

The Sibling Experience, Sibling Support, & Sibshops

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Jess Kruger was born and raised in Long Island, New York. As a sibling to two Autistic brothers, Jess has been passionate about disability acceptance and inclusion since the earliest days of her life. Jess earned her bachelor's degree in International Studies and Spanish from Eckerd College in 2014 and her master's in Social Work from the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College in 2024. Jess' lived experiences and professional development have inspired her entrance into the world of sibling support for "sibs" or siblings of brothers and sisters with disabilities, special needs, and/or complex medical, mental health needs. Jess has been Sibling Support Project Sibshops Facilitator Certified since 2021.

Within the sibling community, "sib" is a term that is used to affectionately refer to people who are siblings to people with support needs, disabilities, special needs, and/or complex medical and/or mental health needs, etc.

Some common unique challenges related to the sib experience:

- Worry, concerns about the future, witnessing stigma, discrimination, and ableism early and often, embarrassment, lack of information, parentification, loneliness, frustration, guilt, and resentment.
- Importance to understand how intersectionality and different identities interact to uniquely impact each sib experience
- Pressure to achieve: "the overachiever", "the perfectionist", "the good kid".

Some common unique opportunities related to the sib experience:

- Maturity, patience, pride, protectiveness, strong family values, open-mindedness, emotional intelligence, empathy, insight, tolerance, loyalty, gratitude, appreciation, resourcefulness, creativity, resilience, social adeptness, mindfulness, and peacefulness.

Tips to Support Sibs:

- Set aside special 1:1 time with sibs; discuss disability and allow space for questions; equal expectations (as best you can); be mindful of parentification and encourage kids to be kids; talk to them about the future; active family life; celebrate everyone's unique triumphs and successes; reassurance ("a little validation goes a long way"); encourage your local service providers to include siblings and provide them with support (share this presentation with them)!
- Become curious with yourself, so you can extend the same curiosity to your sib. Caregiver's interpretation of the disability is the single strongest factor affecting the sibling's interpretation of the disability. Model self-care as a caregiver, find ways to signal to your sib that you can tolerate and hold their emotional experience by modeling healing in your relationship with yourself.

Important organizations to know about:

- [Sibling Support Project](#)
 - [Sibshops](#) - Peer support groups that use play-based activities to help siblings of children with disabilities. Participants tend to be between 8 and 13, although some are as young as 6. While Sibshops may be therapeutic, they're not therapy. Sibshops are unapologetically playful.
 - [Find a local sibshops near you](#)
 - [Publications and books](#)
 - [SibTeen, Sib20, and SibNet](#)
- [Sibling Leadership Network](#)
 - [Future Planning Resources](#)
- Jess' Story
 - Growing up I did not know any other sibs and I never participated in Sibshops or had a sib community. My siblings experienced challenges that overwhelmed my parents and I internalized my experience. I didn't connect with my sib identity or other sibs until later in life. Being in a sib community has offered an opportunity for healing and integrating. Being able to grapple with my own needs and experiences has allowed me to be even

more compassionate and opened my eyes to ways of relating characterized by interdependence. My task as myself and my two siblings with support needs age is to build community around us as adults that will help us to sustain the unique care that all 3 of us will need across the lifespan. Finding Sibshops and a sib community has helped me to see that I exist in a reciprocal web of support that includes other sibs and my own siblings. I encourage you all to hold a curious heart for your sibs and consider nurturing a space or the idea of a space for connecting and sib community.