

The sibling effect

When a child is diagnosed with diabetes it can be difficult to cope with the change in family dynamics, explains **Vincent McDarby**

When a child is diagnosed with diabetes, as well as having a significant impact on the child's life, it also has a significant impact on the entire family. In the early stages after diagnosis, the way a family works is considerably disrupted as the demands of managing the child's diabetes are fitted into day-to-day routines. Although after a period of adjustment, family life begins to return to relative normality, diabetes still places additional demands on everyone in the family.

While we know that adjusting to diabetes brings its own challenges for both the child with diabetes and their parents, we often overlook the challenges faced by the siblings of the child with diabetes as they too adjust.

Adjusting after diagnosis

How siblings adjust to a diagnosis of diabetes is crucial not only to their own emotional wellbeing, but also to the wellbeing of the child with diabetes. Siblings play a hugely significant role in helping the child with diabetes adjust to living with the condition and in supporting good diabetes management in the long-term. This means it is important to look at diabetes from the point of view of siblings and the issues that can arise for them.

When the child is diagnosed parents are bombarded with a mass of diabetes-related information. This includes details about blood sugars, insulin and diet. Parents can feel overwhelmed and their

resources can be stretched to the limit. The needs of siblings can often take a backseat to the more pressing needs of the child with diabetes. And even when parents make sure to devote adequate resources to the needs of siblings, the increased care needs of the child with diabetes can sometimes lead to siblings mistakenly thinking that they are being ignored. This can be made worse by the increased attention the child with diabetes receives from extended family, friends, teaching staff and healthcare professionals.

Sibling jealousy

Although the increased attention focused on the child with diabetes after diagnosis is normal, and most of it generally cannot be avoided, it can understandably lead to some sibling jealousy. This jealousy will often show itself in changes in sibling behaviour, most commonly an increase in misbehaviour as the sibling competes for parental attention.

To address this jealousy it is important to explain to siblings that parents are giving more attention to the child with diabetes to make sure they stay healthy. And that they are doing this in the same way that each child gets extra attention when they are unwell. It does not mean that they prefer the child with diabetes.

Very often siblings feel 'left out' because of how their brother or sister's diabetes is being managed. They see the child and parents sharing the management of diabetes from which they are excluded. It is important to explain that managing the condition is a shared effort that can involve the whole family. It does not have to be exclusive to the child with diabetes and their parents.

Diabetes education

It is important to educate siblings about diabetes management at a level appropriate to their developmental level and

allow them to help in certain aspects of management. For instance, younger siblings can be allowed to bring the items required for an insulin injection or to turn on the glucometer; while older siblings can be allowed draw up insulin under supervision.

However, it is important that the amount of responsibility given to siblings is limited. Too much responsibility can be stressful for them, even for an adolescent. In addition, too much responsibility can lead siblings to taking on a role of reporting any and all discretions in management to parents, which can adversely affect sibling relationships.

The increased attention from people outside the immediate family towards the child with diabetes can also upset siblings. Siblings notice that family and friends enquire all the time about the wellbeing of the child with diabetes and not about them.

It is often beneficial to ask extended family and friends not to focus on the child with diabetes. The increased attention from teaching staff towards the child with diabetes can also upset siblings, particularly if the sibling shares the same classroom. Again it may be beneficial to ask teachers to give equal attention to both siblings. It is also important to explain to siblings that the extra attention from teaching staff is necessary to make sure that the child with diabetes stays in the best possible health.

Trips to the diabetes clinic are often seen by siblings as fun days out where the child with diabetes gets to take off school and spend the day with their parents. Even siblings that accompany parents to the diabetes clinic can become jealous of the attention given to the child with diabetes by healthcare professionals.

Siblings need your attention

Obviously some aspects of increased attention for the child with diabetes

FAMILY HEALTH

are unavoidable and it is important that siblings are helped to understand this. However, siblings should also be given opportunities of extra attention where time is set-aside for parents to engage with them in activities that they choose, particularly in the time around when their sibling has been diagnosed with diabetes.

Just as the child with diabetes has questions and concerns about their diabetes, so too have siblings. Siblings often have exaggerated worries about certain aspects of diabetes management or the long-term implications of diabetes on health. These may be totally in their imagination, for example 'if my brother's blood sugar is too high he will die'; or 'my sister will be sick when she is old because she has diabetes'.

Sometimes siblings believe that they are in some way responsible for the onset of their brother or sister's diabetes because of a particular transgression that happened between them before diagnosis. For example 'I caused my sister's diabetes because I hit her last month'.

Exaggerated and erroneous thought processes like these are quite common in younger children who have a sibling with diabetes. They can lead to anxiety, guilt and upset if not confronted. However, parents often do not know about these exaggerated or erroneous thought processes, as the children can often be reluctant to discuss such concerns with their parents. It is therefore important that parents work to explore with siblings their thoughts, feelings and beliefs about diabetes. Through this parents can find out about any exaggerated or erroneous beliefs the child has and explain the true situation.

Junk food

A common question that parents of a child with diabetes face is whether or not they should also limit siblings' access to junk food. Although limiting siblings access to junk food by removing it from the house can provide an environment that is more conducive to good diabetes management, it can lead to siblings

WHAT PARENTS SAY

Diabetes Ireland has been running a series of workshops for parents of children with diabetes to get feedback about their needs and concerns. Sibling jealousy was the topic at the October workshop and this is the feedback parents gave. They spoke about the positive and negative effects the diagnosis of a child with diabetes had on all their children.

Effects on siblings of a child being diagnosed with diabetes	
Positive	Negative
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Become better friends and look out for one another. Talk more together – they are curious about things like blood sugar. Play more activities together to 'keep fit'. Extra treats. Listen more intently. Healthy eating for the whole family. More family time together. Better attitudes to food. Siblings become protective of each other. Siblings more attentive to one another. Other children get their own 'special time'. One-to-one attention for each child. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Siblings feel child with diabetes gets more attention from parents and teachers. Child with diabetes may feel put out if attention is directed elsewhere. Jealousy of time being spent with other brother or sister. Guilt – for having negative feelings towards brother or sister with diabetes. Life changes for the whole family. It's all about the child with diabetes. Other children affected by mealtimes and food choices. Hospital appointments considered as 'fun days', 'days off'. Meal times are controlled. Sympathy vote – child with diabetes singled out for extra attention from grandparents and immediate family. Parental guilt. Learn to prioritise when child with diabetes needs attention.

resenting the fact that the other child's diabetes is restricting their lifestyle.

Obviously the limiting of junk food is an essential part of good diabetes management, but it is also a change that benefits the entire family and should be encouraged. However, it is important that siblings' reservations about changes in diet are discussed openly with them rather than being thrust upon them without any discussion.

In general, siblings can be very accommodating to such changes in diet providing it is explained to them in terms of the positive impact it will have on their own health, and the positive role their behaviour change will have in helping

their sibling manage their diabetes.

Overall, siblings provide a major support for children with diabetes in a way that parents cannot. By involving siblings positively in diabetes management and encouraging open communication this important role of siblings can be facilitated.

However, above all we must let siblings be siblings and, regardless of diabetes, ensure that they continue to play with, compete against, argue with and support one another.

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