

School choices

There are many factors that influence where a parent decides to send their child to school.

When one or more children have a disability the decision can become more complex. Whilst it might be easier for all children to go the same school, there may be times when a child with disability will have their needs met more effectively at a different school from siblings.

On the other hand, some parents make the decision to send their children to separate schools as they think it is better for a sibling to be able to develop their own identity separately from the child with disability.

Below are some issues for both parents and schools to consider when looking at the different options.

- Will the school be able to cater for the needs of each child?
- It can be helpful if the school knows the whole family and this is easier if the children attend the same school
- There can be a sense of community if children attend the same school
- Siblings can readily share each other's achievements if they are at the same school
- Siblings may find comfort in being able to check on their brother or sister, but they may also spend more time with them and miss out on developing independent friendships
- Siblings may find that it is difficult to develop their own identity eg they may be always known as 'Johnny's sister'
- Siblings may feel greater responsibility for a child with disability if they are at the same school and it can be easy for school staff to call on siblings when there are difficulties with the child with disability
- Siblings may be subject to more teasing or bullying if they are at the same school
- Siblings may need extra support to cope with embarrassment if the child with disability has difficult behaviours

It can be helpful if parents and school staff can discuss together the needs of all the children.

If brothers and sisters are able to develop their own identity, have their own friends and are not burdened by responsibility, then it can be of great benefit for everyone if children attend the same school. If children are together, it is crucial that schools and families consider the needs of all children. The Student Support Plan for children with disability (NEP in some States) provides an ideal opportunity to monitor possible issues for siblings as well.

It is important to respect the sibling's need for privacy in all of these discussions.

If you have stories about experiences with schooling decisions please share them with us.

Supporting your child at school

- If your child agrees, you might want to share family information with school staff so the school knows your family better. Remember, sometimes, older children might not want you to talk to the school about their private information, so it is very important to include them in this decision.
- You could suggest a disability awareness session be organised for the school. This can help all students learn about diversity.
- Your school might be able to help you meet other families who have a child with a disability. This might be done informally or through formal arrangements like allocating brothers and sisters of a child with a disability to the same class or a school-run sibling program.
- You could suggest that the school has a range of sibling-related resources, such as books and movies available in the library.
- Think about talking to the school about the right level of responsibility your other children should have in relation to their brother or sister with a disability while at school.
- You could also talk to the school about other responsibility. Sometimes siblings are called on to 'look after' other children who might have challenges. It is easy to assume that siblings will do this more easily than other children might, but this might not be in the best interests of the sibling.
- If a student support plan is being prepared for your child with a disability, the school could also consider the needs of their brothers and sisters.
- School staff may be able to suggest community sibling programs or they might be interested in running a *Sibworks* program in the school. Siblings Australia can provide support with that.