



Supporting Siblings at School

Small Ways to Make a Big Difference for Siblings of Children with Disabilities

Dear Teachers and School Personnel,

Do you know siblings of children with support needs? Chances are you do, as most kids with disabilities have at least one brother or sister.

These siblings will have the longest-lasting relationship with their brothers and sisters who have disabilities—a relationship easily in excess of 65 years. Research confirms that siblings' concerns parallel parents' concerns, but all too often, sibs' issues are overlooked.

In popular culture, siblings are often portrayed as heroic and self-sacrificing. Indeed, many sibs have qualities such as insight, compassion, maturity, loyalty, pride, advocacy, knowledge of disabilities, and a commitment to social justice.

But for many, being a sib can also be hard, with feelings of guilt, resentment, isolation, embarrassment, future and safety concerns, increased caregiving demands, and a perceived pressure to be "the good kid."

For most sibs, having a brother or sister with support needs is not "all good" nor all "not-so-good." It's "all of the above," with the good and not-so-good stuff happening simultaneously. It can be rewarding, but is often not easy.

Like their parents, these young sibs deserve support and considerations. Here are a few things teachers, counselors, and other school personnel can do to help.

Acknowledge the sibs in our school communities. We asked adult sibs how school staff supported them when they were kids. Here's what we heard:

- *I had two teachers who asked about me, who cared how I was doing, who asked if I was getting out enough and if I needed anything. They also asked about my sib—but their focus was on me. They were a great encouragement.*
- *One of my 6th grade teachers sensed my struggle. I am grateful to her and am still in touch with her.*
- *Mrs. B. was a resource teacher at my elementary school. When my mom came to school to talk to her about my sister, Mrs. B. would always walk over and hand me a book. It was a simple gesture, but it made a big impact.*
- *I liked it when teachers treated me like an individual and not an extension of my sibling.*

- *When teachers talked to me, I felt like a person, not just my sister's little sister. Not just the "other one." I felt seen for me separate from my sister and her diagnosis.*

Little things, these siblings say, mean a lot.

Help sibs get the support they deserve. All too often, we meet sibs who are in their forties who are only now connecting with their peers. That's a long time to wait for validation! Like their parents, young siblings like to hear their experiences described and confirmed. They benefit from opportunities to voice fears, hopes, and doubts with others who "get it" and learn that others are facing the same problems that they do.

Sibshops provide young brothers and sisters with peer support and information in a lively recreational context that emphasizes wellness. There are now hundreds of Sibshops worldwide. You can learn more about [Sibshops](#) and [where they can be found](#) at our website. If you would like to start a Sibshop in your community or school, please drop us a line at info@siblingsupport.org

Other sources of support include our closed Facebook group called SibTeen, and books for young readers such as *Views from Our Shoes*; *the Sibling Slam Book*; *Wonder*; *Al Capone Does My Shirts*, and *Tru Confessions*.

Help parents and colleagues learn more about sibling issues. There's lots to learn about life as a sib, but a great place to start is with the papers ["What Siblings Would Like Parents and Service Providers to Know"](#) and ["How to Let Young Siblings Know that You Care."](#) Both can be found on our website and may be reproduced to share with parents and providers. And please share this short paper with your colleagues.

We know teachers and school staff are especially busy people. We are grateful for your taking time to read this. Thank you for keeping an eye out for those young brothers and sisters in your community. If we can be of assistance, we hope you will reach out to us.



The Sibling Support Project

A [Kinderling](#) Program

Emily Holl, Director

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www.siblingsupport.org