



SAARA BULLETIN

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Preventing Sibling Aggression and Abuse for Children with Disabilities

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Key Points

- Children with autism spectrum disorder and physical disabilities are at particular risk of mistreatment from siblings.
- Children on the autism spectrum or with disruptive behavior disorders are more likely to harm their siblings than are typically developing children.
- Parents can lower the risk of sibling harm by encouraging positive sibling interactions, avoiding favoritism, and keeping a watchful eye for signs of sibling aggression and abuse.

Disability and Sibling Relationships

In the U.S., one in six children has developmental or neurodevelopmental disabilities like autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, or cerebral palsy. In families where one or more children have disabilities, sibling relationships may differ

from those between typically developing children. However, though there are differences, these sibling relationships can provide important sources of support, companionship, and well-being throughout life.

Sibling relationship quality is shaped by the nature and extent of children's disabilities and by how siblings respond to them. Some typically developing siblings report that they have no or a poor relationship with their sibling with disabilities. Others say they value their sibling and their relationship, citing how their sibling has taught them qualities such as patience and appreciation. Research consistently shows that greater levels of disability are associated with increased challenges for the quality of siblings' interactions.

Increased Risk for Sibling Aggression and Abuse

While many children with disabilities have positive sibling relationships, some can face difficulties that increase their risk of harming or being harmed by their siblings. Aggressive and even abusive behaviors can occur when one or more children have trouble expressing their feelings, controlling their impulses, or managing and resolving disagreements effectively (see *SAARA Bulletins #1 and #4*).

Sibling difficulties also can arise because typically developing children often assume altered roles—such as caregiver, advocate, or protector—in relation to their siblings with disabilities. Siblings who assume caregiving or supportive roles are helpful to parents and may strengthen their sibling bonds. But these roles can also increase their vulnerability to both harming a sibling and being harmed by one.

Perceived parental favoritism—whether that perception is justified or not—is associated with negative sibling dynamics. Children who have siblings with disabilities may be especially sensitive to parental favoritism and fairness. This is usually because children with disabilities require more care or attention from parents to meet their needs, which can leave other siblings feeling neglected, bitter, or overlooked. Other ways children are treated differently based on their development and ability levels, such as differences in responsibilities and privileges, can also lead to sibling rivalry and resentment, even when the differences in treatment are appropriate. In turn, children's feelings of loss of attention, resentment, and intense sibling rivalry may lead to aggressive behaviors.

Research on the links between specific disabilities and the risk of sibling aggression and abuse is limited but continues to grow. Children with autism spectrum disorder or disruptive behavior disorders are more likely to harm their siblings. Additionally, those with autism spectrum disorder and physical disabilities are especially at risk of being harmed by their siblings. In some cases, children with disabilities may not be able to tell someone if a sibling is harming them.

Supporting Positive Sibling Bonds

Parents of children with disabilities may notice that siblings spend more time together and interact more easily in childhood than as they grow older. With age and maturity, typically developing siblings will likely go beyond their siblings with disabilities in terms of development and experiences with friends, teachers, romantic partners, and co-workers, possibly making it harder for them to relate.

In families with one or more children with a disability, parents can promote positive sibling interactions by setting optimistic but realistic expectations about their children's relationships with one another. Realistic expectations include awareness that the quality of siblings' involvement can vary with children's ages, developmental levels, or the nature and extent of disability, and with the degree to which these characteristics align.

With these realistic expectations in mind, there are some steps parents can take to nurture strong sibling bonds:

1. Recognize each child's strengths, such as cooperativeness or helpfulness, and encourage them to use these strengths during shared activities.
2. Create opportunities for siblings to have shared interests and spend meaningful time together. When children are older, encourage them to also take some responsibility for the nature of their relationship with one another.
3. Praise children when they get along and work together.
4. Model and coach children in listening, perspective-taking, and problem-solving. There are parenting resources available to help parents and children develop these skills (see *SAARA Bulletins* #2 and #3).

Parents should be alert to children's feelings of loss of attention, resentment, and intense sibling rivalry, which can lead to aggression. When children express such feelings, parents are advised to listen empathetically and be accepting yet realistic. They may need to explain why some differences in treatment are fair due to age or ability needs and help their children build resilience. Parents can also ask children what they need and work with them to find solutions, such as spending one-on-one time with each child.

Closely monitoring children's interactions for signs of aggression or abuse is essential when children's disabilities involve difficulty communicating or recognizing harmful behaviors. When negative sibling interactions occur, parents should not ignore them—whether they see them or are told about them by their child—as temporary or harmless.

In families that include children with disabilities, parenting requires a balance of meeting children's unique needs, setting realistic expectations, and monitoring sibling dynamics. By actively fostering a strong foundation for sibling relationships and teaching key social and emotional skills, parents can prevent or reduce the risk of sibling aggression and abuse. 🇺🇸🇨🇦

For More Information:

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