

My Sibling has an ABI

Brain Injury not only affects the individual, but it affects the family as a whole. In the process of recovery parents may be preoccupied with the medical crisis and the experiences of siblings are often not recognised. This is a significant and stressful time for brothers and sisters because the sudden and confusing changes caused by the ABI can greatly influence family life. Siblings can be affected in many ways, sometimes for many years after the injury. Understanding how each has been affected by this experience is important to facilitate adjustment to the new situation.



Possible Reactions

Siblings, like other family members may feel as if they are on an emotional roller-coaster as so many things have changed so suddenly. Not wanting to further burden their parents who are upset and stressed, brothers or sisters may 'put on a brave face' to help everyone feel better. In this way, their needs may be overlooked and opportunities to talk through fears and concerns which are all part of coming to terms with the situation may not arise.

Emotions commonly experienced are:

- Shock and denial – finding it hard to comprehend and accept the reality of such a tragedy occurring to a family member
- Anger – that life has been disrupted in this way - Why us? Why our family? What did we do to deserve this?
- Loss - of the previous relationship with the sibling.
- Guilt – at feeling ambivalence, such as feeling differently about a sibling who has now changed in personality or thinking 'it could have been me'.
- Frustration – at being unable to change what has happened or to be of more help
- Loneliness and isolation - feeling left out of discussions. Parents may only provide you with information that they want you to hear (not all the details)
- Resentment- that this injury has 'ruined family life' or that everything will always be different now.
- Mourning and Chronic Sorrow - grieving processes rarely end, as a loved one remains in your life, but often as an altered person. It is common to mourn the personality and characteristics that have been lost while learning to relate to a different person. Mourning is never completed but can begin again with reminders of what has been lost.

Relationships and Role change

Depending on the nature and severity of the ABI all family relationships may be affected, especially if the injured person is requiring considerable care.

- Parents may become over protective of the remaining siblings. (This is even evident with adult 'children' as well).
- Parents may have different rules for injured and non-injured offspring – creating a double standard.
- Siblings may feel left out as family and friends focus more on the person with the ABI.
- Siblings may become resentful of the time and money parents are spending on the injured person. Some may feel they are missing out.
- Older siblings may feel resentful that parents are being robbed of their retirement and savings.
- Future responsibility for the injured sibling may cause concern.

Roles in the family may also change as a result of the ABI. This may mean:

- needing to take on extra jobs and responsibilities at home
- change of status in the family
- being required to provide supervision and support
- assisting with social and recreational activities
- educating friends and other family

Behaviour Changes

Some changes in behaviour may result:

- Attention seeking behaviours may develop.
- School/university performance may decline.
- Siblings may no longer want to bring friends home.
- The behaviour of the injured brother/sister may be challenging and at in some cases embarrassing.
- Being unwilling to learn about brain injury – ‘cannot deal with it’.
- Often older siblings will leave the home and move out as soon as they are able.

Practical consequences of ABI

A person with an ABI may need help from their siblings in some of the following ways:

- assistance with the practical care needs at home i.e. feeding, bathing, supervision
- supervision and/or other support
- providing respite for parents when they are the carers
- assistance with managing affairs such as finances and decision making
- assistance to find appropriate accommodation
- social support with recreational, social or other activities
- transport or help with transport to appointments

Useful Strategies

- Ask to be given honest information about the injury and any anticipated effects
- Obtain information about and try to understand the effects of a brain injury.
- Become involved in the hospitalisation and rehabilitation stages as appropriate.
- Allow time to come to terms with the injury. Each person copes differently at such times: - talking may help for some, others prefer to be alone.
- Be open to involvement in support groups or counselling (with School/University or other counsellors)
- Some activities may assist with adjustment: drawing or writing about the experience, or compiling photo albums
- Keep routines at home as normal as possible.
- Try to spend quality time with each member of the family (including the brother/sister with the brain injury).
- Provide practical help with transport, respite, shopping, housework where possible
- Maintain contact with friends and support networks so there is someone to talk to when this is needed.
- Continue with sporting and social activities. It is important to keep life as normal as possible.

Acknowledgements

Burnsall, S. (2003). *Supporting Child and Adolescent Siblings Following Acquired Brain Injury*. Griffith University; Brisbane.

Further information can also be obtained from the Synapse website (Formerly the Brain Injury Association of Queensland).

<http://synapse.org.au/>

Contact ABIOS

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