



## TIP SHEET

# Strengthening Sibling Relationships Between Children with Special and Typical Needs

Children who have a sibling with a disability can experience a wide range of emotions throughout their developmental years and into adulthood. Many families find that children experience unique benefits from having a brother or sister with special needs. They tend to have greater understanding of differences, are more tolerant, self-confident and have an increased sense of family loyalty.

The following tips can help parents foster and strengthen the relationship between siblings with special and typical needs.

1. Be aware that the child with typical needs may have concerns surrounding his/her sibling's disability. Answer questions and share information to help alleviate these concerns.
  - Explain the disability and what to expect
  - Tell them about their sibling's strengths as well as their challenges
  - Teach ways to interact with the brother/sister who has special needs
2. Encourage the sibling with typical needs to express his/her feelings and concerns. A child may experience confusing feelings of guilt, jealousy or anger that s/he is afraid to express. Children who are encouraged to express their true emotions are less likely to act out through negative behaviors.
3. Treat the child with typical needs in a manner appropriate for their age, not as an adult or caretaker. Do not expect the child to assume responsibilities for which s/he is unprepared.
4. Resist the tendency to label children. Avoid saying things like this child "never gives us any trouble" or that child "needs our help." Once labeled, a child strives to emulate that role and suppresses contradictory feelings or behaviors.
5. Avoid making comparisons between the siblings— even if the comparisons are positive — as doing so can make a child feel less unique.
6. Involve children in the care of their brother or sister. Include them in planning discussions and allow them to help make decisions about issues that directly affect them and the family.
7. Take advantage of support networks such as sibling support groups, school counselors and physicians. They offer a safe environment to ask difficult questions, express confusing feelings or share experiences.

*These tips were compiled from a variety of sources, including the National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities, Pacific Northwest Children's Services, and the book Siblings Without Rivalry. For more tip sheets, visit [www.fraser.org](http://www.fraser.org).*