

School based approaches for siblings

Some time ago Siblings Australia made some preliminary contributions to both the Mind Matters and Kids Matter resources. Unfortunately, this work was not supported to continue.

However, using the four key components of the Kids Matter strategy as a framework, the following strategies could be explored in relation to siblings of children with disability:

1. A Positive School Community

Schools identify how they can enhance their school climate to support student mental health and well-being, giving particular emphasis to ensuring that students, staff and parents feel 'connected' to each other and the broader school community.

In relation to students who have brothers and sisters with disability, schools can consider the following:

- Greater awareness of siblings of children with disability as being 'at risk'.
- Data collection at entry to include information about other family members and the impact of the special needs of a brother or sister on a student at the school
- An emphasis on respect of diversity and valuing of differences
- Strong bullying and harassment policies to address siblings being teased or isolated
- Connecting siblings and whole families where there is disability or illness
- Consideration of sibling connections when making class allocations (eg putting siblings, from different families, in the same class)

2. Social and Emotional Learning for Students

Students receive social and emotional curriculum using evidence-based programs to improve their self-awareness, social-awareness, self-management, relationship skills and their capacity for responsible decision-making.

Siblings of children with disability can struggle socially. They can also experience confusion about their mix of feelings in relation to what is happening in their family. As part of their general approach, schools can play a role in the following:

- Promoting the development of social skills
- Supporting siblings to understand, recognise and manage their mix of emotions
- Promoting general care and concern for others
- Improving children's capacity to solve problems and cope with difficult situations
- Providing support for homework where this is difficult to complete
- Assisting siblings to understand it is ok to ask for help

3. Parenting Support and Education.

Parents and families receive opportunities to access information on child development and parenting, as well as engage with other parents and families.

Families where there is a child with disability can experience considerable stress and parents can be stretched both physically and emotionally. They can struggle with meeting

the needs of their whole family. Parents can be given support to understand the issues faced by siblings and how they can play a role in their support, through:

- Resources, eg books, DVDs
- Parenting education programs (contact Siblings Australia for information)
- Developing partnerships with community organisations that can provide such programs
- Opportunities for parents to meet with other parents who are experiencing similar issues

4. Early Intervention for students experiencing mental health difficulties.

School staff and parents receive information on strategies to support and assist children experiencing mental health problems. This includes information on detecting signs of mental health difficulties in young children, information on local service providers and how to access evidence-based programs and interventions.

Siblings of children with disability are easily overlooked in their families and by others. Teachers and counsellors are often unaware that a student is a sibling. The child with disability may go to another school. The school data collection may not include information about other family members. A sibling might choose not to reveal their family circumstance as they feel embarrassed and might be fearful of 'disability by association'. They might also feel guilty about 'complaining'. They might internalise their difficulties. When a child does present with behaviour problems, the behaviour is rarely regarded as being related to being a sibling.

Even when staff members are aware that a child is a sibling to a child with disability, the sibling may not show or express their concerns. They might receive a lot of 'kudos' from home and from others for being a 'good' sibling. Their identity might be largely framed by the idea that their needs are not as important as those of other people. It can be difficult to ask for help. The fact that a child does not show concerns does not mean that they don't need support.

Key strategies for schools include:

- Being watchful for siblings who might show signs of distress or burden
- Ensuring siblings are not overburdened by responsibility for a brother or sister at school
- Providing opportunities for siblings to get together with other siblings (this might include something as simple as putting two or more siblings in the same class)
- Helping families access support from community groups or disability organisations that run sibling support programs – see the directory of services on the Siblings Australia website
- Consider running a sibling group within the school. Resources are available from Siblings Australia – the Sibworks peer support program has been used in many schools.
- Including sibling considerations when Student Support Plans are developed for children with disability. Of course, siblings might be able to contribute important information about the child with disability, but this is an ideal time to consider the needs of a sibling as well.
- Having knowledge of referral pathways for families who might be experiencing stress
- Keeping up to date with the latest research on 'risk' and 'protective' factors for siblings

If you have stories to tell of sibling programs in your school please share them with us.