Siblings of Children with Special Needs

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Abstract

Siblings of children with special needs often face challenges that set them apart from their peers in either a positive or negative way. Though these siblings may feel isolated, they find their way through these confusing emotions to become more mature, responsible, and tolerant adults. The unique struggles that a sibling of a child with special needs go through help them to grow and learn in ways that other people may never get the opportunity to. Seeing life from the side of the family with a child with special needs helps them to empathize with others and understand difficulties in a way that others may never get to share. This unique perspective is an advantage that *outweighs* the isolation and other disadvantages of having a sibling with special needs.
 Much research has been put into the effect that a child with special needs has on a family as a whole, particularly their parents. Although little research has been done on the effect of a child with special needs has on their siblings. Research suggests only assumptions stating that the sibling may be more stressed or have more behavioral problems than their peers, and only recently have studies been conducted on the effect of a child with special needs has on a sibling (Bischoff & Tingstrom). Recent studies show that a child with special needs may effect a sibling in either a positive or negative way.

Some positive ways that a sibling of a child with special needs may be effected are the sibling may have increased maturity, tolerance, and compassion than their peers (Dyke, Mulroy, & Leonard). Typically developing siblings will be familiar with situations and everyday reactions of people to their sibling with special needs. They will understand how to assess a situation and remain caring and compassionate. Children with siblings with special needs will be able to better understand the difficulties that others may go through as well as have a higher tolerance of differences and be able to recognize prejudices quicker than their peers. Also, siblings of children with special needs may have more responsibilities at home than their peers (Cuzzocrea, Larcan, & Costa). These increased responsibilities lead to a higher maturity than their peers.

Some negative ways that a typically developing sibling may be effected is the development of behavioral problems such as anxiety, anger, and confusion (Stanley, 1993). The siblings may often act out to try to receive attention and care from their parents as well as
other caregivers. A sibling's support group by care professionals may also be limited or nonexistent (Granat, Nordgren, Rein, & Sonnander). Because so much assistance is offered to the child with special needs, this sibling is often looked over. Also, siblings of children with special needs may experience embarrassment and exclusion by their peers (Dyke, Mulroy, & Leonard). Peers often do not understand the struggle that a sibling of a child with special needs may go through. Siblings of children with special needs will often experience isolation, either by excluding themselves from activities, or by peers intentionally leaving them out.

Siblings of children with special needs will often work through their anger, anxiety, and isolation to become more well rounded adults (Seligman). As adults, siblings of children with special needs will experience more tolerance and wisdom that they gained through the experience of growing up with a child with special needs. (Peters). Having grown up with a sibling with special needs, these people become more understanding of other people's situations and are often more equipped to handle certain situations.

These articles review many advantages and disadvantages a sibling of a child with special needs faces throughout their lifetime. Many of these articles include discussions with both the parents and the sibling themselves to help better understand the struggles that they go through in their day to day lives. There are many factors that affect a way a sibling of a child with special needs will react, and only recently have the studies shifted from an individualistic approach of only the child with special needs, to a more holistic approach in showing how a child with special needs effects their family as a whole, as well as individual family members (Damiani).

Putting more emphasis on how a child with special needs affects their siblings will help
teachers understand how to better help their students. Being able to effectively teach siblings of children with special needs is very important in today's educational system. Special education teachers have always been taught the best ways to teach children with special needs, but having more research in the field of how children with special needs effect their sibling's social and behavioral characteristics will help teachers understand how to teach a larger demographic of students.

Understanding that siblings of children with special needs go through a variety of more struggles and difficulties than their peers will help teachers to understand how to better teach these students. Since these students often feel isolated and left out both at home and in school, it is important for teachers to provide individualized education for these students. Teachers should emphasize one on one teaching time with these students either through tutoring or small group exercises. Teachers should also understand that siblings of children with special needs may be at a higher maturity level than their peers and should properly adjust their teaching style to meet these students' needs.

I found these articles interesting because we often hear of all of the struggles and difficulties that siblings of children with special needs go through, but not as often do we hear of the positive side of growing up with a sibling with special needs. All of these articles addressed both the positives and negatives involved in growing up with a child with special needs. I also found it interesting in these articles that they often had quotes from the siblings themselves explaining how growing up with a child with special needs helped them grow into a more mature and tolerant adult.
Having a brother with Down syndrome, I felt that many of these statements in the articles rang true. I often felt that after my brother was born, my mother paid less attention to me and my older brother and more attention to my youngest brother, Bill. Although I was already in high school when my youngest brother was born, I still felt as if my mother missed out on many of my own accomplishments, such as high school competitions, and my graduation. I also feel that having a brother with Down syndrome has helped me become more tolerant of people's differences and more mature. I was often left with more responsibilities after my brother was born, and this helped me to become more mature. Although I did feel isolated and forgotten in some situations, I feel as if the advantages of having a younger brother with special needs far outweigh the disadvantages.

Children with special needs have both negative and positive effects on their siblings. But in the end, siblings of children with special needs work through their anger, anxiety, and isolation and become more tolerant and caring adults.
References


