

Sibling Support

How Can Parents of Children with Mental Health Needs Support Typically-Developing Siblings?



Go Easy on Yourself

- **Try to let go of the guilt.** Many parents feel guilty for spending more time and resources with their children with mental health needs than they do with their other children. Try not to! Remember that fair isn't everybody getting the same thing - fair is everyone getting what they need, and sometimes that means one child gets more of your time than the others do.
- **Don't blame yourself.** It's easy to blame ourselves for our children's struggles. But noticing the differences between siblings can help us remember that most of our kids' challenges have little to do with our actions - after all, both siblings grew up with the same parents! Our kids were born to be their own wonderful (and sometimes tricky) selves, and would be who they are no matter how perfectly they were parented.
- **It's OK to not to know.** It can be hard to see your child struggling - and to field questions from their siblings - when you don't have all the answers. Remember that no one does! It's fine to go with your gut, or to ask a professional like your child's therapist for help answering a question.
- **Don't forget to take care of yourself!** Taking care of a child with mental health needs AND their siblings is a huge job. Be sure to recharge your own batteries - take a walk, get a massage, or just stare at your favorite TV show for awhile. Not only do you deserve it, but the better you are feeling, the more you will have to give to your children.

Just for Siblings

- **Encourage your typically-developing children to have their own activities.** With everything that you do for your differently-abled child, it can feel hard to fit anything else in the calendar! But when you can, find time to encourage your typically-developing children to engage in activities that are just for them.
- **Encourage your typically-developing children to make their own friends.** If your home becomes too stressful a place to host friends, schedule meet-ups at a neutral location like a local park, or help a friend's family host by providing food and/or activities.
- **Check up on siblings.** From time to time, ask your other children how they are doing and how they are coping with their sibling's challenges. Encourage siblings to speak up for themselves and when they do, praise them and take what they say seriously. And be on the lookout for sibling anxiety and depression; don't hesitate to consult a therapist about your typically-developing child's needs.





Parent/Professional
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Talk about it*

- **Talk openly with siblings:** The most effective intervention for siblings is for parents/guardians to talk openly with them in age-appropriate language, acknowledging the challenging family life.
- **Validate the sibling experience:** Listen actively to the sibling, and validate their complaints (“I understand you get angry when your sibling does such-and-such”). This will let the sibling know that their concerns are important, and that you understand what they are going through.
- **Try individual or family therapy:** Individual and/or family therapy with a trained clinician can be extremely beneficial for siblings.



- **Encourage siblings to attend sibling support groups:** Sibling support groups with adult facilitators provide a safe and welcoming environment for siblings to talk with other sibs who appreciate what they’re going through. It can feel both comforting and liberating for siblings to meet others who share their experiences.
- If you have trouble finding a sibling support group, **try to connect with other families of children with mental health needs** that you might meet through your child’s school or Special Education Parent Advisory Council (SEPAC) or through parent support groups that you attend. Maybe the families you meet also have siblings that would like to get together with your typically-developing children and talk about common experiences.

*Source: Emily Rubin, MA, LICSW, Director of Sibling Support, University of Massachusetts, Eunice Kennedy Shriver Center

Resources

- **Massachusetts Sibling Support Network | emily.rubin@umassmed.edu**
The MSSN provides education, community-building, and a listing of sibling support groups.
- **Federation for Children with Special Needs | www.fcsn.org**
The FCSN provides information and education, and guidance with the special education system.
- **National Alliance on Mental Illness | www.nami.org/youth**
NAMI offers information, support and local programs for families of people with mental illness.
- **Parent/Professional Advocacy League (PPAL) | www.ppal.net**
PPAL provides resources and support for children with mental health needs and their families.

