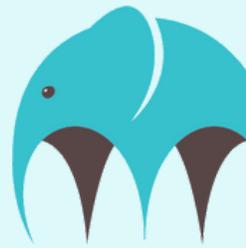


The Sibling Experience:

Supporting the Sibling(s) of a Child or Youth with Mental Health Challenges



Sibling relationships can be great, and they can also be really difficult. They can become even more difficult if one of the siblings struggles with a mental health challenge. As a parent or caregiver, you may feel strained and overwhelmed trying to meet the needs of everyone in the family, especially when one of your children is in crisis. But there are things you can do to make these situations a little bit more manageable for you and your family. In this resource, we highlight what siblings may be experiencing, how to best support them, and where to go to find help.

What's in this resource?

- How might the sibling(s) be feeling?
- How can I support the sibling(s) in my home?
- How can I support healthy sibling relationships?
- How can I take care of myself?
- Additional resources



How might the sibling(s) be feeling?

Growing up with a sibling who has mental health challenges can impact a child or youth in unique ways. Their experiences might be somewhat like yours, but they may have a harder time understanding and managing their emotions. There's a lot to navigate, as they experience a range of responses and emotions.

What the sibling(s) might feel:

- **Stress.** Your child(ren) may worry about both their sibling, as well as you as their parent or caregiver. They may feel a lot of pressure to keep things calm and peaceful in the home, which can sometimes be out of their control...which, in turn, can make them feel even more stressed.
- **Distress and worry.** The challenges that can arise when a sibling has a mental health challenge can sometimes make your child(ren) feel distressed, worried and alone, which can sometimes give rise to their own mental health struggles.
- **Resentment.** Your child(ren) might feel some resentment that their sibling is experiencing these challenges, and that services and support aren't always easy to find.
- **Guilt.** Guilt and shame are common experiences in siblings of child(ren) with mental health challenges. They may be embarrassed about things that are happening at home, and might also feel guilty that their sibling is struggling.
- **Afraid.** [Verbal and physical aggression](#) can occasionally arise when a child or youth is struggling, and lead to trauma for siblings and other family members. Siblings might not understand why this is happening, may feel helpless to control the situation, and may also feel responsible in some way. Navigating the mental health system can also be traumatizing at times, which can make things even more difficult as a parent or caregiver. Learn more about [how to manage verbal and physical aggression](#).
- **Overwhelmed.** Clearly, there's a lot going on for the sibling(s) when one child or youth is experiencing mental health challenges, and so it's not surprising that they can feel overwhelmed. They might feel like they need to ease the burden on parents or caregivers, keep their own problems under wraps so as not to add more to an already difficult situation, and generally take on more responsibility to ease the burden on parents or caregivers. It's a lot for any child to manage, so feeling overwhelmed is pretty common.

SIBLING *Perspective*

"When you are having dinner and suddenly something happens, it can be scary. Fearing when the next crisis might happen, not knowing day to day what things at home will be like is really hard."

How can I support the sibling(s) in my home?

When a child or youth experiences mental health challenges, it can feel overwhelming for parents and caregivers who are trying to support the young person who is struggling, as well as other children in the home. It's impossible to meet everyone's needs all the time, but there are some ways you can help the sibling(s) to cope.



Have Open Conversations

Managing mental health challenges in children and young people can be difficult, and even more so during a crisis. It can help to have open, frank conversations with siblings about what's happening in the family and how it's impacting everyone. A child or young person who has a sibling struggling with mental health challenges likely feels many, often mixed emotions (like isolation and frustration), and they might not be able to put into words what they're experiencing. Talking with your child or youth about this can help. Identifying and validating the siblings' experiences and encouraging them to share their thoughts can help them to feel seen, heard and loved. Here are some tips for how to have an open conversation:

- **Tell them it's okay to share their thoughts and emotions** with you about what's going on with their sibling, even if they are negative. It's important that they have the space to talk it out, and that will help them understand why they may be experiencing these emotions.
- **Balance listening and validating the feelings** that they are sharing with you, rather than using the time to explain the mental health needs of the sibling who is struggling.

"When my daughter was struggling, I would often say "This is so hard. It is not OK that you get hurt by your sister sometimes, and it's OK to feel angry or scared. We can support her and have feelings about it. I'm here to support you."

PARENT
to **PARENT**

- **Create a safe environment** to have these conversations. Taking a walk or a drive together, just the two of you, can help them be open about how they're feeling.
- **Share what you've noticed** about how they've been behaving or responding to the situation, as this can help them feel validated.
- **Help them to understand** what might be going on with their sibling in an age-appropriate way. Ensure that you are balancing sharing information in a way that keeps it simple, respects the privacy of your child or youth with mental health needs, and allows for the sibling to share their feelings about the situation and their experiences.

SIBLING *Perspective*

"Balance talking about the sibling with mental health challenges and listening to and supporting the sibling(s). I didn't always want to hear about his problems, I heard and saw enough of it. I wanted the space to just talk about me."

"It was really important for me to spend some one-to-one time with my younger son, knowing that most of my time and energy was spent supporting his brother. I had to intentionally set aside time to do this."

PARENT *to* PARENT

"My son at 5 said "it's been a lot, hasn't it Mom?" and for years afterwards if I said to him "there is a lot going on with your sister," he was able to understand that she wasn't doing well. I didn't know how to explain to him what I didn't even really understand."

"We created a picture book when our kids were little to help them understand their brother, including how to be safe around him..."

Create Meaningful Connections

If you can, try and spend one-to-one time with each of your children that is focused on them. While it's important to share your thoughts and feelings as well, try to keep the focus on the sibling and how you can support them.

SIBLING *Perspective*

“It’s really important to have one-on-one time with your parent. I remember having time with my mom, and that was really special and got us away from the stress and worry about what was happening at home.”

Share the Crisis Plan

Having a concrete action plan to respond to a crisis helps ensure that everyone in the family stays safe. You can engage the sibling(s) in the process of designing a Family Safety Plan. Talking through what this plan might look like, and (if appropriate) asking the sibling to contribute can help them to cope.

“It was sometimes a challenge to come up with the words to talk about things that were happening that I didn’t always understand either. So I would say things like “we had to call EMS because your brother was struggling and wanted to hurt himself.” That is one of the ways we protect each other and keep each other safe—when I am not sure that I can keep you all safe, we need the ambulance, and we call one.”

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Encourage Peer Support

Connecting your child with other siblings of children with mental health challenges can be extraordinarily helpful and comforting. Informal peer support can be very effective in reducing isolation, validating normal feelings, and helping with problem solving. A practical way to make this happen might be to [seek out peers yourself](#), so that your child can become connected with the child(ren) of your peers. Children might need help with being open with others while also respecting their sibling’s/family’s privacy—talking this through with them is important.

How can I support healthy sibling relationships?

Working to maintain family harmony and encouraging strong sibling relationships is an important part of being a parent or caregiver. This isn’t always easy, especially when one of your children has a mental health challenge. You can, however, do several things to support a healthy relationship between the children and young people in your family.

Here are some strategies to try:

- **Encourage flexibility.** It can be frustrating when interactions between siblings are fine one day and challenging the next, so encouraging the sibling to take things slowly and maintain flexibility with the child who is struggling can help contribute to strong sibling relationships.
- **Support doing things together as siblings.** Time together as a family is important, but so is time for siblings to do things without parents or caregivers around. If it's safe to do so, and if both siblings are interested, encourage your children to hang out together (e.g., playing games, watching a movie, going for a walk) to help them build and strengthen their relationship.
- **Support activities outside of the family.** Encourage the sibling to do things on their own outside of the family, as this can help them to build their own confidence and sense of accomplishment. For example, socializing with friends, getting involved in sports or hobbies, spending time outside, and perhaps developing a respite plan with and for them can give the sibling a break from the family and some of the stressors in the home environment.
- **Avoid communicating in a way that places blame.** When a family member struggles, sometimes others in the home need to make adaptations. Frame these as actions that you take to maintain a positive family environment, rather than placing the blame on the child or youth who struggles with mental health for requiring these accommodations. For example, rather than saying "Sorry, you can't have any screen time because your sister or brother really struggles with screens," try "Let's find another activity that you'll enjoy but doesn't involve being on your phone or device."
- **Celebrate the positive times.** When siblings are getting along well and enjoying each other, it's a good idea to point this out so that they understand that the challenging times are balanced by good times too.

SIBLING

Perspective

"Having my own extracurriculars gave me my own space. Sometimes, those are the times that I remember most fondly."

"When siblings are spending time together and it's going well, let them enjoy it and consider ending it early on a positive note if possible. They need to balance the tough times with the LOTS of memories of joy and kindness around each other."

PARENT
to PARENT

How can I take care of myself?

Having a child or young person with mental health challenges can take a toll on you as a parent or caregiver. To provide the best support for your children, it's essential that you care for yourself too. Here are some suggestions on concrete things you can try.

- 1 Care for yourself.** Self-care is essential, since taking care of yourself helps you to be there for your children. Try to spend time with people who are important to you, maintain a healthy diet and even a small exercise routine (e.g., walking each day), along with meditation or spiritual practice to help you stay centered and well. Even taking 5 to 15 minutes to yourself each day can be helpful, and helps you be able to respond rather than react to your children.
- 2 Access respite care.** As a parent or caregiver of a child or young person with a mental health challenge, you may benefit from taking a break and having someone else support your children for a short period of time. Try to tap into family members or friends who might be able to step in and help you in this way. There are [government-funded options](#), however, it's important to note that these require some work to access and have eligibility requirements that may not fit your family.
- 3 Look for peer support.** At [Parents for Children's Mental Health](#), we know how hard it is to find people who can relate to some of the unique challenges faced by parents and caregivers of children who struggle with mental health challenges. Our extensive network of [peer support](#) groups can help you find and join a chapter close to home.

It can be difficult for a sibling to live with a child or young person who struggles with mental health challenges, and acknowledging this is important. It can also be challenging for parents or caregivers to provide the right help to each child in the right way and at the right time. Through these experiences, the entire family can develop and hone strengths like compassion, empathy, and flexibility—all of which are important for future life.



Additional Resources

Check out these additional information and support resources for help navigating the sibling experience.

For Parents and Caregivers:

- [Parenting Survival Guide – Part 5: Sibling Relationships](#)
- [How can I Support my Other Children \(Siblings\) when They Have a Sibling with Mental Health Challenges?](#)
- [Siblings in the Hospital: Helping your Children Cope](#)
- [Parent Tip Sheet: Supporting Siblings](#)
- [Borderline Personality Disorder: An Information Guide for Families](#)
- [A Family Guide to Concurrent Disorders](#)
- [Improving Sibling Relationships | APA](#)

For Siblings:

- [CMHA Psychosis Resource for Siblings](#)
- [A Sibling's Guide to Psychosis – Information, Ideas, and Resources](#)
- [The Voices of Siblings: Tools We Can Use to Help Support Siblings of Children with Mental Health Challenges](#)
- [Straight Talk About Mental illness: Information for Siblings](#)
- [When your Brother or Sister has Schizophrenia](#)
- [SibKit – A Booklet for Brothers and Sisters of Children who Have Pediatric Acquired Brain Injuries \(ABI\)](#)
- [Support Matters – A Guide for Young Carers and Their Allies – A By Us For Us Guide](#)
- [Take Care Kit \(English\)](#)

You don't have to do this alone.

If you are a parent or caregiver worried about your child, or a young person looking for help yourself, please use our Find Help tool to connect with a service provider near you. Our network of child and youth mental health centres has 4,000 professionals ready to help children, youth, and families with free counselling and treatment. Our agencies provide care in person, on the phone, and virtually. No problem is too big or small.

[Find your closest child and youth mental health centre.](#)