

Sibling needs life throughout

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Every sibling experience is unique
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WHANAUNGATANGA

Building Connections

Building connection in your family and whānau is important for all children. In any family each sibling, as well as the relationship between siblings, is unique and meaningful. For siblings of disabled children this relationship can at times be challenging depending on the differing needs of your children, the complexity of the disability and the types of support needed by your disabled child such as finances, time, attention, or limits on activities. Children develop their understanding of their sibling's disability and needs over time.

The best approach for parents or caregivers is to focus on strengthening the sibling's relationship with their brother or sister over the long term. A non-disabled sibling's reaction and connection to their disabled sibling affects the outcomes for both. Find ways as a parent or caregiver to connect with the non-disabled sibling. Be careful not to put your main focus on preparing the sibling to eventually take over the role of carer.

Even from an early age the non-disabled sibling may be affected by:

- Missing out on time or attention
- Feelings of isolation
- Feeling sad, guilty, or embarrassed
- Worrying about the reaction of others
- Feeling excessively responsible
- Worrying about the future
- Worrying about caregivers' stress

The impacts of having a disabled sibling can include:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Low self-esteem
- Lack of confidence
- Sleeping problems
- Acting as a 'parent' to a disabled brother or sister
- Trying to be a 'good' child
- Withdrawal
- Acting out



HELPFUL IDEAS

Here are some helpful ideas on how you can support non-disabled siblings through childhood and adolescence:

- 1. Keep them informed.** This will depend on your child's age and level of understanding. When they ask questions find a way to explain the disability to them. There may be some helpful online resources. Provide reassurance.
- 2. Validate their experience and emotions.** Acknowledge that the sibling's experience is understandable, for example, "It makes sense you feel frustrated when you can't see your friends because we have a hospital appointment" or, "I understand you are worried about your sibling".
- 3. Build a positive connected relationship** between your children by finding a game or activity they can do together that is special to them.
- 4. Notice when stress is rising** in your family or whānau, and access support for yourself. This might be through a friend or member of your family or whānau, counsellor, or a support group online or in person. Check out the [Parent to Parent website](#) for a range of helpful support services. Remember you are not alone!
- 5. Help your child learn how to interact in a positive way** with their sibling, especially in times when the disabled child may display difficult behaviours such as violence or aggression. Teach them how to remove themselves if this happens and how to alert you to the situation safely. If there is an incident, give them space to debrief.
- 6. Taking on extra responsibility is positive.** Encourage your child to help as much as they feel able to.
- 7. Create space for one-on-one time** between you and your non-disabled child. This gives the child the opportunity to connect, to develop their own identity and to feel valued.
- 8. Build community connection.** There are many organisations and community groups which bring families together as a means of sharing information, creating social connection and building support through mutual understanding.

HELPFUL

9. Inform the sibling's school about their needs so they can be responsive and supportive.

10. Peer support is very important. Help your child find peer support either online or in person. You may be able to do this through various support groups that are available. Look into the sibling support programmes on offer by Parent to Parent at parent2parent.org.nz/sib-support

11. Help your child learn how to advocate for their disabled sibling in an assertive way. Teach them ways to respond to comments other children may make that are hurtful. Acknowledge that they may feel embarrassed by their sibling's behaviour. Come up with some ideas of what your child could say in response to mean or bullying comments from peers and other children.

12. Answer the hard questions as best you can. For example if your child asks, "Is my sibling going to be okay?", and the truth is you are not sure, you could say something like, "We are not sure, it is normal to worry, we will be here to support each other". Sometimes just saying "It will be fine" is not accurate. We need to support our children to cope with appropriate levels of worry and sadness. They too may need to grieve the losses they experience.

13. If needed, access counselling opportunities to support your child in managing difficult feelings. Young people will often report feeling like they can't express their feelings. They may feel that they miss out on your time, or feel embarrassed about their sibling's behaviour. Help them learn that it's okay if sometimes they feel both love and resentment toward their sibling at the same time. They may also feel as though their problems are minimised, so validate their emotions and take problems seriously, even if they may seem insignificant in the face of more serious problems your disabled child is facing.

14. Try to understand your child's behaviour if they are withdrawing or acting out. There could be really good reasons as to why this is happening. They may be feeling stressed or they may be upset at the attention their brother or sister is getting.

15. Different types of support may suit different siblings. For example, support groups may not suit every child, some may have particular stresses which need particular interventions.

16. Teach your child how to deal with

intolerance. Siblings may come up against situations where their sibling is mistreated in some way or where there is a lack of acceptance for their loved one. This can lead to a positive shift in world view resulting in a wish to educate and inspire greater compassion in others, or it can lead to a negative shift resulting in increased cynicism or resentment of the limitations placed on their sibling and themselves as a result.

17. Create a feeling of togetherness.

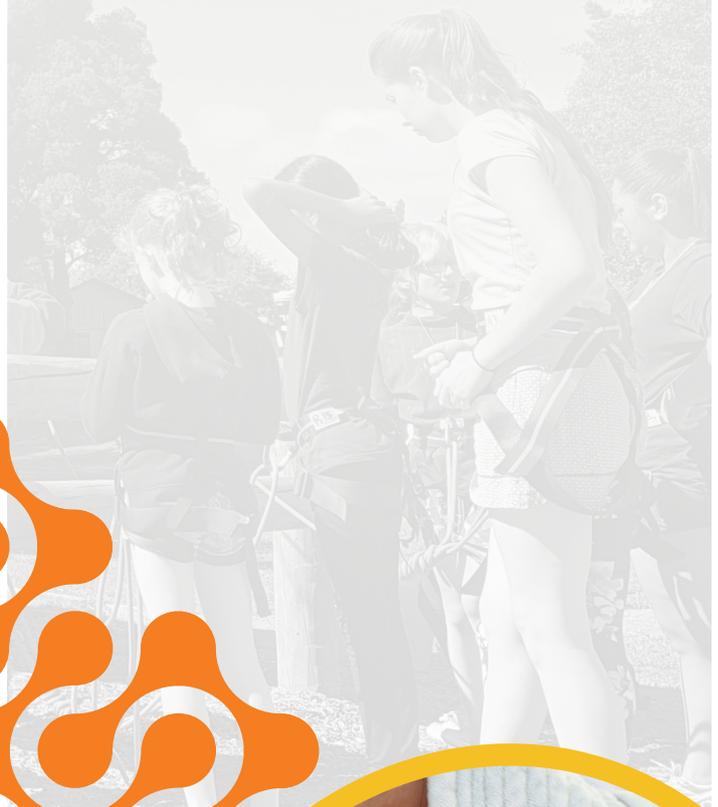
Try to take part in activities together, both in and out of the home. The presence of support staff may change or redefine what the family home looks like. Acknowledge and talk about this.

The sibling relationship is typically the longest relationship people have.

Over the years this relationship involves many roles which change and vary as siblings age and develop.

This resource is intended to support families and whānau to cope with the special circumstances of having a disabled child, and the impact that can have on the sibling relationship.

This unique relationship plays a substantial role in the development and adjustment of all children. Building a positive connection between siblings encourages positive growth for the entire family and whānau.





Special Siblings

Info for kids



Having a disabled brother or sister can sometimes be quite hard, but it can also have some great parts too.

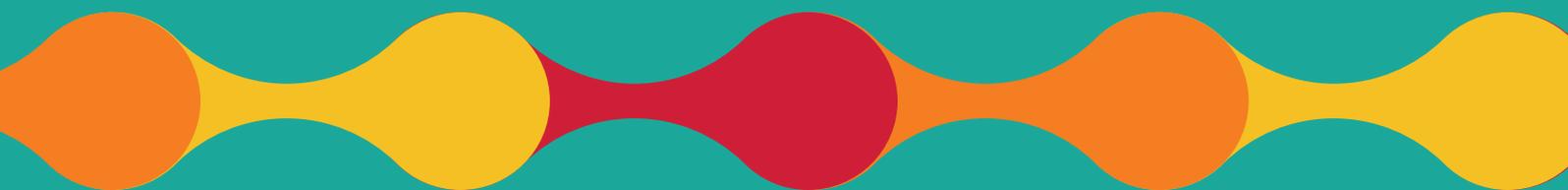
Sometimes you might feel angry or jealous that so much of your parent's or caregiver's time is spent caring for your sibling.

At other times you might be worried about your sibling's disability and feel like you need to protect them.

You might also feel proud of your sibling, and happy when you spend time together.

**With so many ups
and downs, it's important
to know who to go to
and what to do when
you are struggling.**

**Here are some ideas
to help.**

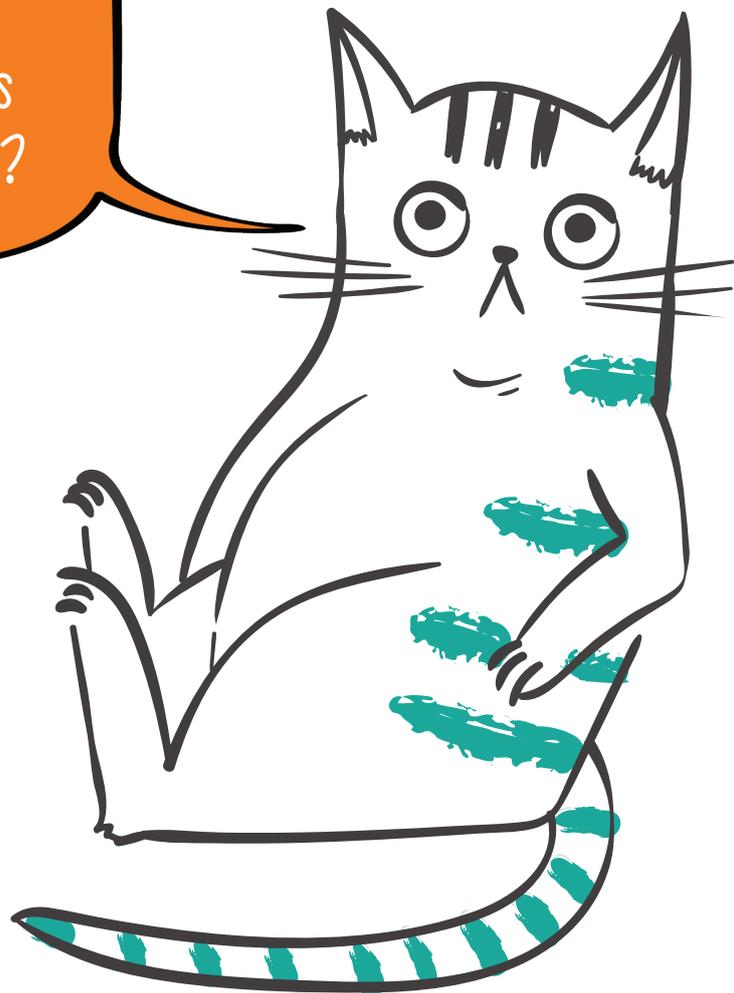


Ask questions

- Ask questions when you want to learn more about your sibling.
Don't be afraid to ask.

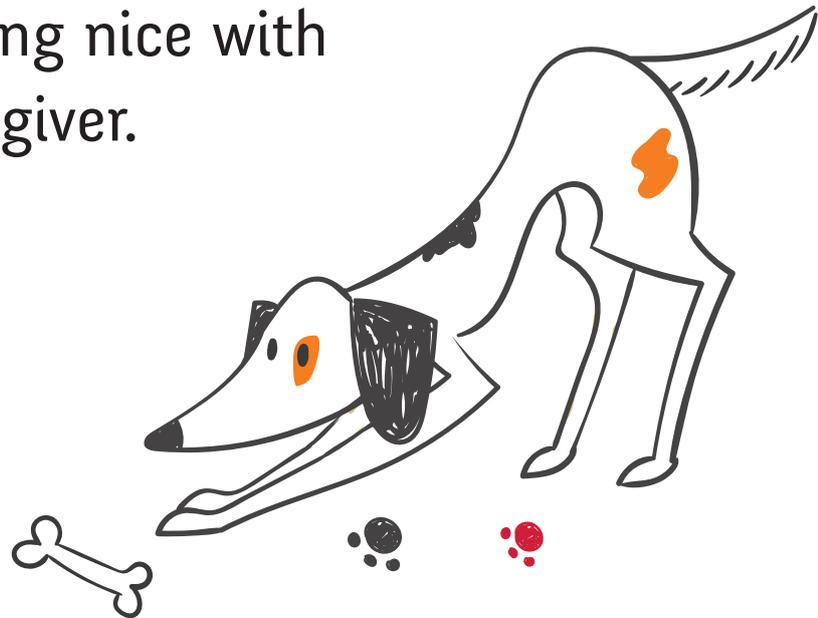
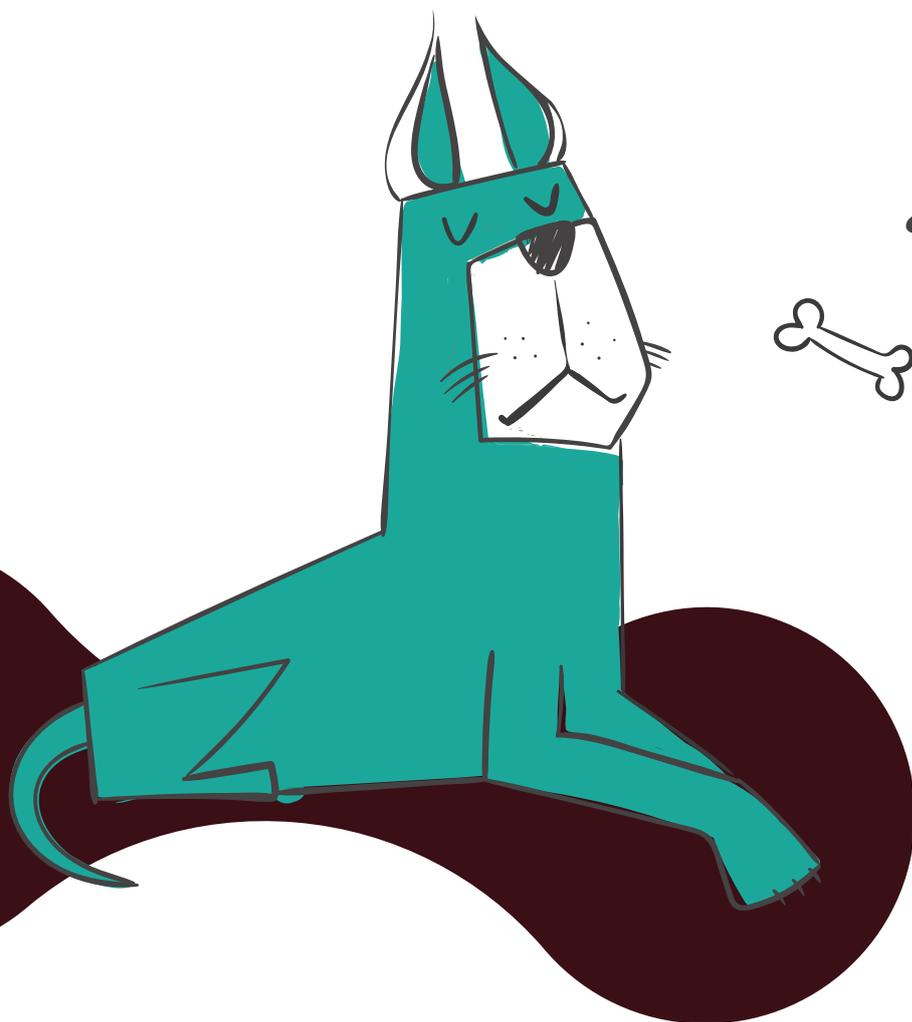
Hey mum?
Why does my
brother wave his
hands like that?

- Choose a time when you and your parent or caregiver can sit together and talk.



Sharing Time

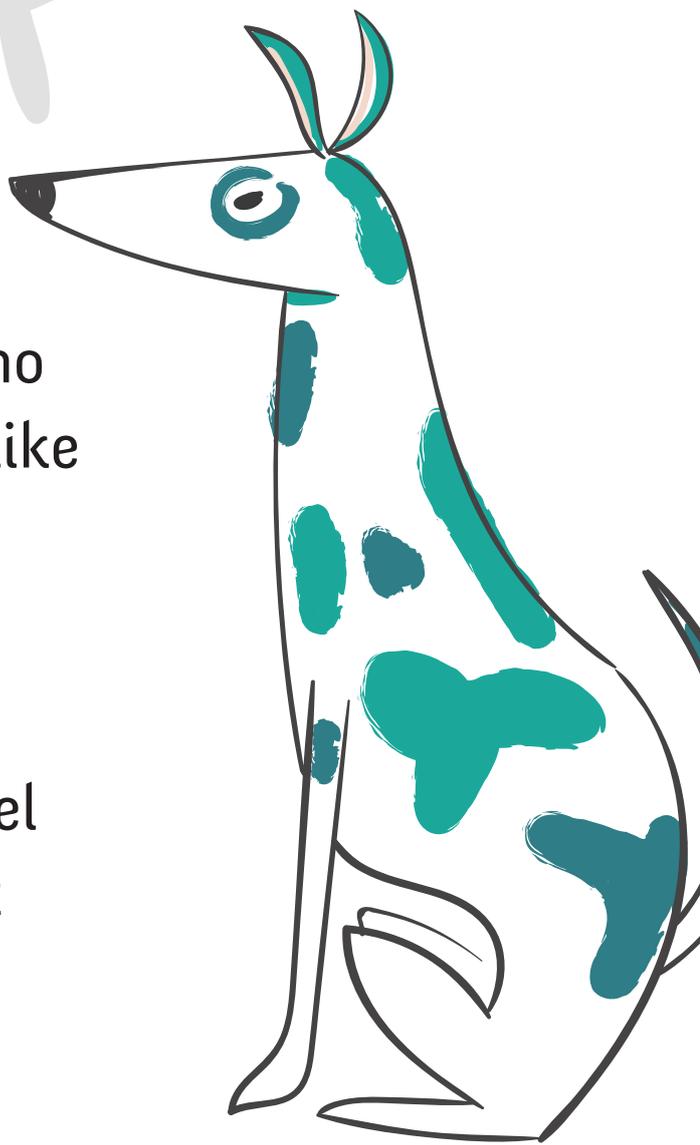
- Find something you like doing with your sibling like a fun game or activity.
- Plan to do something nice with your parent or caregiver.



Friends

- Talk to other children who have a brother or sister like yours.

This can help if you are feeling alone or if you feel that other children don't understand.





Feelings

- It is normal to feel sad and worried about your sibling.
- Sometimes you might get upset that you can't take part in activities because of your brother or sister.



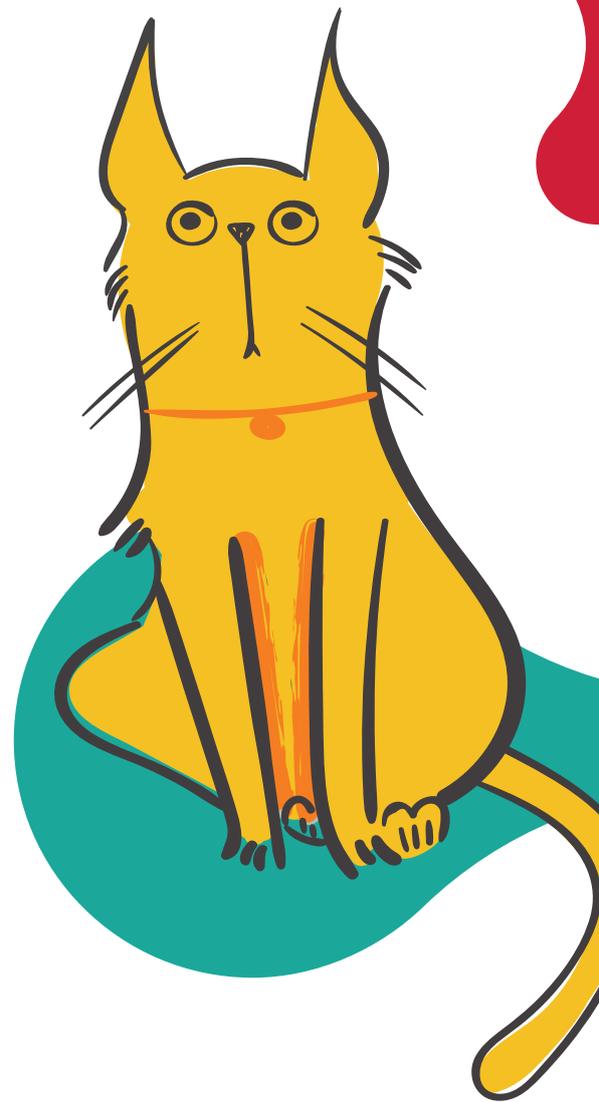
Can we talk?

Talk to your parent or caregiver if you feel upset. It may not change things but you might be able to find some other fun activity to do with your family or whānau.

- It is important to be able to talk about the negative feelings you have, not just the positive ones.

Can we do something **just you and I?**

I feel **sad.**



Bullying/teasing

Sometimes other children may not understand your sibling's disability and may say mean things to you or your sibling.

For example they might say to you:

“Why does he have those stupid things in his ears, they are weird”

or they might say to your sibling:

“Why do you have those weird things in your ears”

Think of some ideas of what you could say to them.

In this example you could say:

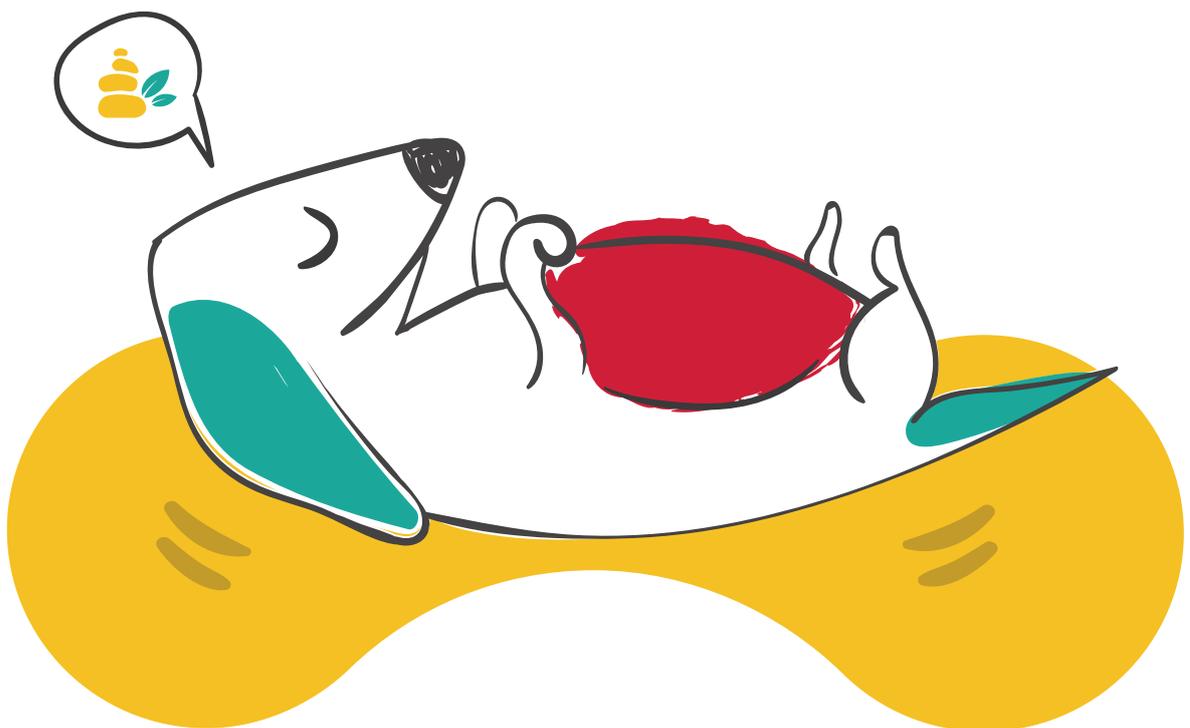
“They are hearing aids and they help my brother's ears hear better”.

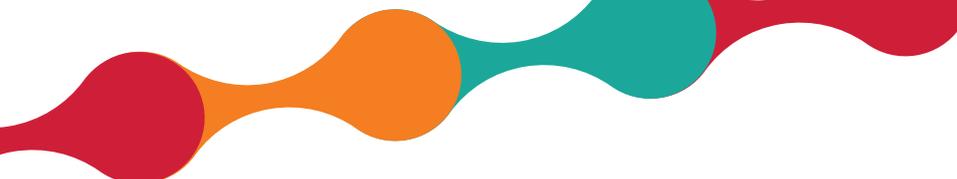


Maybe you have an autistic sibling and people might make fun of the way they flap their arms or rock backwards and forwards.

You could say to these people:

“My sister does this when she is feeling stressed out, this helps her relax. It’s her way of calming down”.





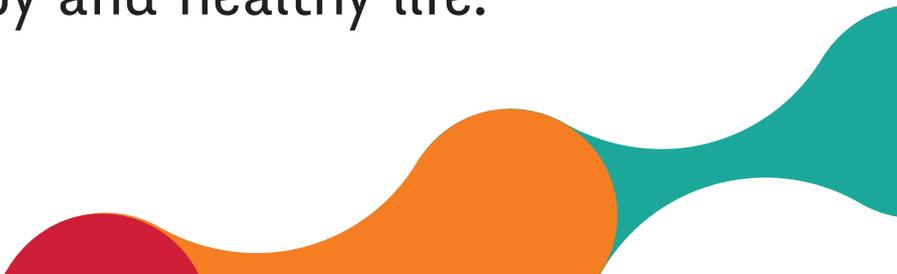
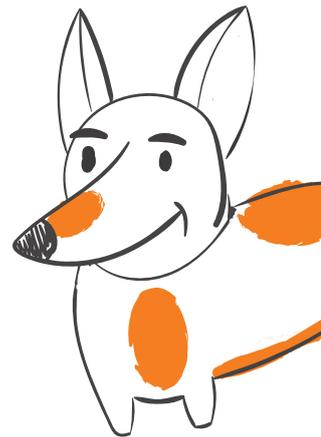
Having a disabled brother or sister is a really special experience.

While there can be some challenges, it can also teach you amazing things like how to care for others, and how to treat everyone with kindness.

Building a positive relationship with your sibling is important for both of you.

If you ever feel like you are struggling, talk to a parent, caregiver or trusted adult and ask for help.

It's not always easy, but it's important both you and your sibling have the help you need to live a happy and healthy life.



Sibling needs throughout life



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