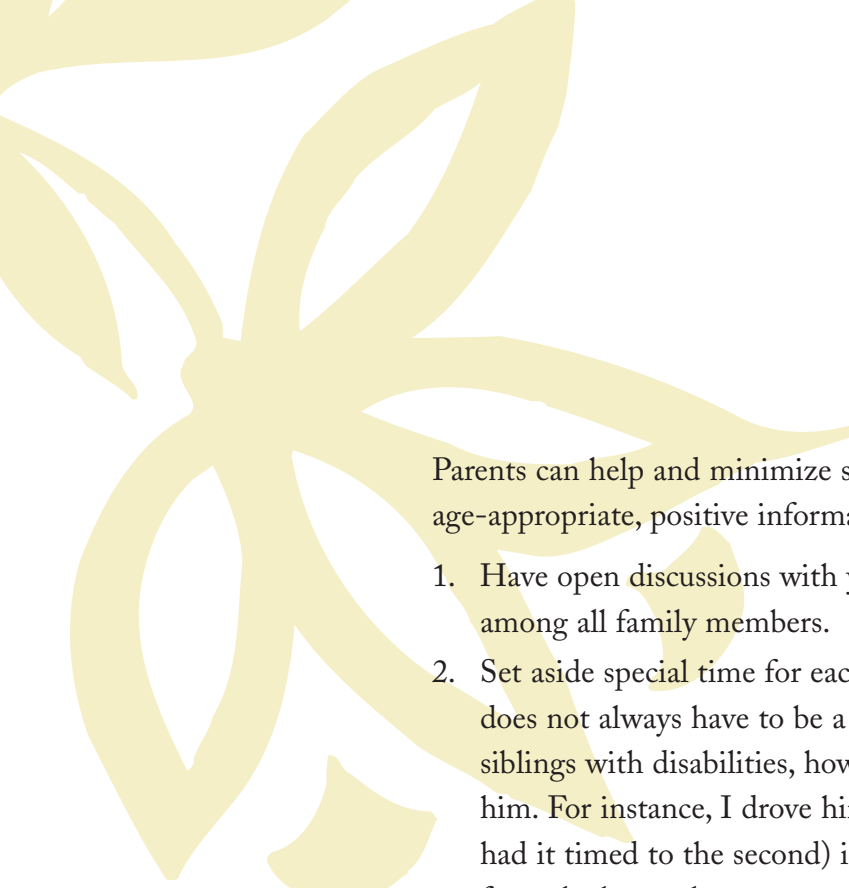


A Message From a Parent Brothers & Sisters—the Siblings

FOR ME, PARENTING A CHILD WITH A DISABILITY IS NOT EASY, and I can't compare my "parenting" experience with others because my experience has so many unique aspects to it. I think it's fair to extend this observation to other parents of children with disabilities and even to brothers and sisters of children with disabilities. Many siblings have the same concerns as their parents about their siblings with disabilities. Siblings influence the social, emotional and psychological development of each child in the family and play important roles for one another. They start as playmates and change roles throughout life, sometimes becoming each other's friend, companion, teacher, enemy, competitor, mentor and more. But when there's a child with a disability, the normal progression of the sibling relationship may change and roles reverse. Many times, a younger sibling becomes a big brother or sister to the older sibling who has a disability.

Siblings often have a host of worries involving their brother or sister with a disability including, but not limited to:

- What will happen in the future?
- Will I have to care for my brother or sister?
- Will I always be embarrassed by his/her behavior or condition?
- Will I always feel ashamed of my brother/sister?
- Will I be able to bring my friends home?
- Why do my parents pay so much attention to my brother/sister?
- Why don't my parents love me as much as my brother/sister?
- Did I cause my brother's/sister's disability?
- Why do I feel angry about my brother/sister?
- Why can't we do things like other families?



Parents can help and minimize siblings' concerns by providing them with honest, age-appropriate, positive information about the disability and what to expect.

1. Have open discussions with your family and encourage good communication among all family members.
2. Set aside special time for each child on a regular and frequent basis. This time does not always have to be a fun activity. My oldest son had to endure having two siblings with disabilities, however, I worked very hard to have alone time with him. For instance, I drove him to school every morning and for 35 minutes (we had it timed to the second) it was just the two of us and we discussed everything from the best cologne to wear to attract girls (he was ten), to presidential politics, to whether I thought that my daughter would ever walk (a tough one).
3. Reassure siblings by bringing them into the “loop” so that they know what’s going on and can contribute in their own ways.
4. Let each child know that he or she has a right to pursue his or her dreams, so that hopefully their involvement with their sibling when they’re older will be a choice rather than an obligation.

One resource for parents and others interested in sibling interactions can be found at <http://www.siblingsupport.org/sibshops>. This site contains information about Sibshops which are events that create opportunities for support and networking for brothers and sisters of siblings with special needs. Sibshops recognize that having a sibling with a disability is a wonderful experience for some, a difficult experience for others, and a somewhat in-between experience for yet others. Sibshops focus on celebrating having a sibling with a disability. They are a spirited mix of new games (designed to be unique, off-beat, and appealing to a wide ability range), new friends, and discussion activities.

It has been a blessing for me to have three children—they balance one another. One day, years ago, my daughter was having a bad day and started crying. When my oldest son asked her what was wrong, she responded by saying, “I hate my legs!” My son very seriously looked down at his chubby legs and said, “Yeah, I know what you mean—I hate mine, too!” She immediately stopped crying to laugh at him, and I felt a burden lift. Love and enjoy your children and encourage them to love and enjoy each other, too!