

National Action Plan for Siblings of a child with a disability, chronic ill health or mental illness – 2010

There are hundreds of thousands of people in Australia living with severe or profound disability, chronic illness or mental illness. Disability or illness affects the whole family, including siblings. Sibling relationships are likely to be the longest of any. Across the life span, siblings often play a vital role in the support of their brothers and sisters living with disability. Siblings may also face risk in relation to their own long-term emotional, mental and physical well-being, which can result in significant costs to governments and the community.

Some siblings are certainly enriched by their experiences. However, children with a disability or illness need a lot of time and attention and it is easy for siblings to be overlooked both within the family and by the community. Growing up, siblings may experience a range of stresses within the family and also through other peoples' reactions. Without the cognitive skills and emotional maturity to understand and deal with those feelings, a child's self-esteem can suffer. They can feel quite isolated, become vulnerable to neglect, and longer term mental health problems may follow. For example a recent report¹ found that siblings (as well as parents of a child living with disability) had a significantly increased risk of depression.

It is important to intervene early and provide support for siblings. This needs to include strategies within all the settings in which the child operates, for example, family (immediate and extended), friends, peers, school and community. Support for siblings can overcome feelings of isolation and help build resilience. As a result, not only will siblings be more likely to develop to their full potential, but also more likely to contribute to the quality of life of their brother or sister with special needs.

Empirical and anecdotal evidence confirms the national effort to support siblings is uncoordinated, under-funded, fragmented and sometimes duplicated. We know that siblings and their families will benefit from coordinated and holistic individual and social support.

Siblings Australia and Families Australia call for urgent joint effort by Federal and State/Territory Governments to ensure that the concerns and needs of siblings are given attention.

- First, establish a national NGO coordination service.
- Provide a co-ordinated voice for raising awareness of the particular roles and needs of siblings.
- Develop data collection about siblings in conjunction with relevant organisations to estimate the numbers and needs of this cohort.
- Develop a national strengths-based service delivery model.
- Link families and siblings to early intervention and support services.
- Maintain a national overview of sibling support initiatives in order to address gaps and reduce the risk of duplication.
- Facilitate effective collaboration between organisations, to achieve flexible sibling supports.
- Initiate and manage the research required to underpin effective sibling programs.
- Develop and implement quality assurance systems that ensure consistent delivery, evaluation and reporting of sibling support programs.

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¹ Edwards, B., Higgins, D.J., Gray, M., Zmijewski, N., Kingston, M. (2008). The nature and impact of caring for family members with a disability in Australia. *Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2008. Research Report, no. 16*