



## **Sibling issues when one has special needs: Am I my brother's keeper?**

Rivalry between siblings is commonplace. Siblings vie for parental attention as well as access to family resources such as the television, computer, telephone and so on. However in families where there is a child with special needs the impact on other siblings can take on added proportions.

By virtue of a child's special needs, more attention and parental and family resources are drawn to that child. This in and of itself can set the stage for resentment or animosity with other siblings. Further, additional responsibilities placed on siblings for the direct care of the one with special needs can add to bad feelings. The siblings may surface questioning matters as, "Am I my brother's keeper"?

From the social work perspective, it is often cited that children should not take on parental duties. When this does occur we refer to such children as "parentified". The connotation is negative and the concern is that the child may have responsibilities beyond their ability to handle causing them to face ongoing failure or, it may build resentment when their burdens feel greater than observed in their friends.

The truth is though that having a sibling with a special need can provide remarkable opportunity for the other siblings to learn lessons in humanity. Far from the concern for negative implications, positive outcomes include sensitivity to others and a remarkable ability to contribute to the betterment of society be it at the local community level on behalf of disadvantaged populations, or the larger community through social action and social policy.

As such, to be one's brother's keeper is not inherently bad or good. The outcome will more likely depend on the temperament of the child and how the needs of the child with special needs are managed in view of resources and the needs of the other siblings. Strategies to facilitate the positive adjustment and support of these siblings include:

1. A profound appreciation for their help and/or sacrifice

This is not to say parents seek to spoil siblings so as to compensate, but rather express verbally and through acts of affection their appreciation for efforts towards the sibling with special

needs. *Thank you* can carry significant meaning – even from parents to children.

2. Manageable expectations – behaviourally and emotionally

Parents need to be sure that whatever they ask of the other siblings, it is within their ability to provide. If asking one to look after (baby-sit) another, make sure the child is emotionally comfortable. It can be scary to be left at home at the best of time, let alone with the responsibility of another.

3. Tuning in

Parents need to encourage the other siblings to talk about family life. Some kids may need to be drawn out for such discussions. The purpose is to help them express their feelings. The challenge for the parents is not to correct or solve problems per se, but to actively listen such that they feel heard. Simply having a voice and expressing a voice is therapeutic. Siblings should not be denied their feelings, which will change over the course of life and experience.

4. Providing special time

Just as parents of children with special needs require respite, siblings require similar respite but in the company and attention of their parents. This recharges their emotional reserves, enabling them to return refreshed with a positive disposition.

There is nothing unreasonable about having expectations on siblings to participate or help in the care of another sibling. This is a function of the situation and a fact of their life. Emotional adjustment will in part depend on how the situation is approached and managed. The above strategies can help.

Gary Direnfeld, MSW, RSW  
(905) 628-4847  
[gary@yoursocialworker.com](mailto:gary@yoursocialworker.com)  
[www.yoursocialworker.com](http://www.yoursocialworker.com)

Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.