

How a Child's ADHD Affects Siblings

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WebMD Feature

Having a child with ADHD means dedicating time to meeting their special needs, and to making sure that doesn't come at the expense of your other children.

"Being a parent of a child with ADHD can be hard," says Terry Dickson, MD, director of the Behavioral Medicine Clinic of NW Michigan, and an ADHD coach.

Keeping It Equal

When there's a child with ADHD in the family, it's common for their siblings to feel jealous and to act out if they sense their parents' attention shifting away from them.

"It works like a squeaky wheel," says Los Angeles psychotherapist Jenn Berman, PhD. "The child who is being the loudest gets the most attention from the parents."

Usually, that's the child with ADHD, so it's normal for parents to spend most of their energy focusing on meeting that child's special needs, whether it's in therapy, extra time at home doing homework, or a special effort on managing disobedience or impulsivity.

The behavior of children with ADHD can also make them hard to get along with as a peer, which means their brothers or sisters simply might not like being around them.

"The child who doesn't have ADHD might prefer to be at a friend's house than at home, might not invite other kids over to hang out, or might be embarrassed socially," says Dickson, who has a child with ADHD.

School is another outlet for kids who have a brother or sister with ADHD.

"It can be a reprieve where kids can get away from the stress they might be experiencing at home, or kids can use it as an opportunity to act out for attention," says Mark Wolraich, MD, a pediatrics professor at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center.

The bottom line is that parents need to share the love and the attention with all their children, whether or not they have ADHD.

10 Tips for Parents

Balance is the key. Here are tips from the experts on how to help your kids with an ADHD sibling learn, adjust, and grow:

1. Manage expectations. Parents expect immediate obedience from their kids who don't have ADHD, Dickson says. It's common for them to think that their child should know better because they don't have the condition. But remember, they're still kids, and helping them understand boundaries and rules is just as important for them as it is for the child with ADHD.

2. Be fair. Just like you shouldn't be extra hard on your kids who don't have ADHD, you shouldn't be too lenient with the one that does, Dickson says. Be clear about the house rules and enforce them equally with all the kids.
3. Make it personal. Treat your children like individuals, Wolraich recommends. Approach each child based on his or her needs -- just like you do for your child who has ADHD.
4. Carve out time. Make time for each of your children. Make them feel special and important, Wolraich says. Quality alone-time with each child really helps maintain balance with your kids and minimizes the resentment they might feel toward a sibling attention-getter.
5. Keep them active. Get your kids involved in extracurricular activities. For siblings of kids with ADHD -- and kids with it as well --these can provide an important outlet and give them a sense of self-efficacy and mastery, Berman says.
6. Open communication. Keep the lines of communication open all the time, Wolraich recommends. Don't hide your child's ADHD --help your kids get comfortable with it, understand it, learn about it, and adjust to having a sibling with the condition.
7. Focus on school. Watch your kids' grades and their reports from school, Berman says. School can be a good, unbiased indicator of how your kids are doing and whether they need some extra support at home.
8. Build sibling trust. Help your kids spend time together. Having a sibling with ADHD is their "normal," says Berman, so they need to learn how to make it work.
9. Teach empathy. As your kids mature and get older, a healthy home environment in which one child has ADHD can help the others learn empathy and understanding, Wolraich says.
10. Ups and downs. There will be moments when having a child with ADHD is hard for everyone in the family, but those moments are not all bad, Dickson says. You have to adjust, learn, and be patient -- with each of your kids equally.