the stress. It may be a movie night at home is all you have the energy for, and

that's OK. Kids need a reminder that even when life is challenging, there are still bright spots when the family can connect.

5. Be on alert

Sometimes, it's not apparent when the healthy child is having problems. Watch for [signs of anxiety or depression](#), such as doing poorly in school, losing interest in friendships, not wanting to participate in previously pleasurable activities, rebellion, or becoming too withdrawn. If you suspect a problem, ask your doctor to recommend a therapist.

When one child needs extra care, the entire family is affected. Parenting is challenging enough without adding serious illnesses, mental health issues, or disabilities. Don't be afraid to ask for help from family and friends when you're stretched too thin. Your family can not only get through a challenging situation, but you might also become closer and stronger than ever!



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BY DIANE MORROW-KONDOS