

## FACT SHEET 15

# Supporting Siblings

Whether your child is born with a congenital limb difference or acquires one later in life, finding the words to explain this limb difference with a sibling can sometimes be difficult. Much will depend on the sibling's age, level of understanding and ability to engage in discussion. It may also be affected by your own family structure, cultural factors and social issues.

There are many positive experiences that come from being the sibling of a child with limb difference. Children who have a brother or sister with limb difference may possess greater compassion, better understand disability, demonstrate higher levels of loyalty and be open to diversity in our community.

However, some siblings can be affected by their brother or sister's limb difference and it is important to initiate and maintain 'open communication' as soon as you think it's appropriate to do so. Having open communication, recognising potential challenges faced by siblings, identifying how you can assist and knowing when to seek support will greatly assist the siblings/s in your family.

But it is important to remember that, like any family, challenges and issues will occur from time to time. This is a natural feature of growing up as siblings and developing relationships in the family.

This Fact Sheet provides information about ways of talking to a sibling about their brother or sister's limb difference, challenges faced by some siblings, ways of supporting siblings and accessing support.

## Talking to a sibling about limb difference

When speaking with the sibling of your child with limb difference ensure that your information is honest and realistic. Try to be factual, use positive language and undertake discussion that is age appropriate. For very young children there may not be a need to discuss their brother or sister's limb difference as yet, and as they grow up it can be gradually brought up with them. If you meet or see pictures of children or adults with limb difference it is good to mention that the person has limb difference, just like their sibling.

When talking to the sibling of your child with limb difference you may want to:

- > explain how your child's limb difference occurred, as their sibling may worry that it will happen to them or that they caused the limb difference
- > discuss the language that your family want to use, so that the sibling starts to use these words or terms with others
- > explain that everyone is different, but try to limit over-emphasising your child's limb difference or allowing it to become a key feature of that child's identity
- > remind the sibling that they have more in common with their siblings than they have differences
- > reassure the sibling that their brother or sister can be expected to do and learn the same things as them but, if mobility is an issue, it may take their brother or sister a little longer or need some assistance
- > assist the sibling to understand and know what to say to others (such as friends) when asked about their brother or sister's limb difference.

## Challenges faced by some siblings

While there are many positive aspects to being the brother or sister of a child with limb difference, some siblings may encounter some challenges or difficulties from time to time.

Not all siblings will experience challenges. Some adjust well, while others may have some difficult times. Some children may appear to be coping well but show signs that they are feeling stressed. There may also be different reactions depending on whether the sibling is younger or older than the child with limb difference. All siblings react differently, although some concerns can include feeling:

- > like their sibling matters more than they do
- > that they are seen by others as the sibling of a child with limb difference, rather than the individual he or she is
- > confused about any mixed feelings about their sibling (eg. love, anger, jealousy or resentment)
- > responsible for looking after and protecting their sibling (particularly at school or during peer activities)
- > embarrassed or sad about others' reactions to their sibling's physical appearance
- > frustrated, sad or guilty about their sibling not being able to play in the same way they can
- > worried about the future for him or herself and/or their sibling with limb difference
- > they need to keep any worries or concerns to themselves and not burden parents with these.

## Supporting siblings

There are many ways that you can support and guide your child, and encourage them to share their feelings and thoughts about being the sibling of a child with limb difference. Some of these include:

- > calmly and honestly answering any questions your child may have
- > encouraging your child to talk freely about their feelings

- > letting your child know that it is OK to feel angry, sad or frustrated at times
- > celebrate your child's personal achievements
- > support your child to connect with other siblings of children with limb differences or disabilities
- > seek professional support for your child if you feel that he or she is not coping.

Sometimes your son or daughter will communicate their feelings with you directly. However, at other times, your son or daughter may not express their concerns openly but instead display these through certain behaviours, including:

- > withdrawing from social situations or peer activities
- > excessive 'acting up' and/or attention seeking
- > being overly concerned with being the 'good child' or 'people pleaser' in order to achieve recognition and approval

## Accessing support

Should you think that your child needs some additional support, there are a number of services you may want to access. You may want to consider speaking with your GP, a Social Worker or a Psychologist.

You may want to speak to a Limbs 4 Kids team member who can assist you. You may also want to speak to another parent who has experienced what you are going through. If so, Limbs 4 Kids can connect you to a trained Peer Support Volunteer who you can speak to you. Visit our website or call us for more information and links to our online support.

A number of organisations exist to assist siblings, including:

### Siblings Australia

[www.siblingsaustralia.org.au](http://www.siblingsaustralia.org.au)

### Kids Helpline

[www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)