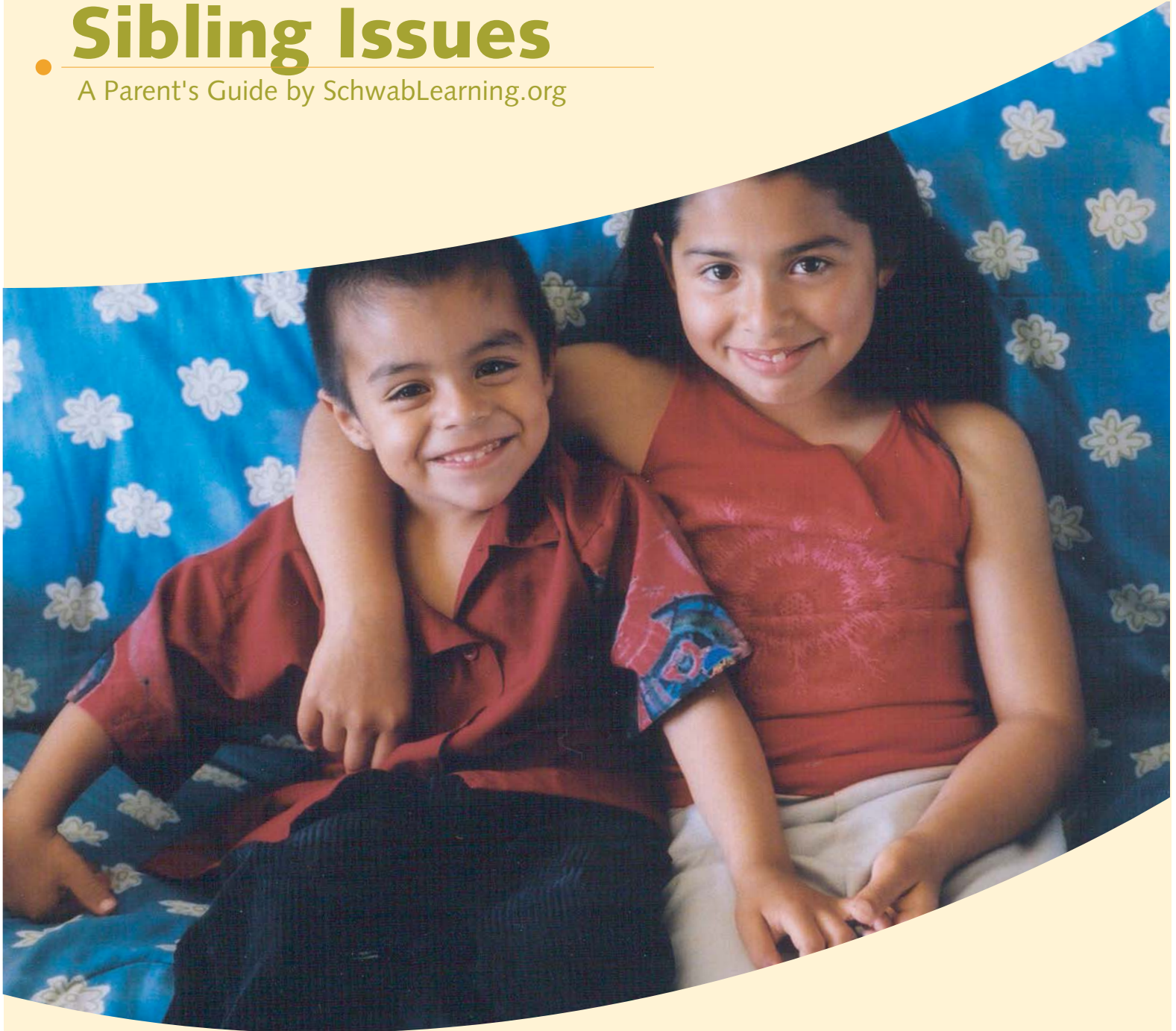


# Sibling Issues

A Parent's Guide by SchwabLearning.org





## **Sibling Issues:** **A Parent's Guide by SchwabLearning.org**

Whether you and your child are just starting out on the LD journey, or you've hit a new roadblock, our *E-ssential Guide to Sibling Issues* will help you understand how to manage the relationships between your child with learning difficulties and his non-affecting siblings. This collection includes articles and interviews featuring experts in the field — all written especially for SchwabLearning.org. You'll also find a list of suggested resources on this topic.

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## A Parent's Guide to Sibling Issues

### How Do Learning Disabilities Affect the Child's Siblings?

In 2002, SchwabLearning.org featured a series of interviews with Betty Osman, Ph.D. about relationship issues and dynamics that arise in families whose children have learning disabilities. The following is an excerpt from that series.

#### SchwabLearning.org Asks:

We know the importance of parents talking about learning disabilities (LD) with their affected children and adolescents. We also know learning disabilities have an impact on all family members, yet there is a tendency to neglect the impact on siblings. How does a child's learning problems affect the other children in the family, and how can parents help?

#### Betty Osman Answers:

Although studies are inconclusive in assessing the impact of learning disabilities (LD) on siblings, it is generally acknowledged that the presence of a child with LD in the family affects the social and emotional development of siblings. While some brothers and sisters, usually adults, claim to have had a special and loving relationship with their sibling with LD, most children and adolescents appear to have complex and intense feelings about themselves, their sibling(s) with LD, and their families in general. Birth order, the attitude of parents, and family dynamics are influential factors.

“Even when parents are sensitive to their children's needs and don't impose more responsibility than is appropriate, some siblings assume it for themselves.”

According to a study by Trevino in 1979 (referenced in *Brothers and Sisters — A Special Part of Exceptional Families*), **adverse effects on siblings are more likely to occur in families in which:**

- There are only two children, one of whom has a disabling condition.
- The children are of the same sex and close in age.
- The child without the problem is the eldest female in the family.
- Parents cannot accept their child's LD.

Realistically, the child with learning disabilities in the family usually requires more parental time and attention. A sibling may become understandably resentful when his needs and bids for attention are overshadowed by those of his brother or sister. Each child in a family typically craves all the resources available from parents, and anyone vying for those resources is seen as unwelcome competition.

Then, too, parents tend to expect more of a sibling without learning disabilities, i.e., higher achievement in school, appropriate behavior in all settings, and even care taking of the sibling with LD. Because they are more able, parents may give them more responsibilities and rely on them, perhaps more than they realize, to ease the burden for the family.

Even when parents are sensitive to their children's needs and don't impose more responsibility than is appropriate, some siblings assume it for themselves. They try to be the “super-kids” in an attempt to compensate for the child with LD and preserve the “family ego.” Some act as miniature parents for

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## How Do Learning Disabilities Affect the Child's Siblings?

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their brother or sister, assuming an overly protective role. Commendable as this is, it may be more than the child is prepared to handle and takes an emotional toll.

Another problem for many siblings of children and adolescents with LD is also largely self-imposed. It is the guilt they may feel for being “normal” and well functioning. “Why him and not me?” they ask, particularly in view of the hostile thoughts and angry feelings most brothers and sisters feel toward each other at times. Some boys and girls even become afraid to excel, for fear of retribution for surpassing their sibling. Parents may unwittingly support this in their effort to protect the child with LD. It seems to be the plight of many children with learning disabilities to have a brother or sister who is not only delightful but also precocious. That child's strengths need to be encouraged as well, even if it seems “unfair” to the sibling with LD.

“When siblings are included in discussions, they are likely to become more understanding and supportive of their brother or sister [with LD].”

Finally, children without problems may become overly anxious and worried, particularly in families where the subject of learning disabilities is taboo and not talked about. Many children are embarrassed in social situations by their brother or sister with LD, not knowing how to explain a problem they don't fully understand. Therefore, it is important for parents to keep the lines of communication open, including siblings in family discussions about this sensitive subject.

In my experience, most often brothers and sisters of children with LD are excluded from family discussions about learning disabilities and rarely are privy to either information about the child's disability or his special needs. Lacking knowledge, they can become resentful, anxious, and confused, with questions they may be afraid to ask. It is not uncommon for a young person to worry, “Is what my brother has contagious? If I'm bad will I get it, too?” or “Will I be responsible for my brother when my parents are old?” and, as a young adult with LD asked me recently, “Will my children be doubly affected if I marry a woman who also has learning disabilities? How great is the risk?”

In addition to their questions, siblings also need an opportunity to express their negative feelings about their brother or sister, difficult as this may be for parents. Some parents discourage children from talking about a sibling's learning disabilities, not only fearing the stigma, but the teasing and rejection of other children and/or their parents. Although their concerns are understandable, a sibling's lack of knowledge and information is even more detrimental. Generally, when siblings are included in discussions, they are likely to become more understanding and supportive of their brother or sister [with LD].

**What, then, can parents do to help other children in the family become more accepting of a sibling who has learning disabilities? Here are a few suggestions:**

- Inform the child as honestly as possible about their brother or sister's problem, not necessarily in terms of a label, but rather in descriptive terms at their level of understanding. Some children's books may be used for sharing and illustration:
  - *The Summer of the Swan* by William Allen White (about a trumpeter swan without a voice, i.e., a learning disability),
  - *Kelly's Creek* by Doris Buchanan Smith (a boy with learning disabilities who loves nature)
  - *When Learning is Tough* by Cynthia Roby (kids talk about their learning disabilities)

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## How Do Learning Disabilities Affect the Child's Siblings?

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- o *The Survival Guide for Kids with LD* by Gary Fisher and Rhoda Cummings (practical questions and answers).
- Acknowledge and accept the child's feelings about her brother or sister with LD, understanding she must feel deprived of attention, jealous at times, and even resentful. Those feelings are normal and not a cause for guilt or recrimination.
- Let your child know that he is not responsible for his sibling with LD and will only be asked to help when absolutely necessary.
- Find ways for each child in the family to gain recognition and a feeling of self-worth.
- Acknowledge they are separate people, appreciated and loved for who they are rather than for what they can achieve.

In other words, parents can create a safe and secure environment for siblings of children with LD by not expecting more of them than is appropriate, by informing them about learning disabilities, by answering their questions and concerns as honestly as possible, and by letting them know it is acceptable and safe to share their thoughts and feelings with you.

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### About the Author

**Betty Osman, Ph.D.**, is on the staff of the White Plains Hospital Center, Department of Behavioral Health, Child and Adolescent Service. She has authored several books, journal articles, and videos. Dr. Osman serves on the Board of Directors of the National Center for Learning Disabilities.

## A Parent's Guide to Sibling Issues

### Living with Siblings with Learning Disabilities

Raising a family is always a balancing act, especially if you have more than one child. If one of your kids has a learning disability, but the others do not, you may wonder how to manage their different practical and emotional needs. In her book, *The Human Side of Dyslexia*, author Shirley Kurnoff explores this topic (and many others) through interviews with 142 parents, siblings and college students, who share their experiences and coping mechanisms.

#### **Shirley Kurnoff: Why — and How — I Wrote this Book**

I don't profess to be an expert in dyslexia but I do know what it is like, as a parent, to face the obstacles of educating a child with dyslexia... I didn't have a book like this one and I really needed it... I wanted to know more about the journey our family inevitably was going to take. What I found, though, was a plethora of information on how the student learns, suggested medication, multi-sensory programs, the legal system, scientific studies and academic analyses. But there wasn't a book written on what really matters most: the human side of dyslexia.

So, I embarked on a mission to fill that gap. *The Human Side of Dyslexia* is a book about real people with real stories, 142 of the 210 people I interviewed; a book with emotions and courage, common sense and tenacity... It's also a book about coping strategies that work. My goal with this book is to make your journey as a parent a lot less painful and a lot more light-hearted.

**The following are excerpts from *The Human Side of Dyslexia*.**

#### **What Siblings Say**

27 siblings (young children, teenagers and young adults) contributed to this section. None of the siblings have dyslexia. I asked them about their relationship with their dyslexic sibling, with their parents, and their feelings about dyslexia in general. Their interviews reveal a number of interesting patterns, not only regarding birth order, but also age, gender and parental attitudes toward dyslexia. Let's look briefly at them all.

##### **Birth Order**

From what siblings told me, birth order absolutely alters sibling relationships. An older sibling often tends to be more protective over a younger child with dyslexia. They want to have input into the parental decision-making process surrounding homework and family issues related to dyslexia. They also appear to be concerned that their sibling doesn't conform to their preconceived standards. Instead of feeling comfortable with their sibling's differences, they can't understand why he/she doesn't fit into the "normal" box. The respondent's age and the parental attitude toward dyslexia may have contributed to this negative thinking about their sibling's futures.

Without a doubt, the younger, non-dyslexic siblings are less concerned with different learning styles. In fact, they seem to see their brothers/sisters through rose-colored glasses, almost completely eschewing any negative feelings. More importantly, they applaud their accomplishments. For them, "different" doesn't mean "better" or "worse."

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## Living with Siblings with Learning Disabilities

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### Age

The age of the child affects how they perceive their sibling's different learning style. College students respect differences and see promise in their sibling's future. Often, they are close in age and have witnessed a track record of mini-successes (non-school related) from their dyslexic sibling. They also no longer are in a parenting role.

Teens, meanwhile, with a younger dyslexic sibling say that grades are most important and are the only measure of success. They have some strong concerns about differences.

At the other end of the scale, 9-12 year olds don't seem particularly concerned with differences. In essence, they see only the positive side of their dyslexic sibling. Young kids also lack the intellectual understanding or depth of experience to make supportive comments. Essentially, they take their brother or sister at face value.

### Gender

The child's gender seems to have an impact on his/her thinking and to strongly reinforce birth order. Teenage girls who are older siblings, for example, take on a protective, parental role, a behavior that appears to come from love and caring.

### Family Views and Influences

The home atmosphere significantly affects kids' attitudes toward dyslexia. In families where there is calm and a sense of control, optimism prevails. Where there are concerns about differences and academic limitations, where the family's issues regarding dyslexia haven't been mapped out, where there is parental confusion and uncertainty, the non-dyslexic child seem to be worried and confused.

It seems that, if parents get "their" plan under control early and keep any concerns to themselves, the family has an easier time coping with the challenges. Just like the rules surrounding dating, drinking and friends sleeping over, the parameters of dyslexia must be discussed early on. It's just one more part of the daily routine.

While birth order, age, family views and influences are important in this section, other factors surfaced along the way. These included sibling feelings, relationships between children and their parents, and relationships between siblings. Let's start with the research data.

My sampling included 27 siblings (non-dyslexic) between the ages of 9 and 28. The following is data I gathered from their responses:

- 67% don't resent their parents helping their dyslexic sibling with homework or projects.
- 92% do their homework independently and don't need help on a daily basis.
- 35% help their dyslexic sibling with homework or do a "homework exchange."
- 56% are confident about their sibling's future.
- 76% are more understanding of students with a disability because of their experience with a dyslexic sibling.
- 92% had not read a pamphlet or seen a video on dyslexia.

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## Living with Siblings with Learning Disabilities

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### Children and Their Parents

While less than a third of the siblings indicate they are “put out” by their parents doing homework with their dyslexic brother/sister, those who were affected — mainly 9-year-old boys and girls, and teenage girls — voiced their opinions loud and clear. For example: Jessie Riving, 9, yearns for a time when her mom will work on a project with her. It seems mom always is working with Jessie’s older brother, Charles, who has dyslexia. Nicole Courser, 14, sees that a lot of time is focused on her younger brother with dyslexia, sometimes to the detriment of her emotional needs.

Only 2 out of 27 children had read a pamphlet or seen a video on dyslexia. Instead, most siblings were given fleeting accounts by their parents, often incorrect statements, about this learning difference. One child says “dyslexia is not a disease, rather it’s like a kind of illness that doesn’t go away.” Another believes “dyslexia is when someone writes his/her numbers or letters backwards or even upside down.” Now, with so much more information on LD websites or on-line newsletters, I’m hoping that families with dyslexia will be better informed.

### Sibling to Sibling

Only 1/3 of the siblings help their dyslexic brother/sister with homework, sometimes on an exchange basis. Brendan Manning, 9, trades math strategies with his dyslexic brother, for paper editing. Talia Laurance, 10, collaborated on homework with her dyslexic sister, 12, until Talia started to get ahead in math and language arts. In most cases, though, siblings prefer to work independent of each other.

Friends seem to be OK with dyslexia. Still, there is occasional teasing. For example: Jessie Riving, 9, says a neighborhood kid circles his finger to indicate her brother with dyslexia is a “thick head.” Nicki Carlson talks about her brother being teased for drooling. (He has facial muscular problems.) Overall, most kids didn’t feel it was an issue.

### How Siblings Feel

The majority of siblings I met, consider themselves very fortunate not to have to struggle in school. Debora Rosen, 12, feels bad her sister got “stuck” with dyslexia. Patrick Morgan, 10, feels guilty his brother doesn’t attend the same public school. Andrew Browne, 20, waited a long time for his younger brother to join him in the G.A.T.E. program, but that never happened. The stories go on and on. All in all, the non-dyslexic siblings realize how fortunate they are when it comes to family genes.

For the most part, non-dyslexic children understand their brother/sister with dyslexia. They start to comprehend their frustrations and they learn to become less critical and more tolerant. Talia Laurance is outwardly jealous of her sister getting compliments on her artwork. But, at the same time, she acknowledges that her sister needs that because she reads at a 2nd-grade level, can’t tell time and is 12. Tyrone Begley, 19, sees his brother, Liam 20, struggling with college reading material. This is the same brother who is a computer whiz, who takes computers apart and then reassembles them, and sets up new software programs without reading the instruction manual!

For Andrew Browne, it isn’t until he arrives at Stanford University that he really begins to understand his brother’s challenge with dyslexia. In one math class, it’s as if the light bulbs are going off around him, and Andrew can’t grasp the new math concept. He realizes then what his brother faces every day, every week.

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## Living with Siblings with Learning Disabilities

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For other siblings, living with dyslexia in their family makes them more aware of this LD. Kate Spencer, 17, does a term paper on dyslexia for her 11th-grade biology class. She wants to know how it impacts the family. Kate concludes that the problem lies in the emotional, not medical, side of this learning difference. Her brother, Andrew 16, has dyslexia. And, finally, because of 12-year-old Maria Accordino's experience with her older brother, Sal 16, she knows when her reading buddy, a 2nd grader, is guessing at words and making up the story line. Maria suggests to her teacher that her reading buddy gets tested for dyslexia. And, there are more stories like these ones.

I sensed a need for sibling opinions. They are integral to the family yet so little has been written about how they feel. It's as if research focuses on the dyslexic child and sibling attitudes are set aside. I wanted to know if they felt left out, not special, and what it was really like growing up with a dyslexic brother or sister. From their straight forward, say-as-it-is interviews, I gained new insight and I hope you did, too. Thanks to all those young people who gave me their time.

### Pointers for Parents

- Recognize “pressure points” that may crop up with your non-dyslexic child. Then be extra attentive with him or her. This may happen in elementary school when you first find out your child has dyslexia. It may occur in middle school with teenage daughters who may feel neglected with too much attention focused on the dyslexic child. And, it certainly happens when SAT preparation and the college search is in progress.
- View your child's learning experience with his/her LD brother/sister as a bonus in character building. Sensitivity, compassion and patience can't be learned from textbooks.
- Consistently compliment your non-dyslexic child for understanding the family's LD situation, working independently on homework and being a team player.
- Be aware of the time and attention you are giving to your dyslexic child. Then, listen to the needs of your other kids. If it means bringing in a college student to help with a project, hobby or sport, just do it!

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### About the Author

**Shirley Kurnoff** is the mother of a dyslexic daughter. After earning her master's degree in education from Stanford University, she put together the resource book she wished she'd had years ago, *The Human Side of Dyslexia*.



## A Parent's Guide to Sibling Issues

### Learning Disabilities and Sibling Issues

#### “What about me?”

“Since I was doing OK in school, my parents just sort of left me alone because they knew I was fine. But, I always felt like my achievements were just not as important as my brother’s.” — *Alicia, 27, older sibling of a brother with learning disabilities (LD)*

Siblings of children with LD often express confusion and disappointment about getting less attention from their parents than their sibling with LD. Due in part to parents’ limited time, their energy and focus may be on helping their child with LD get through school and life. It can be difficult to manage the intense needs of a child with LD while at the same time give ample attention to the other kids in the family. Parents often feel guilty about the amount of attention and time given to their child with LD and worry about ways to balance the inequities.

Here are some ways to be creative and help your other kids feel just as special and important:

- Dedicate one activity or part of the day on the weekend to your children who don’t have LD.
- Spend consistent one-on-one time with your children and express how special this time is to you.
- Celebrate the academic success of all your children even if your child with LD is doing great in school.

“It can be difficult to manage the intense needs of a child with LD while at the same time give ample attention to the other kids in the family.”

#### “I’m glad they told me.”

“One thing that stands out for me from my childhood is that my parents spent a lot of time educating me about my brother’s LD. They helped me understand that he was struggling in school, not because he was stupid, but because he learned differently than I did. This helped me stand up for him and deal with it in a more positive way.” — *Katie, 26, older sibling of a brother with LD*

Parents need to educate themselves on the issues associated with learning disabilities, but also include their child with LD, his siblings, and other family members. **Brothers and sisters need to have open and honest conversations with parents and each other about LD in order to understand and manage the problems that arise.**

Throughout these conversations, it’s important to provide siblings with opportunities to express their feelings or concerns. Some common feelings include guilt over not having a learning disability, anger and resentment about getting less attention, and frustration over having to deal with a sibling who is different. The more these issues are out on the table, the more you and your family will be able to manage them.

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## Learning Disabilities and Sibling Issues

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### "I'm not her mom."

"It drove me crazy when I would have to pick up the slack for my older sister. Why did I have to do so much more than she did? My mother's expectations were just too much and I felt so weighed down at such an early age." — *Marcus, 21, younger sibling of a sister with LD*

Parents typically shy away from giving a lot of responsibility to their child with LD. Instead, the child without LD may be given many more caregiving and household chores. It's important to remember that kids are still just kids, and even though they demonstrate competencies, they can't be overburdened with responsibility.

- Equalize your child's free time with the amount of time given to chores. Try using free time as a reward for helping out.
- Gradually increase the amount of responsibility given to your child with LD. This allows you to reduce the expectations placed upon your child without LD. Most of all, they like being recognized for their contributions to the family.

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### About the Author

**Dr. Jodie Dawson** coaches and consults with college students with LD and AD/HD. She holds a B.S. from Cornell University with a focus in human development and family issues and a doctoral degree in clinical psychology from Yeshiva University.

## A Parent's Guide to Sibling Issues

### How Temperament Affects Parents, Children, and Family Life

The Andersons have two sons: Josh, age 11, and Ryan, age 9. Both boys are bright, achieve well in school, are involved in sports, and have many friends. Yet their parents wonder how two boys in the same family could be so different. Josh moves at a slow pace, is easy going, adaptable, and “laid back.” Ryan is energetic, intense, quick responding, and races through life at top speed. Josh fits his parents’ lifestyle well, but they are puzzled and frequently upset and irritated by Ryan’s high activity and intensity, and find his behavior intrusive and disruptive. The differences in behavior between the two boys reflect individual characteristics of temperament, and these differences are powerful contributors to the ups and downs of everyday life in the Anderson household.

#### What is Temperament?

Temperament describes individual differences which are:

- biologically based,
- evident early in life, and
- characteristic of an individual in many situations and over time.

Differences in temperament are seen in infants. Some are fussy, sensitive to noises, easily startled and upset, and have irregular eating and sleeping patterns; others are calm and mellow and quickly adapt to regular eating and sleeping routines. Many eight-year-olds are energetic, intense, and quick responding, whether they are eating, playing, or talking with friends. Others have a deliberate tempo, are reflective, and take time to adjust to new situations, new foods, and new people. Parents who have several children recognize differences in persistence, distractibility, and energy levels, and are aware that one child may be typically outgoing and enthusiastic, while his brother is shy and “low-key.” It is especially important to recognize individual differences in temperament when a child has learning or attention problems, as parents and teachers need to figure out the reasons for a child's behavior.

#### What Research Tells Us about Temperament

Researchers have developed a number of specific definitions of temperament (Keogh 2003; Kristal, 2005), but the one by psychiatrists Alexander Thomas and Stella Chess (1977) is especially relevant for parents when thinking about how their children and families interact. They defined temperament “as a general term referring to the **“how”** of behavior. It differs from ability, which is concerned with the **“what”** and **“how well”** of behaving, and from motivation, which accounts for **why** a person does what he is doing. Thomas and Chess identified nine dimensions of temperament based on their own clinical expertise and on their research with children and families. These dimensions provide a framework for describing individual differences in temperament, and are captured in Jan Kristal's (2005) definitions of the nine dimensions.

#### Temperament Dimensions (Kristal, 2005)

- **Sensory Threshold** describes the level of stimulation necessary to evoke a response.
- **Activity Level** is a child's general level of motor activity when awake and asleep.

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## How Temperament Affects Parents, Children, and Family Life

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- **Intensity** is the reactive energy of response, whether happy, sad, or angry; it describes how expressive a child is.
- **Rhythmicity** determines the predictability of bodily functions such as appetite, sleep/wake cycle, and elimination patterns.
- **Adaptability** describes how easily a child adjusts to changes and transitions.
- **Mood** is the basic quality of disposition. It may be more positive (a happy or cheerful child) or more negative (a cranky or serious child).
- **Approach/Withdrawal** is the child's initial response to novelty: new places, situations, or things.
- **Persistence** describes the ability to continue an activity when it is difficult or when faced with obstacles; it describes "stick-to-itiveness."
- **Distractibility** is the ease with which the child can be distracted by extraneous stimulation, or, conversely, his level of concentration or focus.

Thomas and Chess also described **three patterns or constellations of temperament** characteristics that influence parent-child relationships and family life.

- **"Easy"** children are typically adaptable, mild or moderate in activity and intensity, positive in mood, and interested in new experiences.
- **"Difficult"** children tend to be intense, low in adaptability, and negative in mood.
- **"Slow-to-warm-up"** children are upset by change, are characteristically reluctant and withdrawing in new situations, and shy with new people, although given time they adapt slowly and well.

These temperament types are consistent with the results of our research at UCLA (Keogh, 2003). We found that Thomas and Chess's nine dimensions described similar clusters of individual children's behavior, especially in regard to activity level, adaptability, approach/withdrawal, intensity, and mood.

### How Temperament Influences Family Life

Individual differences in temperament or behavioral styles are important in family life in several ways because they affect the nature of the interactions among family members. Some children adapt quickly and easily to family daily routines and get along well with their siblings. Others, especially highly active, intense and "prickly" children have a more difficult time adjusting to everyday demands, and their interactions with parents and siblings may lead to friction and stress. Consider how an active, impulsive child can bother an older sibling who is trying to complete a school project, or how a distractible child who is low in persistence can frustrate parents' efforts to get him to complete his homework or to finish a household chore.

It is important to note that parents, like children, also differ in temperament. Some are quick reacting and intense, while others are quiet and slow to respond; some are flexible and adaptable, and others are not. The "mix" between parents' and children's temperaments has a strong effect on family life, sometimes leading to positive interactions, sometimes to frustrations, and sometimes even to conflicts. It is interesting to note that parents also differ in the expectations they have about their children's behavior, and how they view and tolerate differences in temperaments. For example, certain constellations of temperament such as high activity, intensity, and persistence may be tolerated and

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## How Temperament Affects Parents, Children, and Family Life

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valued in boys, but not in girls. Conversely, shyness and sensitivity may be viewed as acceptable in girls, but not in boys.

This leads to the notion of "goodness of fit," which can be a useful framework for helping parents figure out how temperament affects relationships in the family. "Goodness of fit" refers to the match or mismatch between a child and other family members. For example, a high-activity, intense child like Ryan may upset and irritate a quiet, slow-paced, reflective parent. An active, quick-responding parent may be impatient with a slow-to-warm-up child, whom the parent may see as lazy or indifferent. Sparks may fly when both parent and child are intense and quick responding. Life in a family is not the same for all children, and temperament is one of the ingredients in the "fit" between child and family.

### Temperament and Learning Disabilities

Individual differences in temperament can be especially important when a child has learning or developmental problems. A child with learning disabilities (LD) often presents extra demands for parents and siblings, which upset the routines of family life: extra help each night with homework, twice weekly trips to the tutor, continuing visits to school to meet with teachers, to say nothing of needs for supervision and intervention in squabbles with siblings. It is easier for a parent to respond to extra demands when a child is positive in mood, adaptable, and approaching, than when he is negative, withdrawing, and easily irritated. As is the case with all children, the interactions between a child with LD and his parents and siblings are affected by his temperament, especially when there is a poor "fit" between a child's temperament and the family environment.

Temperament can also contribute to children's patterns of adjustment over time. Pediatrician William Carey (1998) suggested that a child may come to rely on particular temperament-based behaviors which result in general maladaptive coping strategies that don't serve the child's best interests. For example, a shy and withdrawing child with LD may come to rely on withdrawal as a general way to cope with many stressful situations, including academic tasks. A child with LD whose low persistence is temperament-based may rely on a strategy of giving up in situations when challenged.

It is important for parents to understand that **there is no single temperament profile that characterizes all children with learning disabilities**. Like other children, a child with LD has his own unique and individual temperament. This is not to imply that LD and temperament may not overlap, because in many instances there are similarities between the signs of LD and the characteristics of difficult temperaments, especially in traits of distractibility, intensity, and low persistence. Too often, however, temperament characteristics of a child with LD are assumed to be part of the LD itself, rather than an individual variation in behavioral style. This confusion tends to over-emphasize the idea of disability, and overlooks the individuality of a child with LD. When you can see and interpret a child's behavior through a temperament "lens" it helps you sort out what are signs of LD and what is temperament.

### How Can Understanding Temperament Improve Family Life?

Understanding your child's temperament provides a fresh way of thinking about child and family relationships. First, **it reframes how you interpret your child's behavior and affects the way you think about the reasons for his behavior**. For example, you might view an active, energetic, and approaching child who is into everything as "exuberant," rather than as "hyper" and intrusive. Or you might see a shy and slow-to-warm-up child as "sensitive" and thoughtful, rather than as unfriendly and unmotivated. Your response as a parent is affected by how you interpret your child's behavior. For example, if you see disruptive behavior as purposeful, you are apt to be irritated, even angry, and to respond negatively or punitively. When you see your child's behavior as temperament-related rather than as due to willful misbehavior, you can reduce your negative reactions.

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## How Temperament Affects Parents, Children, and Family Life

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Second, it is important to emphasize that **thinking in temperament terms does not excuse a child's unacceptable behavior, but does provide direction for responding to it.** As parents often learn, many small accommodations in family life can reduce tensions. A slow-paced child may need extra time in the mornings to get ready for school and to “dawdle” over breakfast. Providing an extra half an hour in the morning, rather than continual reminders to “hurry up,” can be a small price to pay for a peaceful time before school. A highly persistent child who is deeply involved in a drawing project may need to be reminded several times at regular intervals that the dinner hour or bedtime is close.

Third, thinking about your child's behavior through **the lens of temperament helps you anticipate when and where there are apt to be problems.** The old adage that forewarned is forearmed is relevant here. A shy and Slow-to-warm-up child does not like surprises or sudden changes in routines. He is comfortable when the daily routines of family life are orderly and consistent, and he needs time to adapt when those routines are upset. A change in a parent's work schedule, a new babysitter, even a change in the time to eat dinner can be stressful. A Slow-to-warm-up child is more comfortable when he knows ahead of time what changes will occur, and when, and when he is given time to adapt. Similarly, if you can anticipate when and where a highly active, intense, and distractible child will have problems, you can reduce the likelihood of negative outbursts. A long car trip without frequent stops and interesting activities has a high probability of leading to problem behavior. Planning ahead is especially important when traveling with a child with this kind of temperament.

Family life is made up of countless, continuing interactions which affect the quality of our daily lives, and individual differences in temperament among family members are important factors in determining whether those interactions are positive and pleasant or “rocky” and stressful. So, as a parent, it is important to recognize individual differences in your child's temperament and to help him understand the impact of his temperament on other family members. It is also important that you know yourself and recognize your own unique temperament, and that you are aware how your behavioral style affects daily life in your family. Awareness of individual differences in temperament provides a positive way to prevent and manage problems that can result from a mismatch of behavioral styles within your family.

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Children with Disabilities: Understanding Sibling Issues

<http://www.nichcy.org/outprint.asp#nd11>

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