



# Supporting Siblings

Here are some ideas and strategies ***around supporting siblings of children with additional needs***

This toolkit was developed for parents and carers of a child with additional needs or developmental disability and can be useful for all children

## All sorts of toolkits for all sorts of kids



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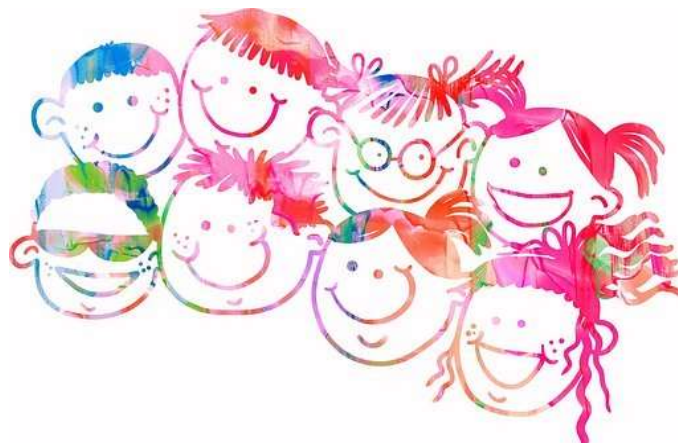
# What it means to be a Sibling

Most siblings have warm and positive relationships with their brothers and sisters who have additional needs or a developmental disability. Many teach their brothers and sisters new skills, enjoy playing together, and celebrate their achievements. Most siblings also have time when their experiences are more difficult and when they feel angry, sad, or jealous about their brother or sister. Some siblings have a very hard time coping with the effect of their brother or sister's additional needs or a developmental disability on their family, school, and social life. Siblings' feelings and experiences may change as they get older or if their brother or sister's needs change.

## **What's the upside to growing up with a sibling with additional needs or a developmental disability?**

While being a sibling of a child with additional needs presents challenges, it also comes with opportunities. Kids who grow up with a sibling with special health or developmental needs may have more of a chance to develop many good qualities, including:

- kindness and supportiveness
- acceptance of differences
- compassion and helpfulness
- empathy for others and insight into coping with challenges
- patience



# Acknowledging difficulties

Acknowledging your sibling child's feelings about their brother or sister with additional needs or a developmental disability, or about family life and school, is one of the most important things you can do to support them. You may not be able to change what is happening at home, but you can respond to how your child feels about things in a way that makes them feel you really care and understand. They may not know how to cope, or may not want to talk to you about it for fear of being a burden or sounding negative about their sibling. It is important to assure your children that it's okay to have these feelings. Listen to what they have to say, acknowledge that their feelings are legitimate, and give suggestions on how to work through things.



## Common difficulties and experiences of siblings:

- ❖ Feeling isolated, lonely and different
- ❖ Feel worried about their sibling
- ❖ Feeling like they have to be perfect and aren't able to make mistakes
- ❖ Feeling left out or jealous e.g. not getting to spend as much time with their parents as their sibling does
- ❖ Feeling resentful that they have to support and/ or take care of their sibling
- ❖ Feeling embarrassed about their siblings differences
- ❖ Feeling like they can't express their feelings
- ❖ Feeling as though their problems are minimised
- ❖ Feeling different to their peers who don't have siblings with additional needs
- ❖ Feeling like they're missing out on opportunities
- ❖ Feeling hurt or getting injured by their sibling with additional needs

Tuning in to the *individual needs of each child* in the family can help ease their difficulties. It can also be helpful to introduce siblings of children with additional needs or a developmental disability to other siblings in the same position. Having a peer with a shared experience of difficulty can be really powerful.

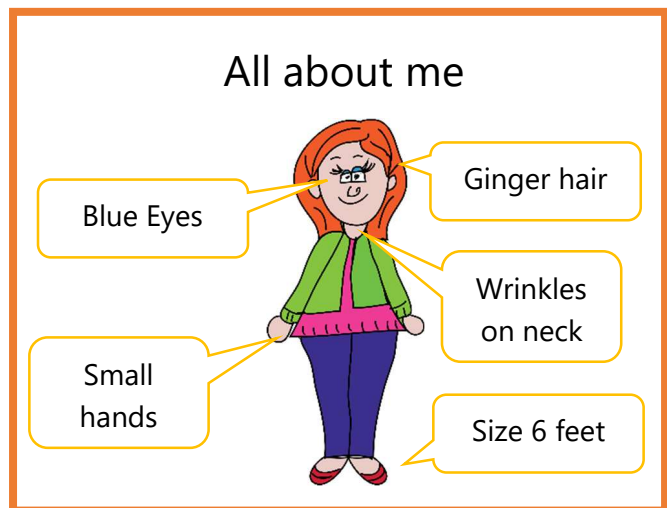
# Talking about Differences

Siblings often want to know what is going on in their brother or sister's world, so offer any insight you can. An accurate and age appropriate understanding of their sibling's condition can help children feel more comfortable when explaining it to others and interacting with their sibling.

Siblings may ask you questions about their brother or sister's additional needs or a developmental disability which may be difficult to answer such as "Will their additional needs or a developmental disability ever go away?" It can be helpful to answer questions as **honestly** as possible, using simple language and visual aids such as story books for support.

## Celebrate Differences

It can be helpful to remind siblings that we are all different and each have unique characteristics. It may be useful to reinforce that differences don't have to be negative. You could try **activities** such as creating an "all about me" poster, where each family member could either draw or write about themselves, highlighting their own differences.



## Responding to Comments and Questions

Sometimes siblings can be asked curious questions from others about their brother or sister's disability or differences. It may be helpful to encourage your child to use this 3-step approach to answering tricky curious questions; 1) Explain, 2) Reassure, 3) Distract.

**Question**  
*How come your brother is in a wheelchair?*

**Step 1: Explain**  
*He has a disability which means he has weak muscles.*

**Step 2: Reassure**  
*He isn't in any pain though.*

**Step 3: Distract**  
*Do you want to play on the swings together?*

# Coping with Teasing and Bullying

**Bullying is always unacceptable and should be dealt with by an adult.**



Bullying can include things like calling someone a mean name, telling lies about someone or hurting someone physically. Bullies can sometimes pick on things people might get upset about, such as someone in your family being a bit different or having an additional need or a developmental disability. Being aware that there is a possibility your child could be bullied, and knowing what signs to look out for may help you to respond to situations earlier.

## Tips to Help Your Child Cope with Teasing and Bullying

### Talk to your Child's School

It may be useful to talk to your child's school about fostering positive attitudes towards additional needs or a developmental disability. This could be done through awareness days or reading around certain topics. Some children may also want to share their own experiences and this should be welcomed if desired.



### Act Calm and Walk Away

It can be normal for a child to feel angry or worried when they are being teased but it can be good not to show the bully this.

Bullies often tease others to get a reaction, so if a child can show a bully that their insults do not bother them the bully will probably get bored and give up.

Remember, it might be helpful to remind your child to tell a responsible adult at this point.

### Rehearse Responses

It may be helpful to do some role play with your child, to ensure they have some rehearsed responses if they are ever teased or picked on. Here is an example:

**Bully:** "I don't like your brother because he is in a wheelchair so he can't play with us!"

**Person:** "My brother has a disability which means he has weak muscles but he can still play. Let's go over and say Hello!"

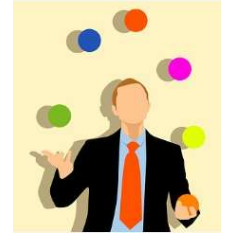
### Encourage Positive Self-Talk

Bullying can have a negative impact on a child's self-esteem and confidence. It is important to encourage positive self-talk in children to help them cope with their negative feelings. Examples of positive self-talk include:

- 1) My family is great and they love me.
- 2) It is the bully's problem, not mine.
- 3) I have lots of kind friends to play with.

# Safety Planning for Siblings

Siblings might often try to intervene when their brother or sister is having a meltdown because they want to help you. Although they have good intentions, this may result in them getting hurt. Siblings need their parents to respond appropriately when they are hurt and to take action to prevent them being hurt again.



It might be helpful to spend some time with siblings to design and create a **safety plan** (*blank template included at the end of this toolkit*)

The safety plan might include things like (please add to these if needed)...

- A code word/phrase
- What I need to do when Mum or Dad says the code word/phrase?
- Where is my safe space?
- What activities can I do in my safe space?
- When do I know when it is ok to come out of my safe space?



A safety plan will help your sibling child know what to do, and give you the confidence that they are safe whilst you attend to your son/daughter.

**Following a meltdown** it might also be helpful to spend some time with the sibling. Perhaps this could be an opportunity to **praise** them for following their safety plan or revisit the safety plan for things to remember next time. It could also be used as an opportunity for the sibling to **express how they were feeling** at the time.



# Getting hurt by brothers or sisters

Sometimes, siblings might get hurt by their brother or sister. There might be several reasons for this including:

- It was just an accident
- Your child could be feeling anxious or frustrated and hits out as a form of communication

For the sibling, it might cause them to feel upset and maybe angry, which could lead to them physically reacting. It may also be a good idea to encourage the sibling to think about their own emotions, perhaps by creating a **'How do I feel'** scale with them, and activities they could do at each point to encourage them to make good 'green' choices instead of reacting.

Remember to offer lots of comfort your sibling child and use first aid as appropriate.

How do I feel?

	How do I feel?	What can I do?
<b>5</b>	Really Angry	Leave room Go to my safe space Take deep breaths
<b>4</b>	Angry	Leave room Go to my safe space Take deep breaths
<b>3</b>	Annoyed	Go outside in the garden. Play on the swing. Take deep breaths
<b>2</b>	Okay	Play with my favourite toys. Get a drink
<b>1</b>	Happy	Have fun Enjoy being happy



**Following a situation** where the sibling has been hurt it might be helpful to talk to the sibling and ask them how they are feeling. Provide them with reassurance and praise if they followed their safety plan and/or if they made a good activity choice instead of reacting.

You could help prevent your sibling child from getting hurt again by teaching them to understand their brother's/sister's early warning signs and to respond appropriately. For example, if their brother/sister begins pacing, this may mean they are starting to feel frustrated. You could work with your sibling child on good strategies to use when they notice this, for example, to give their brother or sister some space, or ask you for your help.

# Safety

## Plan



My code phrase:

When Mum or Dad say my code phrase \_\_\_\_\_

I need to go to my safe space

My safe space



In my safe space I can:

- 
- 
- 
- 
- 

My Mum or Dad will come up or call me and says:

This lets me know I can come out of my safe space.

If I get hurt, Mum or Dad will talk to me and ask me how I am feeling.

# Planning quality time

## Quality over quantity

Understandably, siblings may not get as much of your time or attention as their brother or sister with additional needs. Being a parent of a child with any additional needs can put extra demands on your time which is something parents and carers can feel guilty about.

You cannot change the amount of time you need to meet the needs of your child with a disability but you can put steps in place to ensure that you make the most of the time you do have to spend with siblings. This does not mean spending a lot of money on days out, but just protecting time to spend with them by planning in advance. The importance of this activity lies in providing quality time for them.

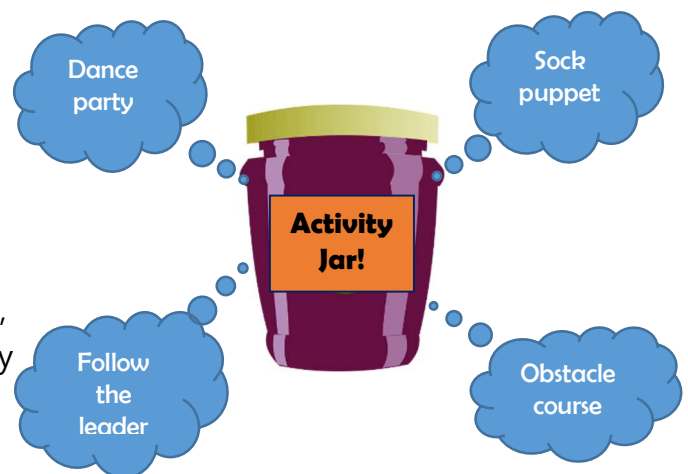
If time is short, strive for consistent bits of time each day. Car time is also a great opportunity for check-ins and giving one child your undivided attention. Kids will eventually come to understand their sibling may require more of your attention, but that does not mean they get more of your love.

These quality times with your child do not have to occur frequently but having this time repeatedly helps validate siblings as important individuals.

Here are some ideas!

## Ten minute activity jar

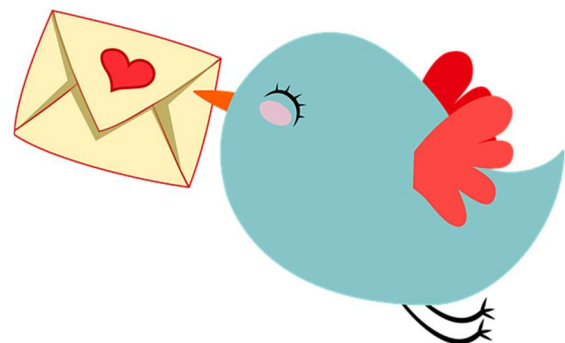
Help your sibling child to write/draw fun activities on pieces of paper, which only last ten minutes for you and a sibling to do together. Put them in a small jar with a lid. When you have a ten minutes spare, ask your sibling child to choose an activity from the jar and do it together.



## Send notes



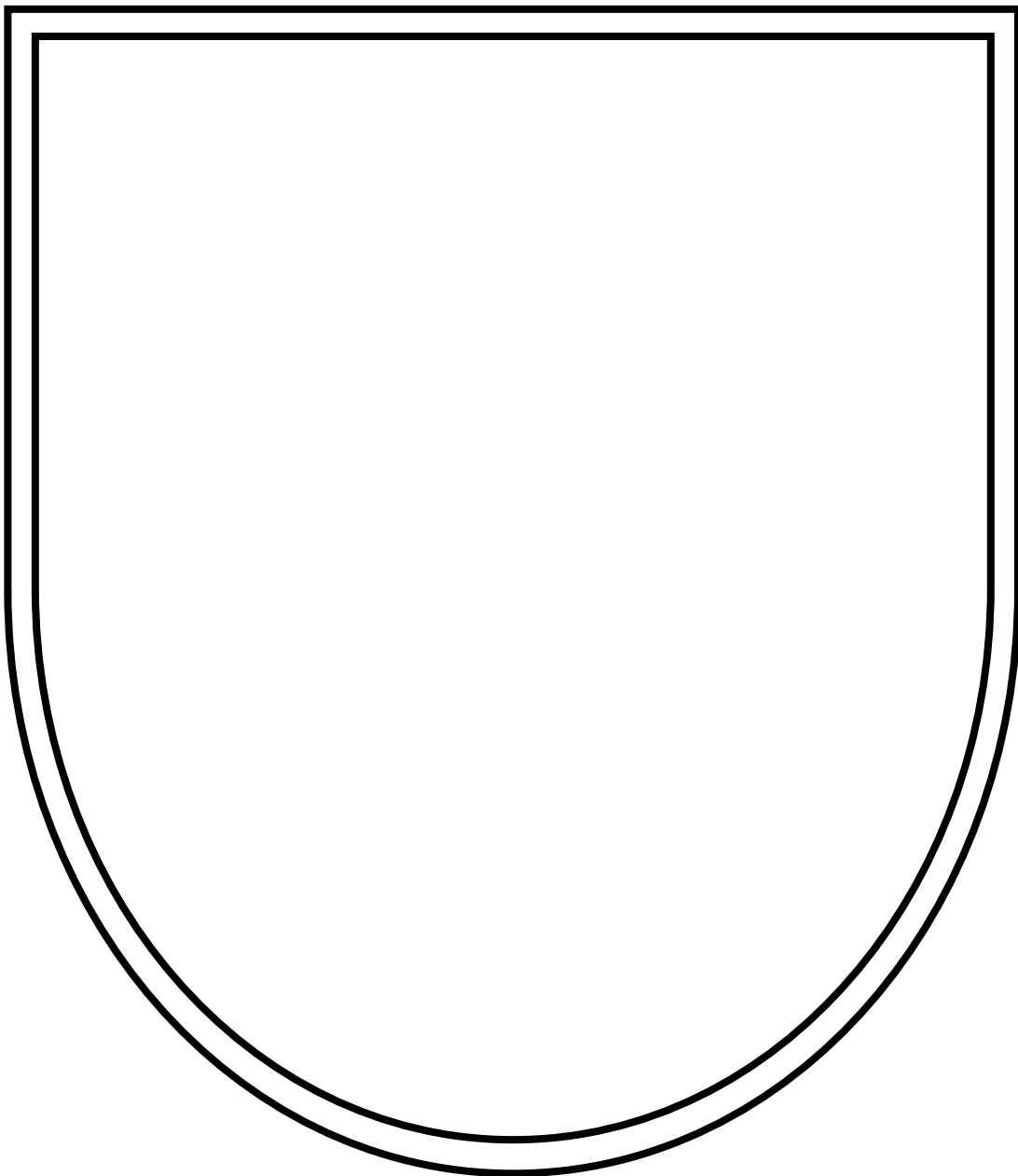
Write a note or a postcard to your sibling child. Make sure to write something fun and positive, like 'I am thinking about you today' or 'Have fun at football club'. Post it, or put it somewhere for your sibling child to find. Your sibling child could then write a note for you to find!



# Identity

It is important that siblings of a child with additional needs or developmental delay have their own identity. A sense of who they are, what would they describe themselves as and what do they enjoy. **They are a sibling of a child with additional needs but most importantly they are a child too.**

**INTERACTIVE TIME:** Now it's over to you... use this personal shield template to help your child explore their identity. The shield might include: a picture of me, my family, my favourite things, my strengths, my favourite subjects, my goals and what would I like to be when I grow up.



# A Celebration Page

***Dear sibling, now it's over to you!***

This is a page for you to celebrate being an amazing sibling. It's important to think about what feels good about being a sibling, and what makes you proud. It's also important though, to notice things that sometimes feel tricky, and to be kind to yourself around those things. Use this page to recognise what a brilliant, supportive sibling you are!

One thing I **like** about being a sibling is...



One thing that is **tricky** about being a sibling is...



One thing that makes me **proud** to be a sibling is...



# The Super Sibling Award

This certificate certifies that

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is a super sibling!



# Top Tips and Summary

## **1. Spend time each day with siblings one to one**

Give your sibling child a short period of uninterrupted time with you doing something they enjoy

## **2. Talk about disability and additional needs from an early age**

Be open and honest with your sibling child about their brother or sister's condition and keep talking with them and being open to answering questions

## **3. Acknowledge the negative feelings as well as the positive ones**

Listen to your sibling child's feelings as this will help them feel loved and build a strong bond between you

## **4. Teach siblings fun activities they can do with their brother or sister**

Show your children how to play together for short amounts of time

## **5. Give siblings choice about spending time with their brother or sister**

Ask your sibling child about how they want to divide their time being with their brother or sister and being with other people

## **6. Limit the type and amount of care and support that siblings do**

Make sure your sibling child is not doing care tasks that should be done by an adult or that affect their wellbeing or school work

## **7. Take action on issues that affect your siblings' wellbeing and education**

Get help with things like disturbed sleep, bullying, getting hurt or not being able to do homework

## **8. Talk to siblings in the teenage years about plans for the future**

Let siblings know they have choice about their involvement and inform them about the options available for their brother or sister

## **9. Give siblings permission to enjoy and live their own lives**

Role model for your sibling child doing things that you enjoy and encourage them with their aspirations

## **10. Celebrate siblings' achievements**

List the things your sibling child has achieved recently and have a treat or special ritual to make this with them

# Useful Resources

## Self-help Apps

Self-help apps can be a useful and viable way of support. The NHS have published apps on their digital library, some focussed on helping you relax include:



## Useful Websites

The following websites may offer some useful resources and information regarding building resilience, learning disabilities, and mental health support.

- <https://www.nhs.uk/apps-library/category/mental-health/>
- <https://www.mind.org.uk/media/17944275/peer-support-toolkit-final.pdf>
- <https://www.mind.org.uk/>
- <https://www.psycom.net/dealing-with-change>

## Further Support

**Children's Centre Psychology Team:** If you require further support please use the contact details overleaf to contact the team in your designated Children's Centre.

**GP:** If you are concerned about yourself or a member of the family you can access support from your local GP.

**Charities:** Charity organisations such as Mind Cymru, Samaritans and Young Minds may also be able to provide you with support regarding resilience.

Mind Cymru	02920 395 123
Samaritans	116 125
Young Minds	0808 802 5544

**Local Support Groups:** Groups are a great way to meet new people and to talk about shared experiences. Here are the links to some we are aware of in the local area:

<a href="https://www.facebook.com/SparrowsAln/">https://www.facebook.com/SparrowsAln/</a>	<a href="http://www.valleydaffodils.co.uk/">http://www.valleydaffodils.co.uk/</a>
<a href="https://www.magicparents.co.uk/">https://www.magicparents.co.uk/</a>	<a href="http://www.buildingbridgesproject.org.uk/">http://www.buildingbridgesproject.org.uk/</a>
<a href="https://hopegb.co.uk/">https://hopegb.co.uk/</a>	<a href="http://www.onelife.wales/About-us/">http://www.onelife.wales/About-us/</a>
<a href="https://www.asdinfoales.co.uk/newport-autism-support-group/">https://www.asdinfoales.co.uk/newport-autism-support-group/</a>	

**Supporting Siblings:** If you are worried about your sibling child please visit: <https://www.sibs.org.uk/> for further information and resources or alternatively please contact the Children's Centre Psychology team.

# Contact

This toolkit was created by the **Children's Centre Psychology** team at Aneurin Bevan University Health Board (ABUHB) with contributions from the Psychologists at **the Family Intervention Team**.

**Your feedback is important to us!** If you would like to tell us what you thought about this self-help toolkit, please get in touch with us using the contact details below to speak to a member of the team at your local children's centre. We would love to hear from you.

Additionally, if you need any help or support with using or accessing these resources, please do not hesitate to contact us with the below details.

<b>Serennu Children's Centre</b> 01633 748023	<b>Nevill Hall Children's Centre</b> 01873 732713
<b>Caerphilly Children's Centre</b> 02920 867447	

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Please contact the team if you would be interested in any of our other toolkits on the following topics –

Understanding and  
Managing Behaviour

Building Resilience

Supporting Siblings

Promoting Sleep

Friendships

Managing Anxiety