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+ Sibling of Special Needs Children:

Challenges and Strategies To Help Positive Development



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+ Overview

- 1. Sibling Relationships
- 2. Challenges of Siblings of Children with Special Needs
- 3. Strategies
- 4. Resources

■ This webinar refers to special needs broadly:

- Physical, Mental, Behavioral, Social, Emotional, Learning based
 - This webinar is not specific to one particular condition or disorder

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+ Sibling Relationships

- Worldwide 80-90% of children have a sibling
- One of the most long lasting enduring relationships
- Part of the family system and affects relationships
- Children often spend more time with their sibling than anyone else

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+ Sibling Relationships

- The sibling relationship is key to development
 - Attachment
 - Positive secure sibling attachment
 - Positive social emotional development, and self image
 - Negative unsecure sibling attachment
 - More at risk to view world as negative, have difficulty with anxiety, depression, trust, and behavior
 - Social Learning -
 - Observing and modeling behavior, generalizing to relationships outside the home
 - Social Problem Solving – conflict resolution, managing feelings

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+ Sibling Relationships


- Direct/indirect affect on development
 - Behavior
 - Learning
 - Social Skills/ Relationships
 - Self Esteem
 - School Performance
 - Social Problem Solving
 - Stress and mood management skills

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+ Sibling Relationships

- Love
- Companionship
- Support
- Caring
- Friendship
- Loyalty
- Role Modeling
- Rivalry
- Power (Perceived or Real)



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+ Sibling Relationships

- **Fairness**
 - Attention, access to resources, opportunities, affection, consequences, rewards, differential treatment
 - Is fair always equal? (has to do with needs, level playing field, rules)
 - ex. Bed time for 9yo vs teen, Tutor for LD sib but not the other
- **Sharing**
 - Dividing up resources, borrowing, taking turns, waiting, patience, delaying gratification, empathy, perspective taking
- **Conflicts**
 - Verbal, physical, resolution, managing emotions (jealousy, anger), problem solving, self efficacy, learned helplessness, trust, rivalry
- **Helping**
 - Responsibility, empathy, awareness of others, compassion, loyalty, morals, values

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+ Sibling Relationships

- **Research meta analysis Buist, Dekovic, and Prinzie (2012)**
 - Looking at Sibling relationships and internalizing/externalizing problems
 - Three key areas covered by many studies
 - Warmth –intimacy, affection, companionship
 - Conflict –fighting, arguing, hostility, aggression
 - Parental Differential Treatment – Perceived by siblings
- **Key findings show:**
 - More warmth linked to less internal and external problems
 - More conflict linked to more internal and external problems
 - More differential treatment linked to more internal and external problems

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+ Sibling Relationships

- **Warmth**
 - Some studies have shown that more sibling warmth is linked with externalizing behavior problems in clinical samples where there is a history of aggression, acting out, and delinquency
 - Typically this occurs with brothers, younger bro imitates
- **Conflict**
 - Sibling relationship, if too much conflict, could generalize outside the family, lead to less empathy and behavior problems
- **Differential Treatment**
 - Unavoidable, occurs naturally, age differences, personality differences, special needs, kids may act out to get parent attention
 - Important parents are aware and make adjustments


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+ Sibling Relationships

- Family Factors
 - Relationships - harmony/stress/communication
 - Parent(s)/guardian(s)
 - Married, single, divorced, step, guardians, other
 - Marital discord – linked to more sibling conflict
 - Parent relationship with each sibling, and parent
 - Sibling relationships with each other
 - First/later born reaction, step siblings, # of siblings
 - Extended family relationships and support
 - Responsibilities, chores, rules, roles, activities, values
 - Where family lives: city/town, home, space/size, bed & bathrooms
 - Socio-economic status, income

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Siblings of Children with Special Needs: Challenges



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+ Siblings of Children with Special Needs: Challenges

- A child or adolescent who has a sibling with special needs
 - This child may or may not have their own special needs
 - Not recommended to call them the “normal” or “typical” child
 - Every child is unique
- The sibling with special needs might have a disability that is
 - Chronic or acute
 - Physical, Mental, Behavioral, Social, Emotional, Learning based

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+ Siblings of Children with Special Needs: Challenges

- Positive impacts for a sibling of child with special needs
 - Can foster the development of very responsible child
 - Asset to the family/ helper for the parents
 - Taking on responsibilities, dependable
 - A sense of loyalty, maturity
 - Development of Social Emotional Skills
 - Strong sense of empathy for those in need
 - Managing conflicts and challenges
 - Patience
 - Resiliency and grit
 - Social problem solving and decision making

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+ Siblings of Children with Special Needs: Challenges

- Challenges
 - Social Emotional Stress
 - Jealousy
 - Anger
 - Embarrassment
 - Stress/Worry
 - Guilt
 - Sadness/ depression/ withdrawal

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+ Siblings of Children with Special Needs: Challenges

- Challenges continued...
 - Stress placed on family resources
 - Differential treatment from parents including attention
 - Evaluating fairness
 - Pressure to be the perfect child, "The Gifted Child"
 - More care taking responsibilities
 - Social Learning and Conflict
 - Imitating negative behaviors
 - Conflict/ Rivalry
 - Sibling verbal or physical aggression or abuse
 - Acting out to get attention

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+ Siblings of Children with Special Needs: Challenges

- Studies have found that siblings of children with special needs have:
 - 60% increased risk for internalizing and externalizing behavior problems
 - Depression, irritability, withdrawal, isolation
 - Anxiety, guilt
 - Isolation
 - Low self esteem
 - Lower school performance
 - More conflicts outside of the home
 - Peer problems, hyperactivity

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+ Siblings of Children with Special Needs: Challenges

- Children differ in how they respond to a sibling with special needs
 - This changes over time, and is affected by many variables
 - Some may be overly compliant, others defiant
 - Some may act out, others may remain silent to keep the peace
 - Young children often act out more than use words
 - Older children and teens understand more
- Every sibling relationship is unique

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+ Siblings of Children with Special Needs: Challenges

- Variables effecting relationships:
 - Type of disability
 - Tourette Syndrome, Autism, Down Syndrome, OCD, Anxiety, Mood, ADHD, Learning Disabilities, Multiple Disabilities, etc...
 - Severity of disability
 - Age of children:
 - Closer in age more conflict, typically better adjustment and relationship as siblings age
 - Environmental variables:
 - Socio-economic status
 - Martial relationship, family schedule, routines, stress
 - Individual/family characteristics:
 - Resiliency, personality, culture, size of family, past history

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+ Siblings of Children with Special Needs: Challenges

Brief notes on specific conditions...

- Tourette Syndrome: Understanding/ communication key
- OCD: Siblings accommodation of rituals
- Anxiety/Depression: Not always aware (internal), can be irritating for siblings
- Learning Disabilities: Most siblings patient, parents can feel guilty spending more time with one child, ometimes teasing, embarrassment


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+ Siblings of Children with Special Needs: Challenges

- Autism: Sometimes less warmth between siblings
- Down Syndrome: Less conflict more positive relationship
- Rage/Anger: Can be very disruptive, safety issues, sibling abuse, can be scary, learned helplessness for young ones

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Siblings of Children with Special Needs: Strategies



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+ Siblings of Children with Special Needs: Strategies

- Goals for helping siblings of children with special needs:
 - Increase positive interactions between siblings:
 - Increase “warmth” and decrease “conflict”
 - Increase positive life experiences for the sibling w/out special needs
 - Give attention, manage fairness, understand, communicate, reduce stress
 - Increase positive family interactions
 - Make adjustments to improve family communication, organization, and overall stress

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+ Siblings of Children with Special Needs: Strategies

- **S**peak – Communicate with the child about their sibling
- **I**nvestigate – Ask what they are thinking/feeling
- **B**est family possible – Work on improving family life

- **F**airness – Manage perceived fairness
- **A**ddress needs – Support the sibling's needs
- **I**ndividual experiences – Give the sibling their own...
- **R**ole model - Model positive behavior for the children

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+ Siblings of Children with Special Needs: SIB FAIR

- **S**peak - Communicate with sibling about their brother/sister's special need
 - As much as developmentally appropriate
 - Acknowledge all perspectives
 - Teach, discuss, and model for them how to respond to difficulties
 - Social problem solving (Problem, Feeling, Goal, Solution)
 - Keep calm
 - Safe place
 - Take a break
 - Conflict resolution
 - Empathy, taking others perspectives

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+ Siblings of Children with Special Needs: SIB FAIR

- **Investigate** - Ask sibling how they feel, and what their needs are
 - Empathize and acknowledge sibling w/out special needs
 - Whats up, I noticed that...
 - Listen without telling them how to feel
 - Get their perspective
 - Siblings often are concerned about behaviors that are related to them interpersonally, even if the special needs sibling is truly struggling
 - Ex. "She is annoying me, irritating me, arguing with me"
 - Instead of taking the parents perspective that more is going on
 - Listen to them, validate their feelings: "I understand how it might feel for you"
 - "Ask them how they feel about something, and "is it ok for them"

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+ Siblings of Children with Special Needs: SIB FAIR

- **Best family possible** – Improve family activities
 - Assess family rules, roles, responsibilities and communication
 - Create and modify family rules that everyone has to follow
 - Make changes if sibling w/out special needs is over burdened
 - Work to improve family relationships and reduce stress at home
 - Marriage, pets, time spent together, activities, school, work

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+ Siblings of Children with Special Needs: SIB FAIR

- **Best family possible** – Improve family activities
 - Schedule regular family activities and routines
 - Dinner, game night, quiet time, etc.
 - Pick family activities w/ good chance of being successful
 - **GET/ASK FOR SUPPORT IF NEEDED!**
 - Extended family - (Grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc...)
 - Could be great source of support, sometimes left in the dark
 - Single parents
 - Friends, other care takers, neighbors
 - Therapeutic services

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+ Siblings of Children with Special Needs: SIB FAIR

- **Fairness** – Manage perceived fairness
 - Chores and household tasks evenly divided (as much as is practical)
 - Track attention given to one child over the other – make up difference
 - Ex. When one child is at the doctor or special activity, spend quality time with the other sibling
 - Don't play favorites
 - Check on sibling feelings of fairness: how are you feeling about this?
 - Its very important how the siblings perceive fairness:
 - Can use behavior charts so its clear and visual
 - Parents can split time with different siblings
 - Child 1 goes with dad today, Child 2 with mom etc..
 - Explain that fair is not always equal.
 - Fair is about needs, a level playing field

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+ Siblings of Children with Special Needs: SIB FAIR

- **Address needs** - Support the sibling's needs
 - The sibling without special needs has their own needs, which might or might not be special needs in their own right
 - Withdrawal, acting out, poor school performance, anxiety
 - Counseling/therapy, groups, support, school assistance
 - If dangerous situations occur ensure safety
 - Stop physical fights and act immediately if any signs of abuse

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+ Siblings of Children with Special Needs: SIB FAIR

- **Individual experiences**- Give sibling w/out special needs their OWN:
 - Space
 - Attention
 - Time
 - Ability to express themselves and do something they want
 - Let them develop friendships and a social life outside the home
 - Activities can be planned with parents without the other sibling
 - This should be done guilt free!

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+ Siblings of Children with Special Needs: SIB FAIR

- **Role model** - Model positive behavior for the children
 - Parents demonstrating in their interactions with each other and the children empathy, respect and appropriate social skills
 - Roll play how to respond to difficult situations
 - Tics, comments from friends at school
 - Take 5 before reacting, follow through
 - Demonstrate for siblings proactive ways to handle stress and solve problems
 - Ask for help when it is needed
 - Not letting anger get the best of them
 - Drop issues and focus on moving forward
 - Collaborative problem solving approach is often helpful

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Siblings of Children with Special Needs: Resources



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+ Siblings of Children with Special Needs: Resources

- The Sibling Support Project <https://www.siblingsupport.org/>
 - Full of information, "Sibshops", local groups, publications
 - Nice slide show of sibling quotes
 - <http://www.slideshare.net/DonMeyer18/how-to-let-young-siblings-know-you-care>



The Sibling Support Project

About the Sibling Support Project: Founded in 1990, the Sibling Support Project is the first national program dedicated to the life-long and ever-changing concerns of millions of brothers and sisters of people with special health, developmental, and mental health concerns. We've published books for and about brothers and sisters, host online groups for teen and adult siblings, and presented workshops on sibling issues internationally and in every state. However, we're best known for helping local communities start Sibshops—lively peer support groups for school-age brothers and sisters of kids with special needs.

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+ Siblings of Children with Special Needs: Resources

- Rutgers Tourette Program
 - Siblings Group
- University of Michigan
 - <http://www.med.umich.edu/yourchild/topics/specneed.htm>
- NYU Child Study Center
 - <http://www.med.nyu.edu/child-adolescent-psychiatry/news/csc-news/2015/special-bonds-fostering-sibling-relationships-when-one-child-has-health-condition>
- Parent Center Hub
 - <http://www.parentcenterhub.org/repository/siblings/>

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+ Siblings of Children with Special Needs

- Questions? Thank you
- Contact information
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