

Rick Lavoie

Advice to Kids with Learning or Social Problems About Siblings

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Parents should explain that you know it is difficult to get along with brothers and sisters. There is, naturally, a degree of rivalry and competition between kids who are living under the same roof. Help the child with learning disabilities focus on the goal of building positive relationships with siblings and to have as few battles as possible. Here are some suggestions for the child:

1. Try to avoid taking your problems out on your siblings.

School can be very frustrating, but it is not fair to bring all of your frustration home with you. Because you cannot yell at your grouchy math teacher, you sometimes come home and yell at your kid sister. That isn't fair! Calm down!

2. Don't hide out.

You may think that the best way to avoid fighting with siblings is to stay in your room all day. That's not a good idea. You'll have better relationships and fewer fights if you try getting positively involved with your family.

3. Choose your battles carefully.

If you fight or argue with your brother about every single minor issue that comes up, you will be fighting all day---and night. You need to decide which issues are worth fighting about and which issues you can live with and ignore. Maybe you can learn to live with the fact that he calls you names, but you cannot tolerate him going into your room and taking your CDs.

4. Talk about it!

Wait until things are peaceful with your brother. Tell him — firmly — that you can no longer tolerate a certain behavior and clearly state that it must stop. Don't ask. Tell.

5. Be honest with yourself

If you fight often with a brother, you may begin to believe that the problem is 100 percent his fault. That is probably untrue. Try to determine *your* role in these battles. Look at the situation from your brother's point of view. What behavior can *you* change?

6. Beware of "hot buttons."

Siblings are very skilled at discovering the specific behaviors that make you lose control. Try not to let them bait you into making a mistake. If you pretend it doesn't bother you when they push your hot button, they may lose interest and move on.

7. Try not to compare yourself with your siblings.

Sometimes it seems that your brothers and sisters are perfect. They have little difficulty getting good grades, have plenty of friends, and excel at sports or the arts. This can be tough to deal with. Remember, your siblings' accomplishments have nothing to do with your own potential. Be yourself and try to improve your own behavior and performance. Try not to compete constantly with your siblings. By the way, try to view things from your brother's or sister's perspective once in awhile. Nobody's life is *really* perfect. The sibling who is a sports star or who gets great grades *also* makes tremendous sacrifices in order to accomplish these things. He also has his share of frustration and failures.

Tips for helping special siblings

- There are no steadfast rules regarding the relationships between special-needs children and their siblings. The nature of this relationship is influenced by numerous factors, including family resources, lifestyle, severity of disability, size of family, birth order, age spans, intrafamily relationships and community involvement.
- Learning to adapt to the needs and idiosyncrasies of a sibling with LD is a challenging and difficult process. The sibling's feelings, actions, and responses may vary over time. The intensity and variation of these feelings will be unique to each individual child. There, unfortunately, is no road map or cookbook for this complex process.
- Older siblings may develop concerns that their brother's disability is genetic and will be transferred to their own children.
- Some siblings will feel an inappropriate obligation to compensate for their disabled sibling by becoming "the perfect child." They may also try to act as "the third parent" and develop a domineering attitude and relationship with their LD sibling. These reactions are understandable but inappropriate.
- Nondisabled siblings have a tendency to overreact to normal sibling rivalry, conflict, and friction. They need to be reminded that even if their brother did *not* have LD, they would *not* get along all the time. Further, each and every squabble that they have is *not* related to the LD. In short, "You don't have an LD brother; rather, you have a brother who has LD."
- The special sibling's need for current, factual information about his brother's or sister's special condition is very significant. Because the sibling has limited life experience, he has difficulty putting the disability in perspective. Parents should share the information about the child's problems (e.g., diagnosis, prognosis) openly. Absent this information, the sibling will develop assumptions and beliefs that are inaccurate and, generally, blown.
- The older nondisabled sibling should be informed of the whereabouts and format of his brother's educational, vocational, and medical records.
- The sibling of the child with LD must come to understand that family life will be uncertain and unpredictable. However, the sibling *can* control his responses to the LD sibling's behavior. Parents should discuss—and even role-play—the child's reactions to the LD sibling's behavior (e.g., tantrums, public misbehavior).
- Explain to the non-LD sibling that moodiness and inconsistency are primary symptoms of children with learning and attentional problems. Caution the child to take his sibling's behavior seriously but not personally. You might say, "Sally, Dick didn't mean to embarrass you in front of Mrs. Clinton. He should not have said that you got a D on your science project, and I will talk to him about it. Sometimes Dick

says things without thinking, and Dr. Rogers is working with him on that. I don't blame you for getting mad at what Dick said. But try not to get mad at Dick, okay?"

- Encourage the non-LD child to discuss his concerns, problems, anxieties, and opinions openly. When these feelings are expressed, avoid being judgmental or reprimanding.
- Encourage the special sibling to talk to you about what it is like to have a sibling with special needs. Remember: you probably have never experienced what she is experiencing.
- Recognize that it is okay for the sibling to have mixed feelings about his special sibling.