

**Theme** Families  
**Topic** **SIBLINGS OF DISABLED CHILDREN**

## **Needs of siblings of sick or disabled children**

When a child is diagnosed with a disability or chronic illness, the focus is often on the child with special needs and one or both parents. However for optimal family functioning we need to support all members of the family. Siblings of a child with special needs often have a mix of confusing feelings - love and protectiveness on the one hand, but also isolation, resentment, guilt, embarrassment and grief. Parents can have difficulty recognising the needs of siblings, if their own emotional resources are stretched. Sibling distress can manifest in 'acting up', withdrawing or trying too hard to be the 'good child', with the risk of longer term emotional difficulties. However, if brothers and sisters are able to express their feelings and if they can learn the skills to deal with difficult situations, they can develop resilience and other positive qualities.

### **Clinicians can play an important role.**

1. You can ask parents whether a sibling:

- is doing well at school
- has friends who come home to play
- shows signs of anxiety, like stomach aches or headaches
- seems embarrassed by a brother or sister with special needs
- withdraws
- tries hard to be the 'good child'
- expresses anger through aggressive behaviour

2. You should interact directly with siblings, about the sick or disabled child, but also about their own interests.

3. Let parents know about Siblings Australia's website, [www.siblingsaustralia.org.au](http://www.siblingsaustralia.org.au) has a range of resources and also hosts discussion groups for siblings (both adults and children). You can download the latest reports and read about the development of Siblings Australia.