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## Helping siblings of children with special needs

Siblings and parents of children with special needs have unique challenges to overcome. Regardless of whether the special needs are medical or developmental, the child with needs will receive the greater share of time and attention. Parents often feel the guilt of being unable to provide sufficient services to their typically developing children, as most brothers and sisters enjoy fewer programs, services and considerations (ARCH, 1993) .

The relationship between children with special needs and their siblings often does not mirror those of typical sibling relations. However, these relationships are often more enduring than typical, as siblings will often become the guardian and/or primary care giver of their brother or sister when parents are unable to continue care (Boyse, 2006). In order to ensure a positive relationship between siblings now, and in the years to come, it is essential to be proactive and prepared.

### Helpful Hints:

1. Maintain an open and honest conversation with siblings of special children. Ensure they are provided with correct terminology and a clear understanding of the diagnosis, symptoms and treatments. Seek out books, videos and other resources specific to the situation. Many hospitals and education centres have loaning libraries.
2. Include siblings in trips to the hospital, the physician and specialists. Allow them to view the environments where their brother or sister will be spending time, receiving treatments or learning.
3. Arrange for time for siblings to talk to physicians, nurses or teachers to ask their questions and feel that they are included. The entire family should be a part of the process to help a child with special needs. This may require parents to book additional appointment times or have their child prepare questions in advance.
4. Allow children to interact as siblings, excluding the consideration of special needs. See times of sibling rivalry, teasing and arguing as typical interactions between brothers and sisters. Celebrate these times as the "normal" times within a family, and react accordingly. It is important that siblings see things as "fair", meaning that a child with special needs who takes a toy or cheats at a game should receive similar consequences to their sibling.
5. Siblings of children with special needs need to find places in their lives where they are normal. Enrol them in sports, arts or other groups that allow them to be themselves, and not the sibling of.
6. Lastly, seek out community resources and supports for your children. Many communities offer sibling support groups, drop-ins or camps to allow children to interact with other siblings of children with special needs (Meyer & Vadasy, 2008).

### Next Steps:

We encourage you to visit the eXL website for a listing of upcoming family and siblings support services. [www.exlcentre.com](http://www.exlcentre.com).

### References:

ARCH National Resource Center for Respite and Crisis Care Services. (1993). Siblings of Children with Special Health and Developmental Needs. Factsheet Number 23. [www.archrespite.org](http://www.archrespite.org).

Boyse, K. (2006). Siblings of kids with special needs. university of Michigan Health Systems. [www.med.umich.edu/1libr/yourchild/specneed.htm](http://www.med.umich.edu/1libr/yourchild/specneed.htm).

Meyer, D. & Vasady, P. (2008). Sibshops: Workshops for Siblings of Children with Special Needs, Revised Edition. 264p.