

Teacher Role in Supporting Siblings

Teachers are in an ideal position to provide a role model or become a confidante to siblings.

Teachers can also help siblings (as they do with all children) develop a sense of mastery, not only through academic skills but also sport, music, positions of responsibility and social skills. They can talk to students about using skills to solve problems through the normal course of a day.

Issues around disability, accepting differences, showing empathy and building resilience can all be covered as part of disability awareness, health and society and environment.

Teachers can give direct support to siblings in the following ways:

- Encourage discussion about a brother or sister with disability or illness, without being 'pushy'. Let them know you are available to talk. Listen in a non-judgemental way.
- Ensure privacy if that is what the student wishes
- If necessary, assist a sibling to complete homework at school
- If a sibling struggles with schoolwork, try to find other activities that give them a sense of competence, eg art or music
- Encourage the child to write about their brother or sister in daily journals or story writing time. (They can share their writing with you or they might want to keep it to themselves or they may even want to tear it up – even if they throw away their writing, the exercise itself can be very helpful.)
- Put the child in touch with relevant resources e.g. books, websites
- Help the child to develop support networks of adults and same-age peers. These networks help a child feel valued and can encourage independence.
- Try to have the child get together with other siblings, either through the school or referral to other options, eg sibling peer support groups or online options.
- Ensure that the student does not take on too much responsibility for a brother or sister, or for other students who might face challenges.

Teachers can also talk to parents about:

- Issues at home that might affect a student's schoolwork
- Support networks for the sibling
- Resources e.g. books, movies that might be useful for the student
- Gaining support from appropriate services if major problems are identified – eg school counsellor, psychologist. Ongoing issues such as anxiety can greatly affect learning.

Also, perhaps once a term, teachers could facilitate a support meeting for parents and their children to discuss any concerns. Something like a drop in centre, designed specifically for 'sibling issues'. This would encourage not only parents to seek support, but also give the students a voice.

If you have stories of what has worked well please share them with us so we can share with others.