

SUPPORTING SIBLINGS DURING THE PANDEMIC



Reaching Families

Background

Being the sibling of a child with disabilities and additional needs can be very challenging for the whole family. Due to the nature of the care they require, you may find that your child with additional needs demands more of your time, which may have an impact on their siblings. There may also be implications on the support that is accessible to the family as a whole.

During Coronavirus, it has been recognised that siblings are no longer getting the natural break from each other that they would normally get. This can often lead to more friction between siblings and less tolerance of some behaviors. Siblings of children with SEND sometimes naturally take on a caring role within the home due to the needs of their brother or sister. This again may have increased during the lockdown period. It has also been noted that the support networks available to siblings has been reduced and in some cases, stopped altogether.

Sibs have produced a report to emphasise the impact lockdown has had on sibling children. You can download the report here:

www.sibs.org.uk/supporting-young-siblings/parents/how-has-lockdown-affected-your-sibling-child-children.

Mental Health

The Sibs report stated that 75% of parents noticed a deterioration in their sibling child's mental health. Some of the noticeable behaviours included restricting of food, self-harm and expressing that they no longer wanted to be here. Many also said that their sibling child was less tolerant of their brother or sister and were worrying over the smallest of things.

It is really important to be open and honest with your child and unpick their worries, talk about why it isn't something they need to worry about e.g., 'it's something adults can make right'. You can look at what led to an act of self-harm, talk about what may have caused it and how it can be made to feel better, look at alternative ways to release their frustrations such as writing them down, using a pillow to squeeze, going for a walk.

Ensure your sibling child has someone they can talk to and be honest with, this doesn't have to always be their parent. Making sure you are spending separate time with the sibling child and they are getting the chance to be with you alone and open up about their concerns. You can also make a telephone consultation with your GP if you need advice and support or contact counselling services like Relate and YES (see further reading and useful links).

How can you tell your sibling child needs support?

Survival in crisis and at any challenging time is dependent on our ability to adapt and come to terms with our circumstances. So here are some ways to help you manage change and transitions successfully:

- Concerns around sibling child's behavior or mood?
- Are they helping with more caring tasks?
- Are they struggling to get their school work done?
- Is there a quiet space for them to do this uninterrupted?
- What is the relationship like between siblings?
- Are you able to spend enough time with the sibling?
- Do they have unanswered questions about their sibling's condition?



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Overcoming the Challenges

Your sibling child might display some challenging behaviors due to them not being able to regulate their emotions towards their sibling with additional needs. There are many tools and strategies that can be used to support your sibling, some of which you might have used with your child who has additional needs:

- Look at their body language. Has it changed/ what are they trying to tell you?
- Name the feelings they are experiencing. Use the real words to describe them. "Are you angry he/she broke your toy?"
- Validate their feelings and acknowledge them. "I would be angry too if they broke my things"
- Role modelling the behaviors you would want from your sibling child. Moving away when you are feeling emotions, explaining why you're leaving a room etc. "I am going to leave because it makes me sad when you hit me"

There are some resources that talk about emotions and how they make us feel. Using these can help break the ice when trying to get your sibling child to open up about how they feel:

Body Outline - Draw around the sibling child (if enough space available) or draw a small silhouette. Place on the body how different things make you physically feel.

Frowns on the forehead = Anger

Smile on the face = Happy

Butterflies in the tummy = Anxiety

Sweat under arms = Nervous

Blob Tree - The Blob tree can be used as a pictorial replication of how you are feeling. They are neither male nor female, young or old, they are non descriptive. The blobs have no right or wrong and can be interpreted in many different way. They are a conversation opener.

The tree is a place or environment, the blobs are the way we express the emotions. You use the words 'how do you think the blob is feeling?' You use it as a neutral tool to talk about emotions.

www.blobtree.com

Worry Box/Worry Monster - Using the box or monster to write your worries down and place inside. You as a parent-carer take these worries out so the next day they are gone. You can use them in conversation when speaking with the sibling.

My Helping Hand - Draw around your hand and use the fingers to write down five people you could call upon if you needed support.

Physical exercise - Getting out and being physical can help when you are feeling frustrated and angry. Use the garden space, trampoline, dance. If you have a pet you can walk, use this as a distraction technique.

Drawing - If your sibling child doesn't want to communicate verbally about their feeling you can use drawing to let them express themselves.

Textbooks and activity journals - There are a variety of interactive workbooks and stories to help you talk about feelings with your sibling child. What do you consider gives you a sense of purpose in life?

- *Starving the Anxiety Gremlin* – Kate Collins-Donnelly
- *There's a Volcano in my Tummy* – Eliane Whitehouse & Warwick Pudney
- *Mad isn't bad* – Michaelene Mundy

Preventative strategies and calming environments - look at what the triggers are. Can you identify times of the day that are more difficult than others? Are there things the sibling child wants to do that triggers your child with SEND? Look at setting the environment so that it's calming, can you offer a space for each child to enjoy their own activities? Does your sibling child have somewhere they can go and have time away that is quiet and calm?





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Attention

One of the biggest concerns for a parent/ carer that comes from the Sibs report is that they feel they are not spending enough time with the sibling. Parents report that feel guilty that they can't spend equal time with the sibling. The thing to remember is to not worry about the amount of time but the quality of the time. Siblings want attention from their parents and uninterrupted attention. Some key points that can help include:

- Using the small windows of opportunity to spend time together – 5-10 minute activities
- Leave notes of affection on their belongings - 'thank you for helping me', 'I appreciate your finding it hard at the moment', 'I'm proud of you'
- Fun quality time - you may have to learn about their favorite youtuber/ online game/ music group. Spending time with them and engaging in their activity of choice helps them feel listened too. It can also be a conversation opener
- Rewards the positives - a magazine when they've helped you out, being allowed to stay up for a movie night. Small gestures go a long way
- Ensure your sibling knows about the additional need and how it can affect the child and their behaviors. Give them opportunities to ask questions about the conditions, give them facts.

Support Network

We are aware that a lot of support networks including family support was stopped overnight when lockdown started. It's important to talk to your sibling about the future and what it will look like and how it might be different. Support networks are still available but many have moved to virtual and online support.

Encourage your sibling to reach out and find out what is accessible to them. Contact any groups you were a part of and ask what they are currently offering. Look at what is available in the local area to you, are there any new groups that have been set up? Look at arranging social distanced walks with family and friends, new fresh faces can help. Use technology to reach out to family and friends, facetime with grandparents, chat groups with friends, quizzes.

Further reading and useful links

- **Aspens Family Support Services** – information, advice and support including for siblings: www.aspens.org.uk/family-support.
- **Reaching Families** – information, training and support for parent-carers across West Sussex: www.reachingfamilies.org.uk.
- **Sibs** – national charity providing information, advice and support for siblings: www.sibs.org.uk.
- **Super Siblings** – support group and Facebook group for West Sussex siblings: www.supersiblings.co.uk.
- **West Sussex Local Offer** – information and resources for families of children and young people with SEND: <https://westsussex.local-offer.org>.
- **Relate** – counselling including for young people and siblings - www.relate.org.uk/sussex.
- **Youth Emotional Support (YES)** – 1-2-1 and group support for 11-17 year olds: westsussex.local-offer.org/services/853-youth-emotional-support-yes-service-mental-health.

Thank you to Tasha Brabon from Aspens for her work producing this fact sheets.

