



Special Siblings of Special Needs Children

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When a baby is born, it is common that so much attention is showered on that new life that siblings often complain of feeling left out and ignored. Eventually, the newness wears off and equilibrium is restored. But when a baby is born with special needs, that equilibrium may be months or years away. Often, the baby is hospitalized for an extended time, and then requires multiple and frequent doctor appointments, ongoing physical and/or occupational, speech therapies, special equipment (walkers, wheelchairs, feeding tools, etc.), and very intense supervision. Parents often become full-time caregivers for their one child. The siblings of special needs children learn very early how life and things "aren't fair!"

The siblings of special needs kids learn some of life's more difficult lessons early on. They learn how to accept and love someone who is not able to walk or talk well, and may not ever be able to; who may make strange sounds or is prone to sudden outbursts; who may look different; who may require someone to always dress them; who may get teased at school because of their appearance or abilities; who require a great deal of practice to learn new things. These siblings also learn how love can be expressed by a touch or sound or even by eye contact.

I have learned from these special siblings of special needs kids that they get angry when their brother or sister is teased or stared at by others. They grow weary of the slow pace their brother/sister moves, including the time it takes them to learn new things, such as going to the bathroom. They often worry about the future and wonder if their sister/brother will get better or who will take care of them when they get older. They wonder if they are hurting, either physically or emotionally and they wonder if their sibling really knows he/she is different from others. They also sometimes wish their parents would give them some extra personal attention or that their sibling could "just go away" for a little while.

In the broader sense, these special siblings of special needs kids often develop a deeper understanding of family, commitment and love. They become very compassionate and tolerant of differences in others. At a young age, these siblings learn some of life's harder lessons and can demonstrate to the rest of us how to be more generous in spirit and in action.

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