

# Siblings of Individuals with Disabilities

## TIPS AND RESOURCES FOR PARENTS

### How will my children relate to one another?

Sibling relationships are often the longest-lasting relationships that your children form. Like all brothers or sisters, they may or may not develop close emotional relationships depending on individual differences and circumstances. Regardless, a child's reaction to a sibling with a disability will have a lasting effect on both siblings' self-esteem and emotional development.

### How do I discuss the disability with my typically developing child?

Your child needs age-appropriate information about a brother or sister's disability. Your child will be better able to communicate feelings about having a sibling with a disability if the disability's limitations—and strengths—are understood. Open communication between you and your typically developing child will help you both express the variety of emotions you feel.

### How will my child feel about a sibling with a disability?

Feelings vary between children and over times in children's lives. Children may experience a range of emotions including:

- Fear. Young children may think the disability is contagious.
- Anger or embarrassment about a sibling's appearance or behavior in public.
- Jealousy about time and attention that a sibling receives because of a disability.
- Guilt for feeling jealous or angry, or for being typically developing.
- Loyalty and protectiveness.
- Pressure to overachieve in order to "compensate" or "make up" for a sibling.
- Understanding. Many siblings of children with disabilities develop a maturity about the needs of others and appreciation of their own health.



### What are the special needs of my typically developing child?

There may be gaps between a sibling's intellectual understanding of a disability and emotions. Take time to talk through these emotions. In addition, sibling support groups or similar activities can connect your child to other siblings of children with disabilities who are great resources for one another (see reverse). Your typically developing child needs your time, attention, and praise for personal accomplishments.

### What are the special needs of my family?

Your family will benefit from taking part in usual family activities whenever possible. Your child with a disability should develop as much independence as possible, contributing to the family and having responsibilities within capabilities. It is important to discuss the future care-taking needs for your child with a disability. Request and value your typically developing child's opinion. Statistically, parents expect older girls to take care of siblings with disabilities more than older boys. Avoid steering an older daughter into a care-taking role and take time to appreciate her goals for herself.

*Please see reverse for resources.*



VANDERBILT KENNEDY CENTER  
FOR EXCELLENCE IN DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

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## RESOURCES

### Who We Are and Who We Serve

The **Vanderbilt Kennedy Center (VKC)** works with and for people with disabilities and their family members, educators and service providers, researchers, students, and policy makers. Faculty and staff engage in interdisciplinary research, training, service, and information dissemination and work in collaboration with local, state and national networks and partners. (615) 322-8240, toll-free (866) 936-8852, [vkc.vumc.org](http://vkc.vumc.org)

### Sibling Programs

Support for siblings who have a brother or sister with a disability, chronic health care issue, or mental health concern. Tennessee Adult Brothers and Sisters (TABS), ages 18+. See [www.facebook.com/tabs.siblings/](http://www.facebook.com/tabs.siblings/)

### Two Easy Ways to Take Part in Research

StudyFinder is a searchable database that lists current VKC studies. Studies seek people of all ages with and without developmental disabilities. See [vkc.vumc.org/studyfinder](http://vkc.vumc.org/studyfinder). Research Match is a secure place for volunteers and researchers to connect. See [researchmatch.org](http://researchmatch.org)

### Tennessee Disability Pathfinder

Provides free information, referral sources, and help with navigating services via phone, email, and website. Assistance is available to individuals of all ages, all types of disabilities, and all languages spoken. Its website includes a directory of more than 3,000 agencies searchable by Tennessee county, topic of interest, and other filters. Pathfinder is a project of the VKC and is partially funded by Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities and other state agencies. (615) 322-8529, toll-free (800) 640-4636, [TNPathfinder.org](http://TNPathfinder.org)

### Other Resources

- The Arc, US  
The world's largest grassroots organization of and for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. [thearc.org](http://thearc.org)
- The Arc Tennessee  
[thearctn.org](http://thearctn.org)
- Autism Tennessee  
[autismtn.org](http://autismtn.org)
- KidsHealth  
Information for kids, teens, and parents  
[kidshealth.org](http://kidshealth.org)
- Health Library, Jr. League Family Resource Center, Monroe Carrell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt  
[childrenshospitalvanderbilt.org/information/family-resource-center](http://childrenshospitalvanderbilt.org/information/family-resource-center)
- The Sibling Support Project  
A national effort dedicated to the life-long concerns of brothers and sisters of people who have special health, developmental, or mental health concerns  
[siblingsupport.org](http://siblingsupport.org)
- Tennessee Developmental Disabilities Network  
A partnership of four statewide organizations advocating for people with disabilities  
[TNDDNetwork.org](http://TNDDNetwork.org)

