

RESPIRE TIP



SIBLING SUPPORT

Families are both 'strengthened and stressed' by having a family member with a disability (Marci Wheeler, M.S.W.). Strengths can be found in the excitement and joy of shared experiences, in building self-esteem in all family members and through improving life situations. Stresses can be financial or emotional as families work on finding supports and building awareness in community. Parents and siblings both struggle with understanding the disability and the effects it has on their lives and on the family.

Strengths and Stresses

Siblings tend to be more compassionate and understanding than their peers. They tend to be more mature and they are better prepared to think about and help others around them. Siblings can be a positive influence on their brother or sister with a disability and can be first playmates and natural teachers for their siblings. Their positive attitude and acceptance increases the self-esteem of the child living with disability as well as their own.

However, siblings can have challenging feelings such as worry about the family member, jealousy, resentment (being left out or not receiving much attention), guilt, embarrassment about the family member and concerns for the future. These can be quite overpowering and they may need some help to deal with these feelings.

What do Siblings need?

Siblings need support and information as much as parents do but this need is often not considered. Siblings will have a longer term relationship with their brother/sister, and they may be expected to provide long-term care for their sibling after their parents are gone.

Families can support siblings by:

- **Talking.** Provide information that is open, honest, ongoing, and understandable to the sibling at his/her age and stage of life. Give good information to the sibling but give them what they are able to manage. Simple language is important for younger children. Give them small bites of information – just what they need for that time. Children may develop worries about the disability, for example that they may catch the disability or that they are the cause of it. Being honest about the disability and its characteristics will help the sibling understand and prevent anxiety.
- **Spending time with the sibling.** Be sure to give consistent attention to the sibling – try to set aside a short time each day when you do something special with the sibling. This may be 10 minutes each night before bedtime where you read a book or play a special game.
- **Celebrating successes.** Everyone likes to be noticed and appreciated. Don't forget to celebrate achievements and successes. Recognizing even a small event can mean a great deal to your child.
- **Teaching.** Help siblings to learn about their family member's disability and the best ways to interact and support their sibling. Search for resources through:

- professionals working with your child
- community support groups

Some organizations have lending libraries for information, e.g.:

- IWK Family Resource Library: Telephone: 902-470-8982
<http://www.iwk.nshealth.ca/childrens-health/services/#/childrens-health/services/family-resource-library>
 - Halifax Association for Community Living Resource Library:
Telephone: 902-463-4752 <http://www.halifaxacl.com/index.html>
 - Autism Nova Scotia: Telephone: 902-446-4995
<http://www.autismnovascotia.ca/about-us>
 - Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus Association of Nova Scotia: www.sbhans.ca
Telephone: toll free (within nova scotia): 1-800-304-0450
- **Providing Private time.** Give siblings some choice about spending time with their brother/sister. Siblings need time for their own activities and should not always be expected to support their brother/sister. Respect their need for private time.

Other ways to find Support

Siblings may find that connecting with other siblings can be helpful. Some ways for siblings to connect and support each other are:

- **Sib group** - The Progress Centre for Early Intervention (Halifax) offers a Super Sibs group on HRSB (Halifax Regional School Board) school in-service days. For more information please contact 902-423-2686.
- **The Sibling Support Project** <https://www.siblingsupport.org/> is based in Seattle, Washington. It offers lots of information related to starting a sibling workshop (sibshop) program in your community. For more information, go to: <https://www.siblingsupport.org/about-sibshops>
Sibnet and SibKids – The internet is another way to connect with siblings for support. The Sibling Support Project has two listserv groups: SibNet for adults and SibKids for youth. To connect, go to: <https://www.siblingsupport.org/connect-with-others-sibs/meeting-other-sibs-online>. Or go to Facebook and search for Sibling support groups.

Finally, there is community support in Atlantic Canada which is special and unique. Camp Triumph is a summer camp experience for children ages 8 – 17 years who have a family member with a chronic illness or disability, but do not have a disability themselves. Campers go for a week and there is no fee for the camp. Parents are responsible for transportation to and from camp. The camp is located in Prince Edward Island. For more information, go to; <http://www.camptriumph.ca/>.

This Respite Tip has been brought to you by the Nova Scotia Partnership on Respite, Family Health, and Well-Being. Information on the Respite Partnership and this and other Respite Tips can be found at: <http://disability.novascotia.ca/content/nova-scotia-respice-partnership>

Respite, WE deserve it!



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