

# What signs might indicate stress?

*Without the maturity to understand and express the range of feelings they might experience, children may act out the feelings through their behaviour. Of course, all children may show these signs of stress from time to time. Even if a sibling does, it may not be related to being a sibling of a child with disability. But the following signs might indicate that a sibling needs some extra support:*

## Withdrawal

Children might withdraw in order to protect themselves physically and/or emotionally. Sometimes that can be a very useful strategy but if continued over time it may not be the most helpful way to manage. Younger children might regress, e.g., need to wear nappies again or be more 'clingy'.

## 'Acting up' behaviour

Children might adopt disruptive or aggressive behaviours in an effort to cope with their feelings. This might also indicate a need for attention.

## Being the 'good child', a people pleaser

Siblings may feel that they want to help make things better for parents who they see as being stressed, and so try to be the 'good child'. Also, whilst siblings can gain much from helping to care for a brother or sister with disability or illness, some children throw themselves into caregiving, denying or ignoring their own needs. They can become used to always putting the needs of another before their own. This can be particularly unhealthy if the child has also adopted the role of 'people pleaser'.

## Perfectionism, overachieving

Siblings can feel a pressure to be perfect, in order to make up for the limitations of their brother or sister. They can develop an exaggerated fear of failure, of letting down their parents. Their self worth can become totally dependent on their successes, which can increase the risk of depression in future years when they don't feel good enough.

## Anxiety, depression, low self-worth

Some children will develop longer-term anxiety in response to the various stresses, fear or embarrassment. Siblings may learn very early that things can go wrong in life. They might see a brother or sister suffer and not feel hopeful things will improve. In terms of family activities they may feel powerless to change what happens. Young siblings might say things like, "my parents never come to see me play basketball", "all they care about is my sister", "I can't do anything". Some are at risk of developing a general feeling of hopelessness.

## Stomach aches, headaches, sleep problems

Anxiety and depression can sometimes show up in physical complaints. Of course not all physical complaints are the result of stress but they are signs to consider when thinking about the needs of siblings. Some siblings have developed eating disorders in adolescence.

## School, social difficulties

If children start to struggle with school or friendships it might mean that they are experiencing isolation, teasing or a sense that 'no-one understands'.