

SIBLINGS OF CHILDREN WITH ED

A child with an illness or disability can seriously affect if not disrupt the entire family, including well children. Living with chronic illness and disability is a difficult experience and can be expected to take an emotional toll on both the patient and the family. However, while such an impact is unpleasant it is neither inevitable nor necessarily all bad. Studies of the impact on siblings of chronically ill or handicapped children have reported inconsistent results. While many have found undesirable effects, some have found no meaningful effects and still others have found beneficial effects. Even those which have reported undesirable impact on well brothers and sisters may describe relatively small effects.

Parents of chronically ill children do sometimes report greater adjustment problems among their well children compared to similar children in families without an ill child. These problems include greater anxiety, sadness, physical complaints, conflict and tantrums, as well as a tendency to keep to oneself. However, while these differences are large enough to be reported in professional journals, a closer look will sometimes reveal that the level of maladjustment is not great enough to be of clinical significance.

To understand this distinction, one must understand how most of these studies are designed. In the typical study parents are asked to complete questionnaires about their children. The results for the children with sick or handicapped siblings are compared with those for another group of families in which all of the children are healthy. If the difference between the groups is large enough, the investigators report that the groups are significantly different. This means that differences of this size are relatively unlikely to occur merely by chance. However, statistical significance does not always indicate clinical significance. For example, investigators in one study reported that the siblings of disabled children had lower scores on a measure of self-concept. Nonetheless, the scores of the siblings of the disabled children were still at least average for the scale used.

Parents of ill children may also report positive effects on the well siblings. These positive effects include greater maturity, helpfulness, and empathy for others, as well as protectiveness of the affected child. Some investigators have also found less teasing and conflict among the children within the affected families.

In summary, serious illness and disability place additional stress on all family members, including the well children. This can lead to both emotional growth and to problems in the children. Even when problems occur, they may not be sufficient to warrant professional attention.

There is no magical approach to dealing with this additional stress other than the effective ways families have developed to deal with other stressors. The family's way of dealing with problems should take into account its history and culture, as well as the unique characteristics of the children involved. The existence of a disability or illness in a sibling does not guarantee either normal or inadequate emotional development in the well child. Most families would be well advised to discuss with the children the disability as well as any stress caused by illness. Should unusual problems arise, seek help from a professional whom you trust.

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