

"That's Not Fair!"

Helping the child with a sibling who has special needs
by Adele M. Brodtkin, Ph.D.

THE TEACHER'S STORY

"I never get a turn to pour the juice or pick the story," Audrey moaned, "I never get a turn for anything!" She was near tears. Although, of course, that wasn't true, Audrey was being honest about the way she feels. She hasn't always felt or acted this way. Until about a month ago, Audrey, who just turned 5, had been friendly, patient, and relaxed in the classroom. I was excited about her development over the two years she has spent in our program. I was certain Audrey was ready to move on to kindergarten. Her social skills were well developed and she was often sought out as a play partner. All that seemed to change suddenly when her little brother, Joshua, joined our youngest group of threes. Because Josh has some developmental disabilities, an aide was assigned just to him. I didn't anticipate Audrey's reaction to "sharing" her school with him. Josh is here just three mornings a week, but I think his presence may be taking its toll on Audrey. She has become sensitive to "injustice" of all sorts and seeks extra attention. In the mornings, understandably, her parents' focus is on getting Josh to his classroom. It's the same at the end of the day, since Josh has motor difficulties that require extra help coming and going. So the once cheerful Audrey now starts and ends her school days looking sad and angry. And throughout the day, it's now rare to find Audrey relaxed and happy. What can I do to help her get back to being her old self?

THE PARENT'S STORY

We're starting to wonder whether it was a mistake to send our 3 1/2-year-old, Joshua, who has some special needs, to the preschool that our 5-year-old daughter attends. Her teacher was frank with us today about the change in Audrey since Josh began school. I wasn't surprised by what the teacher shared, since Audrey has had a hard time understanding why Josh gets so much of our attention at home. I guess school was her place apart from all of that. Now she has to confront the issue there, too. Since Josh was born, his special needs have preoccupied us. My husband and I each make a special effort to spend time alone with Audrey. But those plans sometimes have to be cancelled if Josh has a doctor's appointment or if a therapist is coming to the house. It's true we have expected

a lot of Audrey, asking her not to make noise when specialists are working with Josh, not to leave toys around that her physically awkward brother might trip on, and not to do things that might upset him or "get him going." It's funny, though. Josh has always been more responsive to Audrey than to anyone else. His face lights up when she walks into a room. But that isn't much consolation for Audrey. It's our attention that she wants, not Josh's. I realize now that school had become Audrey's happy place, away from the family's preoccupation with Josh's needs. Maybe we should have waited until Audrey started kindergarten before sending Josh to the preschool. I wish I knew what to do now that would help both of our children.

DR. BRODKIN'S ASSESSMENT

There is a crucial fact that bodes well for Audrey. Both her parents and her teacher are sensitive to her feelings and eager to help.

We don't know why it is that some siblings of special-needs children accept their family situation without showing jealousy or resentment. In fact, some even enjoy being protective mentors or spokespersons for siblings who have special needs. (But remember: Some sibling rivalry is a universal fact of family life.) Then, too, attention-seeking behavior has many other possible origins. Nevertheless, the adults in Audrey's life have probably put their finger on the reasons for her recent social-emotional struggle in school. For almost two years, school was a haven for Audrey. What can the adults do to help restore the 5-year-old's happiness in the classroom?

What the Teacher Can Do

Audrey once knew how to make and keep friends, and she can be helped to recover those social skills. When she expresses angry, jealous, or resentful feelings about having her turn and the like, her teacher can listen respectfully and remind her of the great job she did in pouring juice a few days ago. Be on the alert for opportunities to praise her cooperation, her helpfulness, and her consideration of others. Point out how good another child feels when she does something nice. During free play—indoors or out—introduce an activity that draws on Audrey's positive traits, and acknowledge them. Quietly praise her cooperative behavior. And when the time feels right, the teacher could talk with Audrey, reminding her of the fact that this is her classroom and not Josh's. He's in the school now, but not in her classroom. And next fall, along with many friends from this group, she will be off to a new school, where everything she learned here will help her to do very well.

What the Parent Can Do

Handling sibling rivalry is one of the challenges of parenting more than one child. The challenge may increase when one child's needs call for special attention. But many

parents in this situation have found ways to manage and meet their different children's needs. In Audrey's case that could mean, for example, arranging for other adults, such as a classroom aide or another teacher, to help Josh navigate his way to and from the classroom. Perhaps one parent could go along with Audrey while the other helps Josh at the beginning and end of the day. They might call upon another family member or a babysitter to join them on trips to the zoo, museums, beaches, and so on, so that Audrey can have the ear of her parents a good part of the time. When a specialist is working with Josh, one parent might take her out to do something special.

The parents have already mastered the greatest challenge—understanding Audrey's feelings and empathizing with her. Now they can try to meet a normal 5-year-old's need for sharing good times while modeling the importance of considering the feelings of others. ECT

When to Wonder

If after weeks of all these efforts, Audrey is still stuck with resentful feelings that spoil her days at school.

- If things are no better next year once Audrey has had time to adapt to kindergarten.
- If either or both of her parents continue to find themselves feeling puzzled and distressed by Audrey's behavior. In that case, they should not hesitate to seek the guidance of a counselor skilled at working with families that include children with special needs.

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Web Resource:

<http://teacher.scholastic.com/professional/classmgmt/playhelp.htm>