



OU ISRAEL PARENTING COLUMN

Michal Silverstein, MS

What About My Other Children?

Dear OU parenting,
My oldest child has mental health challenges. How do I make sure my other kids don't pick up "bad habits" or "copy" his behavior?
Thank you, O.M.

Dear O.M.,

Many families struggle with at least one child who requires special attention from parents. Having a child with a physical or mental health challenge can take a toll on the whole family. In general, the challenging child will require a lot of extra attention from the parents. Many parents are involved in accompanying this child to various treatments and therapy and invest a lot of one on one attention. This can

cause resentment among the other children who may feel rejected or aren't getting their needs met. The most important thing to do is have open conversations about the child who requires special attention. Don't tiptoe around the issues or skirt the topic. The other children in the family should be heard and validated. When everyone knows what the issue is and the situation is clear, the family dynamic can improve. It's important to give attention or do something special with the other children. Notice their good qualities and compliment them - Really see them. It's also important to point out the good qualities of the child who's struggling. Sometimes people tend to just see the "problematic child" as one big problem, many times overlooking the good qualities as well.

When the oldest child is the one with a mental disability, parents can become fearful that the rest of their children will follow suit. Remember that the child's specific issue is not contagious. Your other children won't "catch" the disability even if they live in the same house. Although it's a valid fear, it's one that parents should be aware of and not allow it to guide them. Parents should be careful not to panic when they see another child have a similar behavior and jump to conclusions. That same behavior to a limited degree can be normal in a different child.

As children grow they perceive the environment around them and learn quickly what is considered normal, acceptable behavior. They desire to fit into society. Although one's



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primary environment is their family, kids also learn from and model neighbors, friends, classmates, teachers and community leaders. So just because one child, even if it's the oldest one who has intense challenges, it does not mean that the younger children will follow in their footsteps.

When parents learn to accept the situation, the other children will follow the parents' lead. When they work on quieting their fear and project confidence, the other children will notice and feel stronger too. Having a sibling with a disability (physical or mental) may also build a person's character and make them more sensitive to others as they grow. This can be an opportunity for children to learn to grow through challenges. ■

Michal Silverstein has a MS in educational psychology and counseling. She facilitates parenting workshops in and around Jerusalem and maintains a private practice.

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