Kids with Special Needs: Extraordinary Parenting, Strong Siblings

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Siblings with Special Needs

Agenda:

- *Why this topic?*
- *What do we learn from our siblings?*
- *Some prevailing sibling attitudes*
- *Family Education: a key to mutual understanding and acceptance*
- *Tips for parents & kids*
- *Q & A*

Siblings with Special Needs

We learn from our siblings how to…

- … share
- … take turns
- … play together
- … communicate needs
- … negotiate
- … cooperate
- … express feelings
- … care for others

Siblings with Special Needs

Siblings also help siblings acquire skills like…

- … cognitive / language / social skills
- … effective communication
- … academics
- … knowing game rules / protocols

Siblings with Special Needs

Siblings without special needs can learn from special needs sibs, too…

… tolerance
… being less judgemental
… sensitivity
… affiliation
… perspective
… forgiveness
… patience
… independence
… emotional expression
… resilience
… loyalty
… persistence in the face of frustration

Stress in families with special needs kids:

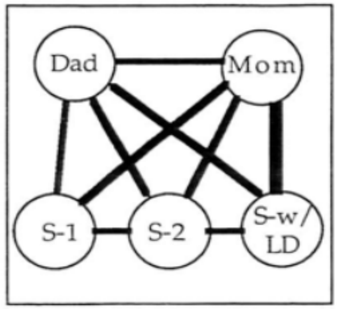
(The presence of a child with special needs) **has a significant impact on the social and emotional development of the other siblings. Usually, there are complex and intense feelings about the sibling with special needs, themselves and the family. Jealousy, anxiety, fear, anger, frustration, resentment, confusion, embarrassment and even abandonment are feelings siblings with AND WITHOUT special needs describe experiencing when talking in groups.**

Siblings with Special Needs

How a Learning Disability or Attention Deficit in the Family May Affect the Relationships Within

Scenario One

1



Mom becomes increasingly aware of the special neediness of the child with learning problems, and develops a particularly close relationship with him / her.

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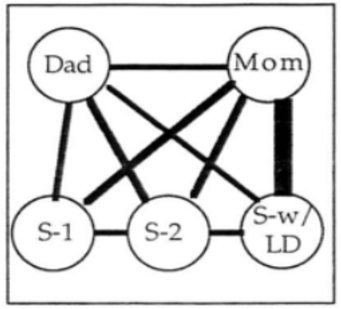

As the child's struggles increase, so too does Mom's role as a buffer, interpreter and comforter. An inter-reliance may develop between them. Dad may perceive the child as being pampered, and detach emotionally from him / her.

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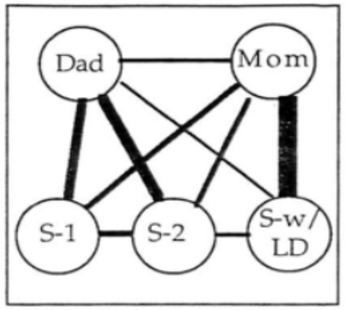
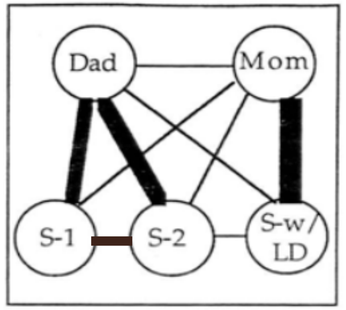


The more time Mom spends meeting the needs of the child with learning differences, the less time is available for the other siblings. As Dad distances from the child with learning problems, his attachment to the other siblings grows stronger. The relationship between Mom and Dad may begin to be strained.

4



Mom focuses all her energy on helping the child with learning problems, at the expense of her relationship with the other siblings. The family begins to ressemble two camps, as the majority of Dad's time is spent with the siblings without learning problems. Disagreements abound, as does marital discord.

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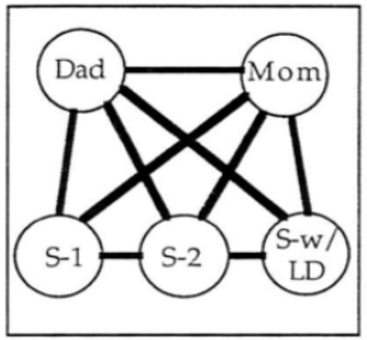
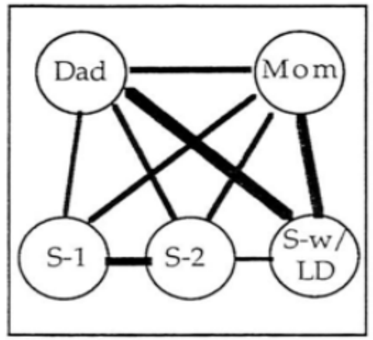
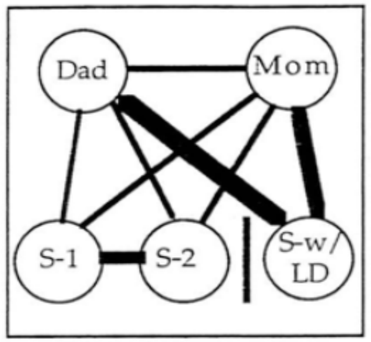
Scenario Two



Initially, all familial relationships and connections are of equal strength and addressing the special needs of the sibling with learning disabilities is a shared, cooperative experience.



As the child with learning differences struggles more academically and socially, more and more of Mom and Dad's time and energy are allocated to him / her. The other siblings begin to experience typical academic, social or adolescent issues, but find Mom and Dad insufficiently available to them.

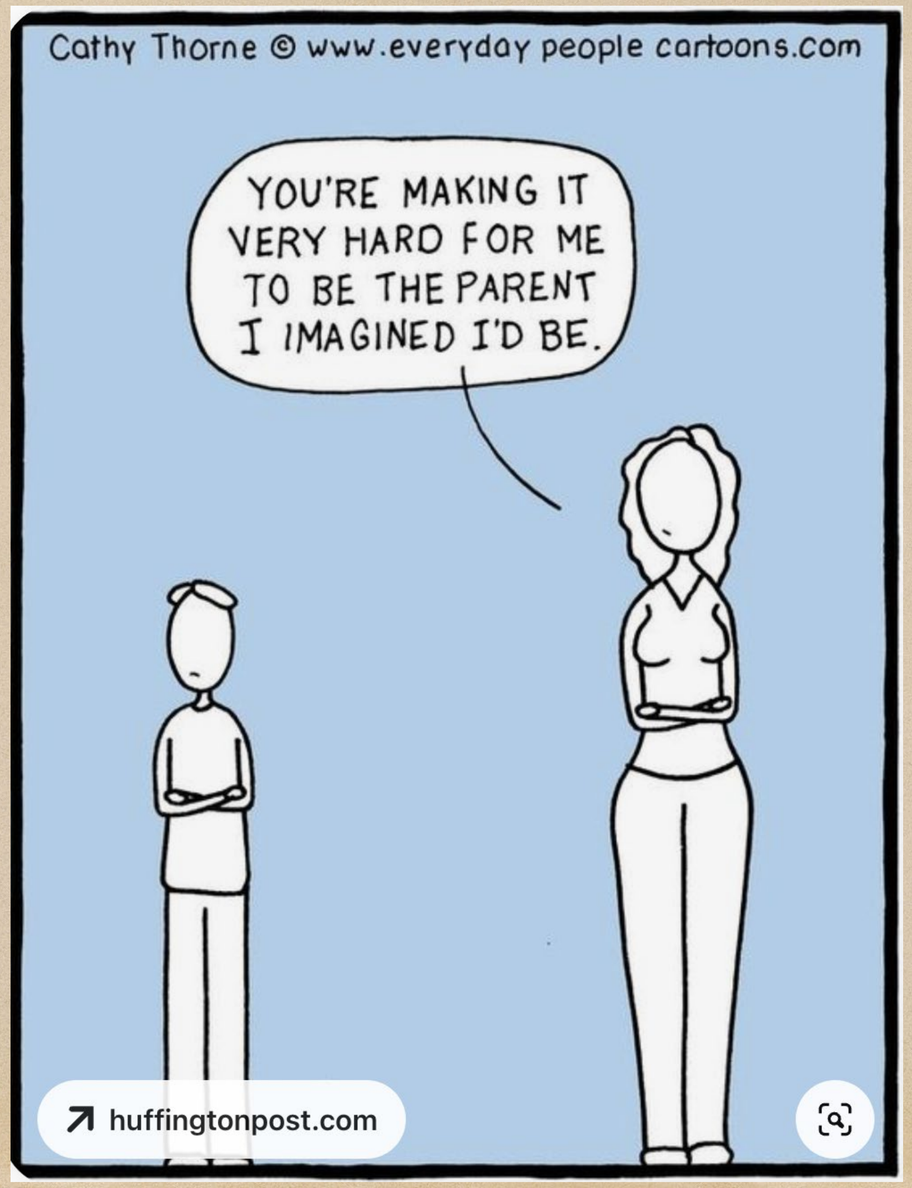


The distancing of the other siblings continues as Mom and Dad's investment in the child with learning problems increases. Resentment of that sibling may be voiced or unvoiced at this stage, depending on the temperament and adjustment of the other siblings.

Some social/emotional/behavioral reactions to special needs in the family by the non-special needs sibling:

- hyper-achievement
- precocious maturity
- “the perfect child”
- regression
- promiscuity
- poor school performance
- clinginess
- hyper-empathic
- separation from family
- asocial

Siblings with Special Needs



Things kids with special needs want their sibs to know…

… when you remind us that you can do something better than we can, our feelings get hurt

… we can feel embarrassed a lot about the level of work we do in school, so we'd rather not hear that you think our work is easy - even if you're trying to help

… we usually can only remember about 10 seconds of directions that take a minute to tell us*

… we feel bad that nobody believes that simple things can be so difficult for us*

*… we usually can only remember about 10 seconds of directions that take a minute to tell us**

*… we feel bad that nobody believes that simple things can be so difficult for us**

- **educate EVERYONE in the family about the nature of the strengths and challenges EVERYONE brings to the table**

- it's helpful for the kids to know that we have our own struggles, too

- **for siblings ≈9 and over, have a family viewing of Rick Lavoie's video "F.A.T. City: How Difficult Can This Be?**

- overlook the 80's shoulder pads and big hair and try to focus on the way Rick talks about the feelings that accompany having an LD or attention deficit

Siblings with Special Needs

Things kids with special needs want their sibs to know…

… we get frustrated when we lose almost every argument because you can talk faster than we can

… when we get angry and blow up and say mean things, we usually don't mean them exactly that way

… It's all more frustrating than you could ever think.

… we hate it when we get teased by you in front of your friends or in front of ours*

… we love it when you say something nice about me or about something I can do to your friends*

(…we hate it when we get teased by you in front of your friends or in front of ours)

(…we love it when you say something nice about me or about something I can do to your friends)

- **Celebrate sibling differences and accomplishments and avoid comparing siblings.**
  - *This will promote self-esteem and prevent wedges from being formed between siblings*
  - *“Third party checks” can be hugely reinforcing when delivering praise / compliments to kids*

What non-special needs sibs want their sibs to know…

… it makes me crazy when you tell on me for every little thing I do or say

… it's hard when you get so frustrated with me even when I'm trying to help

… why do you ALWAYS have to get your way or you'll cry?

… I know you can do WAY more things than you're asked to do by mom & dad but you complain and complain until you get out of it*

(… I know you can do WAY more things than you're asked to do by mom & dad but you complain and complain until you get out of it)

- **ensure that the sib with special needs "has the opportunity" to contribute to family responsibilities to a degree JUST BEYOND what his/her capabilities are**
  - *because we want kids to reach, we need to be prepared to teach and teach… and review and re-teach*

What non-special needs sibs want their sibs to know…

… I worry about you even when I'm so pissed off at you

… you always make up things that I'm doing bad to you

… I'm frustrated I can't have my friends come over the house

… you're so mean to mom and dad

… it's so frustrating when you beg me to play a game with you and when I do, you whine as soon as you start to lose and then quit*

… it'd be so much better to work out problems together ourselves instead of you telling on me to Mom or Dad*

(…it's so frustrating when you beg me to play a game with you and when I do, you whine as soon as you start to lose and then quit)

(…we'd rather work out problems together ourselves instead of "getting told on" to Mom or Dad)*

- **teach and model positive listening and conflict resolution skills**

- using phrases like "Let me check if I'm understanding you…" "What I just said was important - can you tell me what it means so I can make sure I said correctly?" can focus the kids (and us…) on the importance of communication clarity

What non-special needs sibs want their sibs to know…

… I can't understand how you get ALL the attention and still whine and complain?

… why do you act one way in front of mom and dad and totally different when you're with me?

… I know things are hard for you but you make it so impossible to feel bad for you and try to help*

… it's not fun when you butt in when I'm with my friends and then tell on me when I get mad and tell you to leave*

*… I know things are hard for you but you make it so impossible to feel bad for you and try to help**

*… it's not fun when you butt in when I'm with my friends and then tell on me when I get mad and tell you to leave**

- **acknowledge the feelings of anger and frustration and discouragement and sadness, etc. that the kids feel - they're REAL!**

- Feelings Happen! Being made to feel guilty about uncomfortable feelings exacerbates the negative expression of them

- a parents' job is to help kids find more constructive ways to act on those feelings, NOT to say they shouldn't be feeling them

Siblings with Special Needs

What to do, whatever to DO???

- **educate EVERYONE in the family about the nature of the strengths and challenges EVERYONE brings to the table**
  - *it's helpful for the kids to know that we have our struggles, too*

- **acknowledge the feelings of anger and frustration and discouragement and sadness, etc. that the kids feel - they're REAL!**
  - *a parents' job is to help kids find more constructive ways to act on those feelings, NOT to say they shouldn't be feeling them*

- **model the qualities you want your kids to adopt**
  - *patience, tolerance, acceptance, resourcefulness, resilience - shoot for 33%!*

What to do, whatever to DO???

- **Celebrate sibling differences and avoid comparing siblings.**
  - *This will promote self-esteem and prevent wedges from being formed between siblings*

- **Design tasks that involve the sibs working together for an incentive they BOTH/ALL prize**
  - *the acts of cooperation and responsibility sharing will be rewarded rather than just the final product*

What to do, whatever to DO???

- **ensure that you build in time to spend with each child individually**

the amount of time you spend with each child is less important than that it will be (as…) sacrosanct a time (as it can be…)

- **for siblings ≈9 and over, have a family viewing of Rick Lavoie's video "F.A.T. City: How Difficult Can This Be?**

- overlook the 80's shoulder pads and big hair and try to focus on the way Rick talks about the feelings that accompany having an LD or attention deficit

What to do, whatever to DO???

- **if the sibling frustrations and antagonizations (??) persist or worsen, enlist the aid of a local therapist or sibling workshop**
  - *sibling relationships - as well as parental sanity - are important both in the short term as well as in the future*

- **maintain social engagement outside the family as much as possible**
  - *being with kids and adults outside the family can be good for EVERYONE - and offer opportunities for positive planning (plans B through, like, J…), practicing pro-social behavior, and praising incremental positive change*

What to do, whatever to DO???

- **teach and model positive listening and conflict resolution skills**
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- **ensure that the sib with special needs “has the opportunity” to contribute to family responsibilities to a degree JUST BEYOND what his/her capabilities are**
  - *because we want kids to reach, we need to be prepared to teach… and teach*

Resources:

Understood . org - *great clearinghouse for information about LD, ADHD, NVLD, parenting, etc.*

https://www.understood.org/

Child Mind Institute - *a pioneer in the online distribution of special needs information*

https://childmind.org/

Betty Osman: How LD Affects a Child's Siblings - *great article from another pillar of the field*

https://www.greatschools.org/gk/articles/learning-disabilities-and-siblings/

Thanks much for tuning in today!

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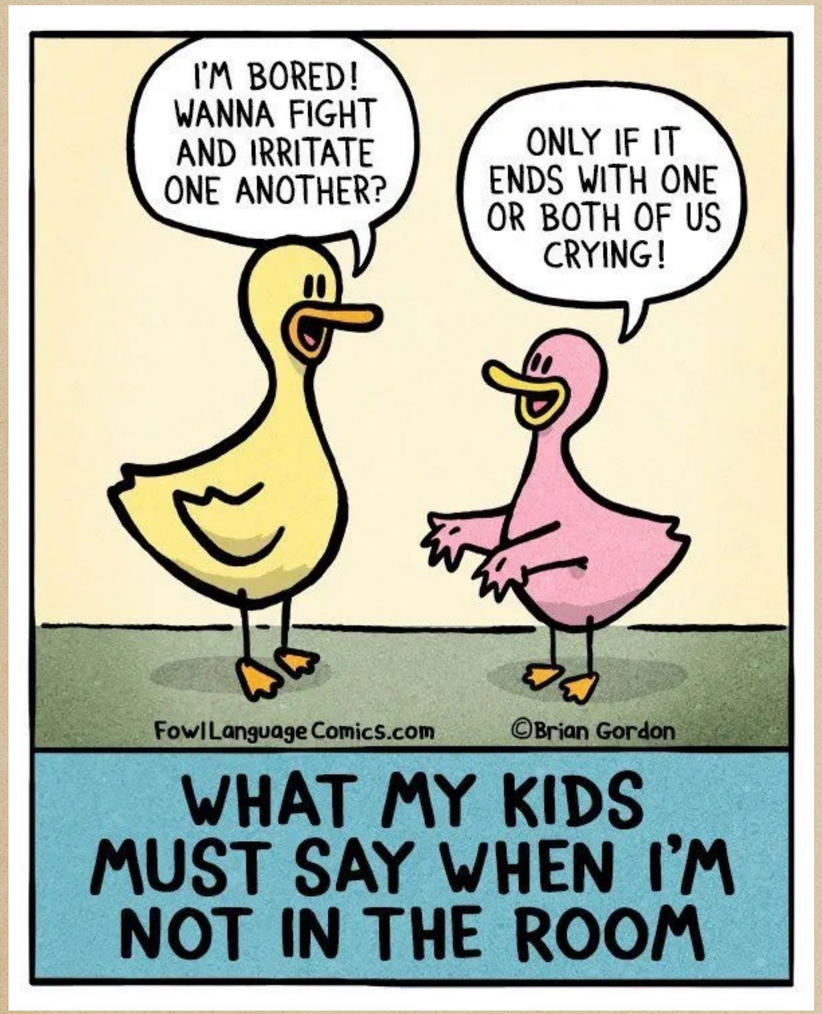
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