Siblings australia inc

for siblings of children and adults with disability/illness

Submission to the Youth Mental Health Sector-Led Advice Consultation

May 2025

About Siblings Australia

Siblings Australia is a national not-for-profit organisation dedicated to supporting siblings of people with disability, chronic illness, and mental health conditions. The sibling relationship is often the longest of a person's life, and for over 350,000 young Australians aged 12–25 who have a sibling with disability, that relationship carries unique joys and burdens.

Since 1999, Siblings Australia has worked to ensure that siblings are seen, heard, and supported. We provide direct services for siblings, training and resources for parents and professionals, and advocate for the inclusion of siblings in health, disability, education, and mental health systems. This includes our previous collaboration with headspace to develop training and resources for mental health practitioners working with siblings.

Why siblings must be recognised in youth mental health reform

Siblings of people with disability or complex health needs are an overlooked yet highly vulnerable group within the youth mental health landscape. Research and practice both show that these young people experience significantly higher rates of anxiety, depression, and trauma than their peers.

A 2018 survey by Siblings Australia found that:

- 53% of adult siblings reported symptoms of depression linked to their upbringing,
- 65% reported symptoms of anxiety, and
- Many experienced ongoing impacts of vicarious trauma and emotional burnout, often beginning in childhood.

  These outcomes stem from a range of chronic and cumulative factors including:
- Emotional isolation due to parental focus on the child with disability or illness
- Unacknowledged caregiving responsibilities
- Exposure to medical crises or behavioural incidents in the home
- Guilt, grief, and fear about their sibling's future or wellbeing
- Feeling overlooked or "not allowed" to have problems of their own

Many siblings become skilled at masking their distress. They internalise messages that their struggles are "less important" than those of the child with disability. They may become anxious high achievers or act out to seek attention - both coping strategies that mask complex trauma. These figures echo the findings of a broad range of research both nationally and from around the world.

These dynamics are rarely visible to professionals unless they are explicitly trained to look for them.

Recommendations in alignment with the early advice

We welcome the early advice of the sector-led consortium and offer the following considerations to strengthen youth mental health models:

Explicitly recognise siblings as a priority cohort

Despite facing chronic risk factors, siblings are not currently identified in most youth mental health frameworks. Their experiences must be included in population-level risk profiles and service design.

Integrate sibling-focused expertise within headspace and emerging models

Our previous collaboration with headspace demonstrated the value of equipping frontline staff with tools to identify and support siblings. As the headspace model is strengthened and expanded, this should include routine screening for sibling dynamics and staff capacity-building.

Address vicarious trauma and complex PTSD among siblings

Siblings frequently witness traumatic medical events or escalating behavioural crises without the developmental maturity or professional debriefing needed to process them. This can result in symptoms of complex PTSD. New models must be equipped to recognise and respond to this trauma, even when it is not disclosed.

Leverage peer and psychosocial support

Consistent with the early advice recommendation to integrate psychosocial supports, sibling peer support programs – such as our **TeenSib** initiative – offer critical protective factors. These programs create spaces for validation, belonging, and emotional safety.

Ensure care navigators understand whole-family dynamics

As care navigators are piloted, they should be trained in family complexity, including the sibling perspective. Navigators must recognise that the mental health needs of one young person may be directly affected by their sibling's disability, and vice versa.

Improve service access for siblings in rural and remote areas

Many siblings in regional Australia are unable to access appropriate services. Our national online programs partially bridge this gap, but investment in locally-led outreach and sibling-informed practitioner training is critical.

Conclusion

The youth mental health system must evolve to include the often-invisible needs of sibling children and young people. Without explicit recognition and targeted support, these young people continue to fall through the cracks – despite being vital members of their families and often taking on responsibilities well beyond their years.

Siblings are not an optional add-on to mental health reform. They are a *missing stakeholder group* who live with elevated and sustained risk factors, including exposure to trauma, emotional neglect, and unacknowledged caregiving burdens. Their mental health outcomes are poorer, and the consequences ripple across their lives and families, often into adulthood.

We urge the Australian Government to:

- Explicitly identify siblings of children with disability, chronic illness, or mental health challenges as a priority population within all youth mental health frameworks and models
- Fund dedicated sibling-informed resources and supports, including workforce training, psychosocial programs, peer connections, and trauma-informed care, both within and beyond the headspace network
- Embed the sibling lens across all tiers of care, recognising that early intervention for this group will not only improve individual outcomes but strengthen families and reduce system burden over time

- Ensure that the expertise of Siblings Australia is embedded in policy, service design, and workforce development, drawing on more than 25 years of lived experience-informed practice, training, and research in the sibling space

With recognition and investment, siblings can move from silent sufferers to supported allies – empowered to thrive in their own lives and continue to play positive roles in the lives of their brothers and sisters.

Siblings Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute further to this critical area of reform.

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