



# My well child is struggling because of their sibling's mental health issues. How can I help them?

We feel for you. You're in a difficult position and it can feel like you face an impossible choice between your children and their needs. Let's explore how you can help your children and yourself through this.

## WHAT SHOULD I KNOW AS A PARENT?

Your well child is going through all of the same stresses and strains that we adults carers do and in addition, is dealing with experiences and emotions beyond their years. Recognising that this is happening to them - through no fault of their own or yours - can help take the pressure off you to 'fix' it.

Your well child needs 1-1 quality time away from their sibling with you. They need time to do things that they enjoy that they're often not able to do because of the impact of their sibling's mental health. They need time and space with you so that they can feel connected and calm.

Your well child sees your pain and doesn't want to add stress to your life, which can lead them to withdraw or diminish their own feelings. Your well child's

needs need to be recognised, even if it's painful for you to hear and their feelings need to be validated. You can do this by acknowledging what is going on and sharing that it's hard for you too - "this must feel really difficult for you, because it's feeling really difficult for me."

Your well child shouldn't have to compensate for the behaviours of your ill child. For example, if your child with mental health issues hits your well child, it is unacceptable behaviour and how you deal with it may differ between the children. While you may understand that this act is due to poor mental health, the well child sees it as an act of aggression at them and their needs to be safe, secure and to be validated need to be met. When we want to fix things, we can gloss over situations that are complex and not fixable. It's important that we don't diminish the well child's needs by expecting them to not feel bad, just because their sibling has a mental health condition. It's a reason why, but it shouldn't make the well child feel they don't have a right to feel.

Treating your well child as an individual reinforces their needs to be validated and



safe. Celebrate the brilliant things about them. Try and be at concerts, ceremonies, matches and events that matter to them. It's not always possible but explain that you want to be there and will try.

It's easy to rely on the well child to meet the gap that comes with caring for a child with a mental health issue. It's essential you remember who the parent is so you don't develop a codependent relationship with your child. Use your adult relationships to explore your feelings or get support from a counsellor or a charity specialising in carers. If you need a hug or reassurance, turn it into an opportunity to make it about your child - "Your hugs are so special to me - thank you. How are you darling? Are you ok?"

Everyone deserves and needs to have a voice - including your well child and your poorly child. Why not hold a wooden spoon chat so everyone gets to speak? The rules are that whoever has the wooden spoon gets to say what they need to. Everyone then get a chance to respond in turn. It takes some of the heat out of the interactions and ensures everyone is heard.

If you are in a couple, you can offer support both ways. Don't feel you have to do everything as a whole family - you don't. One of you can stay home with a child, the other can take the well child out. Remember that one size does not fit all - you can nurture a special relationship

with the well child - you don't need to treat them exactly the same.

Different routines for different children are ok. Don't try and force them into the same routine. Be positive about the well child's routine - including good sleep hygiene, healthy food and exercise - as a way to support the life they are living.

Register your sibling as a young carer, the whole family will get more info. A young carer is someone under 18 who meets the Care Act 2014 and Children and Families Act 2014 definition of providing excessive and/or inappropriate care.

### **MANY PARENTS SHARE THAT THEY FEEL...**

- ✓ Guilty
- ✓ Worried about their well child's future and the impact of this on their mental health
- ✓ Pulled in different directions
- ✓ The peacekeeper
- ✓ Exhausted trying to juggle everyone's needs
- ✓ Ashamed
- ✓ Anxious about managing everything
- ✓ Not a good enough parent
- ✓ Confused



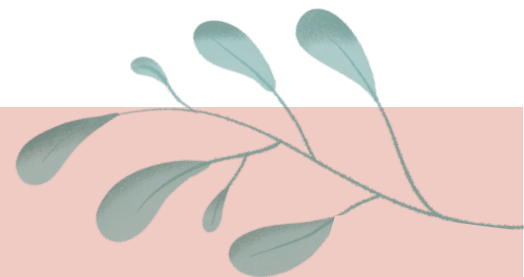


## HOW MIGHT YOUR WELL CHILD BE FEELING?

- ✓ Alone
- ✓ Angry
- ✓ Invisible
- ✓ Unimportant
- ✓ Anxious
- ✓ Exhausted
- ✓ On edge
- ✓ Unable to ask for help, express their emotions, or voice opinions
- ✓ A perfectionist to try and gain some control
- ✓ A burden
- ✓ Responsible for everyone's health and wellbeing
- ✓ Numbed and disconnected from their emotions
- ✓ Easily led and influenced - craving attention - potentially vulnerable
- ✓ Worried about you, their parent
- ✓ Resentful
- ✓ Ashamed of their siblings with their friends
- ✓ Embarrassed if their uniform isn't clean, they haven't done their homework, they're late into school
- ✓ Hungry - if there's no time for breakfast if things kick off at home or you've been up all night with their sibling

## HOW MIGHT YOUR UNWELL CHILD BE FEELING?

- ✓ Jealous
- ✓ Resentful
- ✓ FOMO - that your well child gets all the attention even though they don't - because they see you do nice things with them; that they have friends; that they've got nothing to be upset about - they're not struggling with their mental health
- ✓ That you love the well child more than you love them





## COMMON TRIGGERS FOR CONFLICT

Miscommunication generally including:

- Feeling like something is unfair - "Why do they get to stay up to midnight and I have to go to bed now?"
- Feeling unheard - "I don't have a voice in this house"
- Feeling put upon - "I've had to do double chores because you were at hospital" "I've missed going to the party because of their doctor's appointment"
- Fear of things not changing and being too afraid to say so
- The well child being made to compensate for their sibling's behaviours
- The well child's needs not being met

## WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP?

- ✓ Don't be afraid to ask for help - there is support out there.
- ✓ Help yourself to feel strong, empowered, nourished, nurtured and complete so you have energy, patience and time for both children
- ✓ Make time for quality time 1-1 with both children
- ✓ Follow your well child's passions and interests
- ✓ Don't play them off against each other
- ✓ Remain the parent - lean on adult friends or a therapist to help you process your emotions and needs
- ✓ Don't rely on the well child - be their emotional support
- ✓ Validate their feelings - active listening helps
- ✓ Show compassion - "it's normal to feel angry, anyone would feel angry if they were you"
- ✓ Consider therapy for the well sibling
- ✓ Ensure that, even when there is chaos, the well child has their needs met - ensure they have space to sleep, ensure they can go to school, make sure they are fed, clothes are washed etc. Do Do what you can to make life easy for the unwell sibling - for example, organise a friend to



take them to the party if you can't

- ✓ Start small with one thing - what one thing can you pick from this list and work on this week?

- ✓ Remember this is a very difficult situation and you're doing the best you can

- ✓ Be kind to yourself and your children

## TOOLS AND TIPS

- ✓ Speak to the school - how can they support? Are they aware of what is going on?
- ✓ Enlist friends and family to support you - don't be afraid to ask for help

- ✓ Look for resources and support from charities that specialise in carers as well as financial support in the UK: <https://www.gov.uk/carers-uk>

In the US:

In Australia:



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