

Public release date: 10-Apr-2006

Contact: Carol L. Vieira

cvieira1@lifespan.org

401-432-1328

[Lifespan](#)

Help for siblings of children with special needs

Group intervention can aid young siblings' relationships

Providence, RI – Siblings of children with chronic illnesses and developmental disabilities are two to three times more likely than their peers to experience psychological adjustment problems. Young children in particular are at high risk for experiencing these kinds of problems. To address this concern, a report published in the December 2005 issue of the *Journal of Pediatric Psychology* finds that family-based group intervention can help improve the self-confidence and knowledge of young siblings (ages 4 to 7) of children with special needs.

"We found that participating in a group with other young siblings and parents of children with disabilities was both educational, therapeutic, and fun," says lead author Debra Lobato, PhD, with the Bradley Hasbro Children's Research Center (BHCRC) and Brown Medical School.

The authors explain that within their families, well siblings may experience extra caregiver burden, differential treatment, and an imbalance of family resources. Outside their families, siblings may experience limited access to information about the child's condition, negative peer reactions, and disruptions in social activities.

"It's important to address the psychological and emotional needs of this group at an early stage," says Lobato. "Children spend more of their lifetimes with their siblings than they do with their parents. Siblings play a key role in one another's social and emotional development. They often sleep together in the same room, eat at the same table, and go to the same school. Our siblings are often the ones who most easily make us laugh and cry. So, when a child has a chronic illness or disability, brothers and sisters are likely to affect each other in both positive and negative ways."

Forty-three healthy siblings (ages 4 to 7 years) of children with chronic illness or developmental disabilities and their parents participated in an intervention designed to

address sibling challenges that cut across all types of diagnostic conditions including autism, Asperger's disorder, mental retardation, cerebral palsy, cancer and Tourette's.

For six sessions, parents and siblings participated in two group settings (parents with parents, children with children). The authors measured sibling knowledge, sibling sense of connectedness with other children in similar family circumstances, and sibling global functioning.

The authors found that the siblings' knowledge of the child's disorder and sibling "connectedness", or the feeling that they are not alone, increased significantly regardless of the nature of the brother or sister's condition. Siblings' feelings of competence also increased. The improvements in sibling knowledge and connectedness maintained at follow-up three months later.

Since its inception in 1995, SibLink, the program that Lobato started to help well siblings of children with chronic illness or developmental disabilities, has helped over 200 families.

A prior report in 2002 found that in older children, SibLink helped improve the participants' knowledge about their sibling's illness or disability, helped them connect with others, and improved their behavior problems at home.

###

Founded in 1931, Bradley Hospital (<http://www.bradleyhospital.org/>) was the nation's first psychiatric hospital operating exclusively for children. Today, it remains a premier medical institution devoted to the research and treatment of childhood psychiatric illnesses. Bradley Hospital, located in Providence, RI, is a teaching hospital for Brown Medical School and ranks in the top third of private hospitals receiving funding from the National Institutes of Health. Its research arm, the Bradley Hasbro Children's Research Center (BHCRC), brings together leading researchers in such topics as: autism, colic, childhood sleep patterns, HIV prevention, infant development, obesity, eating disorders, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and juvenile firesetting. Bradley Hospital is a member of the Lifespan health system.
