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Web Exclusive: What Parents Can Do

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While families rally around a child with cancer, siblings often get lost in the everyday responsibilities of doctor appointments, treatments and questions from well-meaning friends. There are several things a parent can do to make their other children feel special and involved in their sibling's cancer battle.

Letting a child know they are important can be as easy as having friends and family send personalized cards of encouragement to the child, identifying them by their name and having quality time alone with parents. Giving younger children duties or responsibilities to help their brother or sister, such as decorating their sibling's room or reading to their brother or sister, can make a child feel important. Although it may be easier to give more responsibilities to teenagers, becoming another "parent" may create too much stress for an older sibling. Asking for help from willing family members and friends can take much of the stress off of an older brother or sister who is asked to step into a more responsible role.

Be aware that a younger sibling may have different needs than a teenage sibling. Older siblings may be comfortable knowing about their brother's or sister's cancer, treatments and hospital routine. A tour of the hospital or oncology ward may be helpful. Younger siblings may ask several questions, especially to their sibling, as well as doctors or nurses. Pediatric medical professionals have experience with children and questions should be encouraged.

Pediatric psychologist Larissa Labay, PsyD, suggests that parents talk to their other children on a continuing basis about their brother or sister because they will have more questions as treatment progresses. "You can give them really good information about what's going on, but then also create opportunities throughout treatment for them to revisit that," Dr. Labay says.

It is also important for siblings to understand they are not alone. Participating in support groups, camps or online message boards may be a way for siblings to talk to other kids their age who are dealing with similar issues. Organizations such as SuperSibs! (www.supersibs.org), Gilda's Club (www.gildasclub.org), The Arc's Sibling Support Project (www.siblingsupport.org) and various programs at individual cancer centers and hospitals provide opportunities for siblings to express themselves and talk to other children and young adults.