

## How to Help Siblings of Children with Learning Disabilities

It is always difficult to have a sibling with special needs. Having a brother or sister with learning disabilities poses a set of particular difficulties for a number of reasons.

When told that their child has a learning disability, similar to being told that their child has other disabilities or illnesses, parents may find it difficult to accept. Many parents come to terms with the diagnosis and find effective ways to help their child compensate for the learning disabilities. However, others may not recognize the magnitude of the impact of the learning disability, particularly in areas of the child's/teenager's life other than academics. Conflicting diagnoses from professionals often make this problem worse, as does the apparent "invisibility" of learning disabilities.

The hidden nature of a learning disability, along with confusing information from parents or professionals, may make it hard for children/teenagers to appreciate that their brother or sister really has special needs. This can contribute to intolerance toward the child with a learning disability. Responsible, caring parents can unknowingly increase this intolerance. **When parents minimize or do not recognize the impact of the learning disability across a**

**child's life, it makes it difficult for siblings to appreciate how seriously their brother or sister is affected.** Additionally, siblings can feel resentful when the child with learning disabilities receives more of their parents' time and attention, and seem to be allowed more lenient expectations.



If children attend the same school as their brother or sister with a learning disability, they are exposed to and can be victim to the peer taunts and teasing that the child with learning disability suffers. Children may react to this teasing in different ways. Some children may feel embarrassed by their sibling with special needs. Other children may react with anger and blame their brother or sister for the peer teasing or may become protective and assume responsibility for their sibling.

**Having a sibling with a learning disability can also influence a child's relationship with his/her teacher.** Richey & Ysseldyke (1983) found that teachers expect the sibling of a child with a learning disability to perform poorly on academic, perceptual and memory tasks and to make less progress during the school year than the rest of the class.

There are several things parents can do to help children/teenagers deal with a sibling with learning disabilities:

- ▶ Explain your child's learning disability to his/her siblings, including how it may affect areas other than academics.
- ▶ Allow your children/teenagers to express how they feel about their sibling with special needs (feelings expressed may include resentment, embarrassment, or feeling overly responsible). It is important not to reprimand the child for these feelings, as they are natural and understandable feelings.
- ▶ Be aware of and help your child/teenager to find ways to cope with issues that arise (e.g. being teased).



Integra, founded in 1967 by parents and professionals, is an accredited Children's Mental Health Centre dedicated to helping children and adolescents who experience social, emotional and behavioural problems related to their learning disabilities. We are a charitable organization administered by a Board of Directors comprised of dedicated volunteers from the community.

Integra has an experienced and multidisciplinary professional staff that is dedicated to creating and implementing a range of programs. Integra serves as a centre for research, practicum placement and continuing education.

Integra is committed to the promotion of a community-wide understanding of the mental health needs of children and adolescents who have learning disabilities, and to improving community-based services for them and their families. A range of clinical services is provided by Integra, as well as related activities in research and evaluation, and in training, consultation, collaboration and advocacy.

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Improving the Lives of Children &  
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## TIPS FOR PARENTS

### How to Help Siblings of Children with Learning Disabilities

by Lorraine Campbell, PhD, C.Psych.  
and Faye Mishna, PhD, C.S.W.

*Improving the lives of children and youth with Learning Disabilities*

25 Imperial St., Toronto, ON M5P 1B9

T: 416-486-8055

E: [info@integra.on.ca](mailto:info@integra.on.ca)

W: [www.integra.on.ca](http://www.integra.on.ca)