

PARENTING A CHILD WITH AD/HD can be stressful, demanding and exhausting. Yet, being the sibling of a brother or sister with AD/HD comes with its own set of challenges and can be just as stressful. Siblings without AD/HD often wrestle with a powerful range of feelings from anger and jealousy over the loss of parents' focused time and attention to grief, sadness and guilt. Repeated disruptions of family activities can leave them disappointed. A household in a chronic state of chaos invites frustration and anxiety. A disruptive sibling might contribute to strained relationships at home and school. Many children without AD/HD worry about the health of their sibling, wonder about themselves and are concerned about the visible wear and tear on parents.

Some will fret about where they stand in the family and are confused about what role to take. Should they be the super-achievers, the perfectionists over-compensating for their sibling, or do they become the peacemakers and helpers, being as independent as possible? Others will weigh whether being the "good kid" is worth the effort. While undemanding and cooperative behavior may be welcomed by weary parents, it often gives the child without AD/HD nothing in return. Inappropriate acting out may be a better bet to get the attention they crave, even if it's negative.

While it can be an enormous challenge to live with a sibling with AD/HD, few are readily equipped to effectively tackle it, and even fewer parents are aware of the challenge. Overwhelmed and completely consumed by the needs of the child with AD/HD, parents don't always recognize the effect on the other family members. For the siblings without AD/HD, this means their needs are often overlooked. Sadly, it may take a crisis for their issues to get noticed.

It can be painful for parents to realize how much a child with AD/HD can impact the life of a sibling. But an informed parent holds the key to helping a child cope. Looking beyond the needs of a sibling with AD/HD lets parents learn the skills to accomplish this. When parents apply coping strategies and then equip their child without AD/HD with tactics and methods to deal with the challenge of their

sibling with AD/HD, they empower them. Siblings move beyond survival to effective coping.

# Strategies to Help Siblings Cope

#### Acknowledge and validate your children's feelings

Let them talk about life with a sibling with AD/HD. Allow them to voice their fears, anger, hurts and concerns and validate what they say without making judgments. If talking is uncomfortable, have them put thoughts in a journal, write you a letter or draw a picture. They don't need to explain why they feel the way they do. Just let them know that you accept their feelings. Fight the urge to jump in and defend the sibling with AD/HD. Remember, your job here is to simply listen.

## Show empathy

Try to see life from your child's perspective. Imagine how it feels on a day-to-day basis to live with a sibling with AD/HD. Reflect this back to them. If your child is in tears because a carefully constructed tabletop project is in pieces, an empathetic comment from you might be, "You look angry and upset. I bet it feels awful when your sister does things like that. It must be so hard."

#### Ask for input

Ask how you could make things easier for your child to live with and understand their sibling with AD/HD. Be receptive to their ideas; kids often have creative solutions. If you know that your child without AD/HD

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is having some friends over on the weekend, ask him or her how you could help make the situation more positive.

## ■ Explain the ABC's of AD/HD

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Even a basic understanding of AD/HD makes it easier to understand and cope with the behavior of a sibling with AD/HD. Lack of information only fuels irrational fears and misconceptions. Some children feel responsible for their sibling's AD/HD, believing they said or did something to cause it. Others worry about catching it, fearing it's contagious.

Explain the symptoms, how they develop and what medications can do. Talk about things your family is doing to help the sibling with AD/HD. They may even show empathy for their sibling and reframe some of the annoying behaviors. You may be surprised to hear, "So that's why it takes him so long to do his homework. His AD/HD makes it hard to concentrate. I thought he was just being lazy."

# **■** Evaluate your expectations of the sibling relationship Take an honest look at things to see if your expectations of how your children get along are realistic. Do you insist that your children be friends at all costs? Is the child without AD/HD assigned the role of peacemaker by always "giving in?" Do you expect perfect behavior from that child? Does he or she have the

perception that you want him or her to be the "good kid?" Are all family members treated with respect, or is the child with AD/HD held to a lesser standard? You may need to reassess what you expect from each of your children.

# ■ Help your child develop strategies

Teach your child without AD/HD to respond with effective strategies when issues arise. Nurture feelings of empowerment. Coach your child and role-play to practice appropriate responses to sibling aggression, melt-downs or interruptions. Rehearse the use of "I" statements, e.g., "I feel\_ when you Practice the steps of problem solving:

- I. Identify the problem
- **2.** Brainstorm all possible solutions
- 3. Choose the best option
- 4. Try it out, and
- **5.** See if it worked. If not, try another option.

# ■ Make your home user-friendly

Make sure your child without AD/HD has a place in the house to escape and retreat from a demanding sibling. Take steps to ensure that your child has successful get-togethers with friends by planning where, when and how they will happen. Schedule visits when you're available to keep the sibling with AD/HD oc-



cupied, or when he or she won't be home. Offer to take your other child and a friend to an out-of-thehouse activity like the park, a movie or the mall. Before a visit, it may help to talk to friends or their parents about the AD/HD behavior of the sibling. Kids may be more comfortable knowing why a friend's brother runs circles around them, talks constantly and always interrupts.

# ■ Redefine the concept of family outings

Let go of the myth that your family must do everything together. Plan outings to accommodate your family's needs. Be flexible and creative. Not everyone needs to do the same thing at the same time. Arrive late, leave early and if possible, go in separate cars. Everyone deserves input for family activities, so don't allow the sibling with AD/HD to continually set the

Make other arrangements for the sibling with AD/ HD when your focus needs to be on the other child. Expecting a child with AD/HD to sit through a sibling's music recital is a recipe for failure.

#### ■ Be fair with rewards

Are you often hearing the lament that things aren't fair? "She gets money for doing homework and I get nothing." If you are using a behavioral incentive program with the child with AD/HD, consider doing the same for the other siblings. Since homework may not be their help them identify behavior and mutually agree upon a reward.

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# **■** Create opportunities for affirmation

Encourage working to potential and embrace individual strengths and talents. Schedule special private time between you and your children without AD/HD—go out to breakfast on weekends, run errands together or rent a movie and escape to another part of the house. Really focus on your other children and listen to their ordinary concerns. Compared to their sibling, their problems may seem insignificant, but realize that their needs are just as impor-

#### ■ Seek and welcome support

You may need to draw on other sources for help and support. National organizations can provide resources and help locate sibling support groups. Consider looking into CHADD, National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) and Attention Deficit Disorder Association (ADDA).

Sometimes, individual therapy or family counseling may also be helpful. Your pediatrician or other clinician can make a recommendation.

# **■** Celebrate positive coping

In the struggle of the journey, don't lose sight of the positive outcomes and inner strengths your children without AD/HD gain through the coping process. Point out the compassion, acceptance, tolerance and yes, the patience being developed by having a sibling with AD/HD. These positive traits may well generalize to other life situations. In their own small way, siblings can be terrific advocates for those affected by AD/HD. Talking about it is a huge first step in reducing the shame and stigma.

As one mother of three so beautifully summed up, "I don't have one AD/HD child with special needs; I have three special children, each with their own needs."

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