

Family Focus

Helping Siblings of Children with Special Needs

By Margie Ryerson, MFT

If you are a family with a child with special needs, most likely you experience intense physical and emotional demands. You need as much help and understanding from family, friends, community and school services as possible. In addition, your other children will often need special attention as well. Here are some considerations for helping them:

1) Explain to your other children exactly what the child with special needs is experiencing (and will experience), so there are no misconceptions or unnecessary worries. Keep updating them, since conditions and treatment will vary over time.

One 11-year-old sibling I saw developed a school phobia because she worried that her sister with leukemia would die when she was at school. She needed frequent reassurance and information about her sister's condition, and a promise that if there was an emergency, her parents would pick her up from school.

2) Have open communication with your children so they can comfortably discuss their concerns, worries and frustrations with you. Check in with them regularly, even

if they seem annoyed that you are doing this. Let them know that you welcome discussion of any worries and feelings.

3) Protect your children as much as possible from your own worries and anxieties. Your children need reassurance that you are handling what is necessary, and that you are confident and competent, even if you have to fake it sometimes for their sakes. Unfortunately, some parents "let it all hang out" with their children, and necessary boundaries become eroded. If siblings are too involved, they can develop symptoms such as obsessive-compulsive disorder, an eating disorder, self-harm, excessive anxiety, depression, underachievement in school, substance abuse – the list goes on and on. Your other children need to be free to feel less responsible and less emotionally involved than you are. They need to be able to live their own lives.

4) Explain how siblings can help out, but don't create too much of a burden for them, which can lead to resentment. Have your child with special needs pitch in to help as much as possible

5) While you want to have ap-

propriate expectations for your child with special needs, don't set your expectations too high for your other children.

Annie, age 19, grew up with an older sister with severe learning disabilities. She thought her sister, Alison, got off easy while she felt pressure from her parents to perform well in sports and academics. Annie developed an eating disorder, bulimia, as a way of coping with her resentment and accompanying guilt for feeling the way she did. Whenever she tried to express her frustrations to her parents, they would tell her to just be happy that she didn't have Alison's problems.

6) If you see your other children setting goals that are much too high for themselves – or developing perfectionistic tendencies, perhaps to compensate for a sibling's inability to perform – be sure to intervene and try to provide some guidance.

7) Try not to automatically get involved in your children's disputes. First see if they can work things out themselves; otherwise you may tend to try to protect and defend your special needs child too much at the expense of your other children.

8) Encourage each child to have his own interests, friends and activities, and not to pursue something solely because he wants to please you.

Trevor had a physically disabled brother. He signed up to play football in high school even though he didn't like it very much. Trevor's father and grandfather had both played in college, and his father expressed hope that his son would continue the family tradition. Trevor knew his father was already disappointed that only one of his sons would be able to follow in his footsteps. He felt duty-bound to fulfill his father's hopes and to compensate for his brother's disability.

9) Make time to spend individually with each child and to participate in their activities. Give each child enough personal parental attention so that they won't try to obtain your attention in negative ways. As one wise parent noted, "When I spend individual time with my children, I can more easily be a different kind of parent to each of them, depending on their personalities and needs."

10) Take advantage of school, community and other resources for

your children that offer emotional support. An excellent resource is Donald Meyer's Sibling Support Project (www.siblingsupport.org). The organization offers books, training, workshops, online support, and sibling support groups.

Keep in mind that if they are well-supported emotionally, your children with a special needs sibling can develop special strengths. Many of these children demonstrate empathy and compassion starting at a young age. In addition, they are often very loyal and accepting of others because of their experiences with their sibling.



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You think Dad or Mom needs Senior Housing?

By Linda Fodrini-Johnson, MA, MFT, CMC

How do you start the process when mom or dad needs senior housing? Should you ask friends, respond to ads, follow the get "free help and advice for senior's" advertisement or are there other ways? The answer could be "yes" to all, but you might make a mistake with the well-meaning friend's advice or the "free helper." They might not give you the information you need to make a good choice. Be mindful of the old saying: You get what you pay for.

Good choices give you options – from staying in your home with the support of a service like the Lamorinda Village (www.lamorindavillage.com); there are similar "Villages" all over the country) to home care, home delivered meals and/or a part-time personal assistant.

When making choices for another, there are three important considerations:

1) Make the choice based on your parent's values, likes, dislikes and needs. Don't choose a commu-

nity because it fits your idea of the ideal retirement setting. Does it give mom or dad a place to swim or do fitness? Do they have day trips or art projects? If pets or gardening are important – will that be something he or she can continue to have in their lives. Can they continue to care for them as their needs change – can they have a wheelchair and what if their memory fails?

2) Be sure you have looked at all the community services, having consulted with objective professionals and the physicians about needs now and in the near future.

3) Cost of all levels of care should be taken into consideration at admission even if he or she never needs extra care. Look at the contract closely – do you have to pay for care levels even when they are out of the community for several weeks. In some communities, these little details can be negotiated or discussed and often reduced or eliminated.

An aging life care manager (also

called professional geriatric care manager) can assess mom's or dad's situation and come up with a plan that addresses issues such as confusion, or an unsteady balance that may not lead to a placement out of the home. This care manager will perform a comprehensive assessment that might uncover something such as dehydration, which is causing the problems and is not dementia; often they will want your parent to get a good work-up at a memory clinic before you make any decisions.

After my mother's stroke I found a wonderful assisted living facility for her. We moved all her furniture in and set it up much like her home. She needed support but thrived in that setting for almost two years until she was being taken to the hospital way too often – every time she had trouble breathing, because that was the rule according to state licensing. So, I moved her to a nice skilled nursing setting only to find she was not getting the one-on-one attention I wanted

her to have.

The hard decision for me with over 30 years of experience helping others was putting her on hospice and then moving her to a wonderful small home for six residents. In that setting she was dressed with hair and nails done and make-up on. She participated in the daily exercises and coffee hour with organized games and discussions until the very day she died. In fact, the night before she died, she did something she had never done – she asked the caregiver to take her to each resident's room to say good-night. Finding the right place was the greatest comfort to me and my brothers.

Make good decisions; start right with a non-biased professional who is "client-centric" with extensive experience, credentials and expertise. When a move is necessary, you want to make the right one and avoid the stress of multiple moves.

I am happy to help you find an aging life care manager anywhere in

the country because of my affiliation as a past president of the National Association.



Linda Fodrini-Johnson is the founder of Eldercare Services, a licensed Marriage, Family and Child Counselor, and a Certified Care Manager. She is an advisor on the new Lamorinda Village Task Force that will assist seniors to stay in their own neighborhoods and homes. Contact info: linda@EldercareAnswers.com

Cal Shakes Summer Conservatory Students Take to the Stage

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"We take great pains to emphasize the importance of mutual respect, trust and acceptance, tolerance for people who may not appear on the surface to have any-

thing in common with you, and what winds up happening is that we rebuild this lovely sense of community for the few weeks that these students are with us to-

gether," said Worsley.

Of course, the amount of teamwork required to put on Shakespeare's complex plays helps build community, too, espe-

cially on such a short time frame. After brief auditions on the first day of this two-week session running from July 20 to July 31, students were divided into plays

based on their age group and cast into roles. Each morning several hours were spent on classes surrounding stage combat, improvisation, vocal techniques, text analysis, movement, Shakespearean history, and acting, with the afternoons dedicated to rehearsal.

The result: half-hour versions of "Twelfth Night," "The Tempest," "Hamlet," "King Lear," "As You Like It," and "Richard III" that Worsley described as "fantastic." Students in this two-week session performed their plays one after another, every hour on the hour between 9:30 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. on the final day of camp.

"Even though it was just two weeks, I felt very prepared, very on top of my game, and I felt like everybody there was on top of their game," said Isabella Fleury, who played King Lear in "King Lear."

Maybe students' confidence and ability is a product of thorough training, but maybe also of an uplifting celebration of humanity and togetherness that only Shakespeare and talented acting teachers can bring to life.

"As one of my staff members likes to say, we are training humans who could be actors, not actors who might be human," said Worsley, quoting Lamorinda conservatory coordinator Brett Jones.



"King Lear" Photos Jay Yamada



"Macbeth"



"Twelfth Night"