

Siblings

Siblings of children with life-threatening or life limiting illnesses can face a number of challenges, yet this is a group that is often unacknowledged as needing specific support. It is essential that the needs of siblings are recognised and addressed as part of a family-centred approach.

Siblings in families of children with a chronic illness may have poor psychosocial outcomes in general and specifically, emotional problems, behavioural problems, academic difficulties, adjustment issues, peer-related difficulties and low self-esteem.

A number of common feelings and experiences described by siblings of children with life-threatening illnesses include:

Guilt - such as feeling they might have caused the illness through something they did wrong, about being the healthy one, or guilt about their feelings towards their sibling or parents.

Worry - for example about whether they will become ill like their sibling, whether their sibling may die or return to hospital, concern about the family's financial situation, their parents' emotional wellbeing, or pressure to be the 'good', 'easy' or 'able' child.

Resentment - such as a sense of unfairness and disappointment about the extra attention and time devoted to their sibling, or the limitations imposed on the family due to their sibling's illness.

Sense of loss and isolation - for example feeling different from peers who have healthy siblings, sad that they cannot have the same type of relationships with their sibling as their peers or isolated when their sibling has a hospital admission.

Embarrassment - in relation to their sibling's differences, appearance or behaviour.

Responsibility - for example increased independence due to parents' preoccupation with caring for their sibling, or their own caregiving responsibilities towards their sibling.

How to help

- Provide a creative, fun and safe environment.
- Explore the child's understanding of the human body, illness and their sibling's condition.

- Express feelings about having a brother or sister with a life-limiting illness, and its implications.
- Identify and share strategies for coping with difficult feelings and situations.

Siblings of children with CF are considered young carers, and support is also available through your state Carers Association.

Cystic Fibrosis WA also run an annual Sibling and Offspring Camp in the October school holidays. See www.cfwa.org.au for more information.

Useful Resources

- Carers Australia www.carersaustralia.com.au/about-us/contact/
- Carers Factsheet https://www.cysticfibrosis.org.au/media/wysiwyg/CF-Australia/Fact_Sheets/CF_Aust_Fact_Sheet_Carers.pdf
- Kids Health www.kidshealth.org
- Kids Help www.kidshelp.com.au
- Livewire www.livewire.com
- Siblings Australia www.siblingsaustralia.org.au

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