

## Siblings

When a child is born deaf or hard of hearing, your whole family is affected, including the child's siblings. A variety of things can affect sibling relationships; however, families can use strategies to create and maintain positive relationships.

As a parent you may initially feel overwhelmed with emotions, information, decisions and medical appointments. The child's needs become the focus of your time and energy. During this period of adjustment, siblings may begin to feel their needs are overlooked or take a backseat to that of their brothers' or sisters'. You will feel like it is a balancing act as you learn how to meet the needs of everyone.

It is important for you to acknowledge your feelings and look for a positive outlet to express how you are feeling. By communicating with others, and taking time for your interests, you can renew your energy and model positive coping skills to your family. Siblings will often model their parents' attitudes.

Sibling relationships are often the longest relationship in the family and of our lives. Siblings are the first peers a child has, they are playmates, keeper of secrets, and rivals. Having a sibling helps us to learn how to relate to others in a healthy way.

Several factors can influence how siblings adjust to having a brother or sister who is deaf or hard of hearing.

The home environment you create for your children as they are growing up can influence who they become as individuals, and how they relate to the world around them. The degree to which you positively adjust to the hearing loss in the short and the long term can have a direct impact on the wellbeing of the siblings and the relationships they build with one another.

Siblings may react to their brother's or sister's hearing loss differently. Older siblings may experience more disruption to their routines and may feel resentful about the changes and loss of parental attention. All of a sudden their parents have medical and other appointments related to their sibling that were not a part of their lives before. Older siblings who have a better understanding of the situation may feel a deeper sense of responsibility than younger siblings. Younger siblings may respond differently because the sibling with hearing loss has always been a part of their life and this is all they have known.

When a child is in their pre-school years, they are not able to understand the new things you need to attend to, such as going to medical and therapy appointments. Because they may not



be able to fully express these feelings, you may see a change in their behavior. Preschool-aged children are also great playmates for their siblings. Oftentimes they are the best teachers and models for them because they have no judgement.

School-age children are better able to understand themselves and their siblings, communicate with you about their needs, and are more socially conscious and aware of the world around them. As they become more aware of the challenges you and their sibling face, they may feel pressure to be good, and not make waves, make you worry, or they may be overly helpful. They also may feel embarrassed by their sibling because they do not know how to explain to others what's going on. For example, their peers may become aware that their sibling wears hearing aids or communicates differently.

During the teen years, young people try to find their own identity apart from their parents and siblings. They may begin to question their role with their sibling who is deaf or hard of hearing. Are they the protector or can they just be their brother or sister? They may want to spend less time with them and seek the company of their own friends and peers. The sibling may also begin to be concerned for their future and their sibling's future.

Siblings may feel a range of strong emotions at different times in their development. Siblings may experience feelings of loss, guilt, isolation, protectiveness, resentment, jealousy, anger, frustration, and embarrassment. Even though they may face these difficult emotions, they can grow up with very positive qualities such as maturity, self-reliance, tolerance, patience, pride, and loyalty. They may have good advocacy skills or a strong sense of equality, and a depth of insight and creative communication skills as a direct result of their relationship with their sibling.

Another factor that can influence sibling relationships is communication. The mode of communication, used in the family and the ease of access siblings have to this modality, is important. Can the siblings easily communicate with one another without the help of another person? What is the depth of communication possible? Does everyone in the family know and use the communication modality? These are real questions that impact communication between siblings. When the siblings can communicate with one another, it helps them build positive interactions, work out their own problems, and encourages independence.

It is important to create special times to spend with each child in the family one-on-one. Some parents take turns spending individual time with the siblings and allowing them to choose what they'd like to do. Find ways to help each child feel special and valued. Ask them what their needs are and be creative in meeting them. Acknowledge and praise their efforts whether it is helping with their sibling or an accomplishment that is personal to them. Maintaining an open door policy allows them to freely express feelings comfortably and without judgement. Find activities to enjoy as a family; the family unit is the most important for children to learn to relate to one another and the world around them.



Be open and honest, to the extent each child can handle, when communicating what is happening with their sibling. Create a family schedule and calendar so everyone knows what will be happening and when, to help everyone plan ahead. Consider joining support groups to learn from other families and siblings of children who are deaf or hard of hearing to build a social network of support. Positive communication can reduce uncertainty for everyone in the family.

It is also important to discuss how to explain the hearing loss to friends and others in a positive manner. If you notice signs of teasing, bullying, or anti-social behavior seek help from a professional or mentor. For younger children it can be fun and helpful to role-play how to handle reactions of others.

The sibling relationship is a very precious one. It can also be a fragile one when a disability is introduced. It is important to balance meeting the needs of both the deaf or hard of hearing child with their siblings. By encouraging honesty, fun, and individuality you can find ways to nurture relationships that have a lasting impact on your family as a whole. Siblings are an amazing part of the family unit!