

# Siblings of Children with Disability

Paediatrics and Mental Health

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*Services for brothers and sisters  
of children with special needs.*

# Session Aims

To consider:

- Why siblings are important
- Challenges for siblings (the risks)
- Protective factors, ie what helps
- The role of Paediatrics



Services for brothers and sisters  
 of children with special needs.

# Why support siblings?

1. They are at risk themselves for mental and other health problems
  - *Siblings face challenges too.*
  - *If supported they are more likely to reach their own potential*
2. Siblings have the longest relationship with the child with disability
  - *If supported, siblings are more likely to add to the quality of life of their brother or sister. They have much to contribute.*

# Siblings of children with disability

- each experience unique
  - changes over lifetime
  - some enriched, manage challenges well
  - some need more support
- first experiences as children
  - lack maturity to understand
- siblings at risk for mental, social & physical health problems
- very few meet another sibling, or access support

# Opportunities for sibs

- tolerance, compassion
- more insight, maturity
- resilience
- reliable, responsible
- high achieving
- pride in achievements of bro/sister
- often work in helping professions

# Challenges/risk factors

*Can be within family, with peers, at school, or in the community*

- Overlooked
- Communication
- Isolation
- Extra responsibility
- Relationship with child with disability
- Others' reactions
- School

*I felt completely isolated. I thought I couldn't share any of that part of my life with my friends. They didn't understand and I felt alienated from them. Other kids never had the same responsibility.*

Adult sib



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# Warning signs

- withdrawal
- 'acting up' behaviour
- 'good child', people pleaser
- perfectionism, overachieving
- anxiety/depression/low self worth
- stomach aches, sleep problems
- school, social difficulties

# Factors affecting adjustment

## *IS COMPLEX*

- characteristics of sibling
  - eg age, birth order, temperament
- sibling perception/meaning of disability
- sibling sense of competence
- interaction between siblings
- number of siblings in family
- family communication
- parent attitudes
- social support

# Factors for resilience

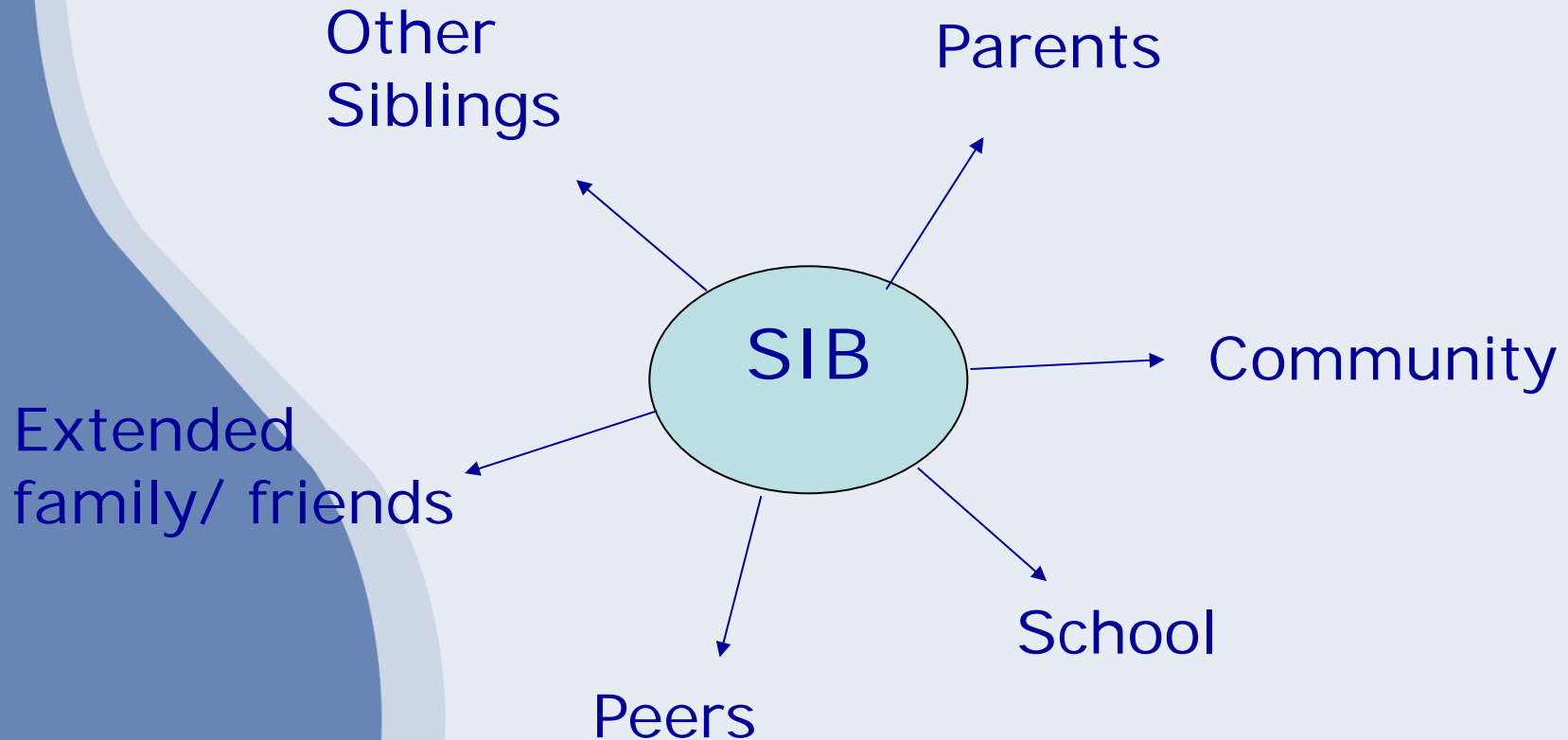
- Family connectedness
- Peer connectedness
- Fitting in at school
- Problem solving skills
- Help seeking skills

Fuller et al. *The Mind of Youth*

# What siblings need

- open communication within family
  - information, permission, feel special/listened to
- strong connections with family/friends
- support from school & other agencies
  - problem solving & coping skills/how ask for help
- connections with other siblings

# Where can sibs get support?



# Why siblings are overlooked

- Siblings not a 'squeaky wheel'
  - Feel guilty, disloyal if complain
  - May not be aware issues are connected
- Parents stretched
  - Many very concerned
  - Others don't see the difficulties for siblings
- Providers
  - No co-ordination, collaboration, lack funding
- Government
  - Where siblings fit?
  - No data
  - No policy, umbrella of support

# Policy

*The needs of brothers and sisters should not be overlooked, and they should be provided for as part of a package of services for the child with a disability.*

*Children Act 1989, UK*

# Siblings Australia

## Our Mission

*Siblings: Acknowledged ,Connected, Resilient*

## Work in three main ways

- *Direct with siblings*
- *With parents to help them support sibs*
- *With providers to help them support sibs*

## Use a 'settings' approach

- *family, friends, school, community*



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# Activities

- Awareness
- Website
- Sibling groups – *SibworkS, Saturday Sibs*
- Adult siblings/adult project
- Parent workshops/DVD
- Professional training
- *SibworkS* facilitator manual/booklets
- School resources
- Research collaborations
- Networking
- Advocacy

# Paediatrics

- Acknowledge siblings
- Increase awareness about sibling experience
  - *RANZCP*
  - *Siblings Australia website – reports etc*
  - *Professional development*
- Add to case notes – record impact on sib
- Include in discussions
  - *Own needs – ask questions*
  - *How help interact with child with chronic condition*
  - *Refer siblings and parents to relevant resources*
- Pathways to support?