

ask the therapist

by Leslie H. Petruk, MA, LPC, NCC

Q: How do I promote the relationship between my “typical” child and my child with special needs and try to avoid ill will between them?

Sibling rivalry and sibling relationships are challenging topics in and of themselves, but when you factor in one child having special needs, it can be incredibly challenging. Family dynamics change significantly when you have a child with special needs.

Siblings of a special-needs child may experience jealousy because their brother or sister gets lots of attention due to their disability. Life often centers around a child with special needs due to doctor appointments, therapy sessions and extra assistance they may require, and can lead to their sibling(s) feeling neglected. It is also common for “typical” children to experience guilt about the fact that they don’t have special needs – particularly when they see their sibling struggling in any way.

Parents of special-needs children also face a grieving process that impacts the family dynamics. Initially, mothers, in particular, tend to feel guilty – as though they did something to contribute to or cause their child’s disability. Depression, anxiety and grief are all typical reactions of parents. Parenting a special-needs child is different than parenting a “typical” child. This can be a complicated balancing act for parents, who also often experience the same mixed bag of emotions that their typical children do – guilt for not being as available for their non-disabled child because of the needs of their child with special needs, grief over the loss of the fantasy of how their family would be, and sadness for the struggles and challenges that they see their special-needs child endures.

A child with special needs obviously has a whole different perspective. They may feel jealous towards their siblings who don’t experience their challenges and wonder, “why me?” They may feel left out or discounted, particularly when they are unable to do things that their siblings can. Amazingly, children with special needs are incredibly resilient. They often deal with their disability and challenges better than their family members. Yet that is not to say they don’t get frustrated, feel depressed or discouraged or envious of their “typical” sibling(s). Their feelings must be acknowledged and discussed.



Let them work it out.

Often parents become overprotective of their child with special needs; this can cause resentment from their siblings. Knowing when to intervene when they have conflicts among themselves can also be a difficult call. Sometimes, allowing siblings (both typical and special-needs children) the space to work out their own conflicts and challenges is necessary. Doing so may help decrease the rivalry they feel towards one another. Not taking sides, but facilitating communication of negative feelings between siblings will empower them to work out their own conflicts and reinforce the idea

that you are not giving preferential treatment to either child. A common pattern that is easy to fall in is to immediately defend or take the side of your child with special needs. This can be a precarious as it can leave your typical child(ren) feeling unheard and as though they will always be seen as the guilty party no matter what they do. This can ultimately lead to feelings of resentment towards their special-needs sibling as well as behavioral problems.

Honesty can be healing.

Allowing your child(ren) to honestly express their negative feelings as they relate to their sibling with special needs and how it impacts the family without getting defensive or taking on guilt (they won’t talk to you openly and honestly if they sense you are going to take it personally or get upset with them) gives them the permission to feel, discuss, and work through all the emotions they are experiencing. It can also be healing for you, as their parent. Facilitating conversations between your children can be incredibly healing for everyone in the family. Additionally, discussing your child’s specific disabilities and allowing your child(ren) to ask questions about their disability is critical. Young children may believe they can “catch” what their sibling has or have other inaccurate beliefs or fears they are holding onto that can be burdensome. Giving them permission to ask questions and express their feelings can relieve them of feelings of guilt, sadness or fear and clarify incorrect conclusions they may have drawn.

Children should not be caretakers.

Typical siblings can often feel as though they have to become the caretaker, whether it's for their parent(s) and/or sibling with special needs, or even other younger siblings. Being cognizant of the "roles" your children are taking on, discussing with them what it's like for them to have a sibling with special needs, and relieving them of any over-responsibility they seem to be taking on can be very freeing for them. Reassuring your child with special needs that their sibling(s) love them and recognizing when you see them doing something special for them will help them feel loved.

Live. Play. Love.

Facilitating activities between your child with special needs and typical child(ren) that they enjoy doing together will help forge a connection between them. Helping them find commonalities, reinforcing their positive interactions and allowing them to express the feelings they have towards one another are all ways to promote a positive relationship between them.

Last but not least ...

Most importantly, you, the parent(s) *must* take care of yourself *and* your marriage. The divorce rate amongst couples with special-needs children is 80%! Men and women deal with their grief differently ... caring for one another and walking through the challenges as a team can strengthen a marriage. ●

Do you have a chronically ill child?

Don't forget to take care of yourself in the process. Some of these solutions may help ease the strain:

Take one day at a time instead of focusing on the big picture, which parents in similar situations will tell you can become too overwhelming.

Ask for help in managing financial aspects of your child's illness.

Accept help from friends, family and even strangers. Meals, childcare, donations, carpool help, etc. can prove to be life preservers.

Don't forget about yourself. Make sure you are getting adequate rest and nutrition.

Try as best as you can to spend time with your other kids and spouse - even an

hour here and there will be well appreciated on both ends.

Keep a journal to help express your feelings.

Also try talking with other parents in similar situations by joining a support group.

Research your child's illness and don't be afraid to ask questions of his medical team.

Make the most of services offered through your hospital and develop a relationship with your child's team of physicians.



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A: They're all Young & Polite!

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Ages 1-18 and children or adults with special needs are welcome.



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