

marks. But to be completely honest, he didn't really care either. My mother didn't mention much of it in passing, but would often comment on how smart my sister would've been if she wasn't autistic.

Despite probably being a completely innocent, prideful comment, it had an effect on me. It started leading me to thinking- what if my parent's expectations in me were doubled because my sister would not be able to achieve what I could? What if I disappointed them?

With that thought under my belt, I worked harder. And it was *hard*. I didn't get anywhere. That aspect of my school life left me disappointed in myself. To make matters worse, something else had started stirring up. I had once noticed white vans in my sister's school driveway. The curious child I was, I had promptly asked my mother what they were for. She told that they were used to drive some of the children to and from school. That left me a bit confused. If my sister could be driven to school by my mum, how come the other parents couldn't drive their children to school?

Knowing that I was probably thinking about something like that, she started to explain to me that not all parents had enough time to drive their children to school. Some had to work harder to earn enough money to take care of their child, because they might've split from their partners, and might've been taking care of their child themselves.

## siblings australia...

I recently received a review copy of a new DVD produced by Siblings Australia. This organisation runs an informative website ranging from info for siblings of children and young people with a disability, to books and other resources. They have also produced a kit to assist with running some activities for siblings groups.

Having viewed the DVD I felt it was a balanced approach – looking at the development of strengths – resilience, empathy, responsibility in siblings, as well as a frank discussion of some of the concerns of these children and young people. The format was one of a combination of talking heads – teenage siblings, parents/caregivers and professionals drawn together by a celebrity narrator. As well as looking at issues for siblings the DVD explores sources of support within the family, outside the family, and professional supports. It provides very useful information about supporting siblings and taking care of carers.

Sometimes, partners would squabble about whose fault it was- whose genetics might've passed the disorder, who might've dropped the kid on its head when it was younger, and so on.

My parents themselves never got on very well in the first place. It was the typical arranged marriage. They would have their wedding, try to get along, squabble and argue some more.

My sister's condition probably made matters worse. By my year five, my parents had officially separated. By grade six, on Valentine's Day, they had divorced. I didn't know whether or not to be happy or sad. I might've been sad because I probably would never have a nice, normal family or happy because my mother was finally free of my father.

With my father failing to meet his child support payments, my mother had to work even harder to support us all. I had to help out to look after my sister. Being a babysitter for her wasn't so bad. I bonded a bit more with her, playing with her and comforting her when she became upset. But it meant I didn't have that much time to do what I wanted to.

Since my mother was always busy, we couldn't spend much time together. But when we did, we talked. She told me curious things. We talked about how lucky my sister was to be a girl, because boys with autism were often worse off than girls and how lucky we were that my mother wasn't

weak-willed, otherwise she might've ended up with depression like many other women with autistic children. She told me that my sister was better off than some autistic children, since she had and used her emotions and could learn.

One day, when she had a day off, I was allowed to go to the movies with my best friend. She was astonished to learn that that time was my first time going to see a movie in a cinema. However, already knowing of my situation, she understood. We went to see *'The miracle worker'*, a movie based on a play based on the life of Helen Keller, who was deaf and blind, and consequently, mute. I watched the fits Helen threw and sympathised with her teacher, Annie Sullivan. I watched as Helen grew in understanding, slowly and winced at her frustration.

Then, at the climax, I watched Helen identify and understand her first word- water. It was like a key to the gate of knowledge. With one word, she changed her whole life. It was a miracle.

I was left breathless after the movie. A glimmer of hope shined in me. If Helen could do it, then my sister had a chance as well. My mother did say she could learn. Maybe, just maybe.

"What happened to Helen, anyway?" I asked my friend. She looked at me, and then answered, "She earned a Bachelor of Arts degree and became an author. Why?" I smiled. "Nothing, don't worry."

My sister had a chance to have a future because sometimes, miracles work. ●

I showed the DVD at a recent parents meeting at a School for Specific Purposes, and it was very well received. I only showed some sections as one challenge of working in our area is the very high number of different languages and cultural backgrounds among our parents – currently some 29 language groups are represented. The DVD is in English, and some speakers are a little difficult to understand even when this is your first language. Nonetheless the discussion generated was excellent and really got people thinking. Some parents of older young people with a disability expressed regret that these issues were not talked about so freely when their other children were younger – so it is clearly a very much needed support.

I would be very interested in collaborating with anyone else who might be interested, to run a pilot sibling support group using the materials from Siblings Australia. I imagine this could pose some logistical

issues – but would like to give it a go. From my experience of running parent support groups at school with Relationships Australia, I feel this to be an appropriate and much needed extension. If anyone else has already used these materials I would love to hear from you!!

Parents were keen to take away a brief handout, and check out the website, and if appropriate encourage siblings to explore it for themselves. Aging Disability and Home Care also have material for siblings on their website. Overall a much needed resource and I would encourage readers to explore the Siblings Australia website for yourself, if you haven't already found it [www.siblingsaustralia.org.au](http://www.siblingsaustralia.org.au).

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