

## CONNECT WITH OTHER PARENTS OF EXPLOSIVE CHILDREN.

Parents who struggle with similar issues can provide valuable resources, in addition to advice and support. Meet other parents through organizations that serve families of explosive children, such as Think:Kids, which offers support groups and an interactive message board for parents, or Child & Adolescent Bipolar Foundation, which provides online forums and a monthly newsletter. If a support group for parents of explosive children is offered in your community, join it. If one isn't available, approach your local school or mental health center and suggest starting one.

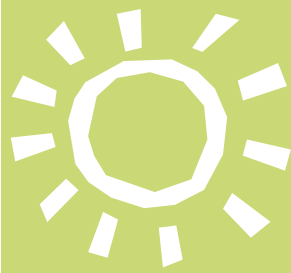
## ENCOURAGE SIBLINGS TO PARTICIPATE IN A SIBLING SUPPORT GROUP.

Wayside Youth & Family Support Network offers support groups at several locations within Massachusetts for siblings of explosive children, and the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health also offers support for families of children who qualify for DMH services. NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, runs local support groups which vary from town to town. Sibshops, recreational support groups developed by the Sibling Support Project, are offered in different venues across the country. Many schools geared toward students with behavioral challenges are starting to run sibling support groups as well.

## GET INVOLVED IN THE SIBLING SUPPORT MOVEMENT.

Siblings have started receiving media attention in recent years. The sibling support movement is relatively new and has been pioneered by the national Sibling Support Project. Geared to siblings of people with all types of special health, developmental, and mental health concerns, the Sibling Support Project promotes community-based support for siblings across the life span. Hundreds of parents and professionals have been trained as Sibshop facilitators by the Sibling Support Project, and have established a strong sibling presence in their communities.

The Sibling Leadership Network is another national organization that provides resources and information for siblings of people with disabilities. The primary goals of the Sibling Leadership Network are to help siblings advocate alongside their brothers and sisters with disabilities, and take on local and state leadership roles in the field of disability awareness.



## RESOURCES WITHIN MASSACHUSETTS

### Wayside Youth & Family Support Network | [www.waysideyouth.org](http://www.waysideyouth.org)

As one of Massachusetts' family-serving agencies, Wayside offers educational programs for explosive children as well as parent and sibling support groups.

### Think Kids: Rethinking Challenging Kids | [www.thinkkids.org/parents/next.aspx](http://www.thinkkids.org/parents/next.aspx)

Think Kids is an innovative program at Massachusetts General Hospital that supports children with social, emotional and behavioral challenges, as well as their siblings.

### Parent/Professional Advocacy League | [www.ppal.net](http://www.ppal.net)

Known as the "Massachusetts Family Voice for Children's Mental Health," P/PAL provides resources, advocacy and useful publications.

### Massachusetts Department of Mental Health | [www.mass.gov/dmh](http://www.mass.gov/dmh)

DMH offers programs and mental health services for children, adolescents and adults in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

## NATIONAL RESOURCES

### Sibling Support Project | [www.siblingsupport.org](http://www.siblingsupport.org)

The Sibling Support Project offers support and information to siblings across the lifespan, including support groups for young children and adolescents.

### Sibling Leadership Network | [www.sibleadership.blogspot.com](http://www.sibleadership.blogspot.com)

SLN provides policy recommendations, tools, information and support to help siblings advocate alongside their brothers and sisters with disabilities.

### National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) | [www.nami.org/youth](http://www.nami.org/youth)

NAMI offers information, support and local programs for families of people with mental illness.

### National Mental Health Services Knowledge Exchange Network

[www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/child/childhealth.asp](http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/child/childhealth.asp)

Geared to children, adolescents and adults struggling with mental health issues, this website provides fact sheets, resources and programs.

### Child & Adolescent Bipolar Foundation | [www.bpkids.org](http://www.bpkids.org)

In addition to online forums and parent support groups, CABF provides brochures for educators and assessment tools for explosive children, such as mood charts.



## RECOMMENDED READING

The Explosive Child: A New Approach to Understanding and Parenting Easily Frustrated, Chronically Inflexible Children by Ross W. Greene

Siblings: Brothers and Sisters of Children with Special Needs by Kate Strohm

Turbo Max: A Story for Siblings of Bipolar Children by Tracy Anglada

The Sibling Slam Book: What It's Really Like To Have a Brother or Sister With Special Needs by Don Meyer (Editor)

Siblings Without Rivalry by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish

This guide was written by Emily Rubin, 2009 Gopen Fellow. The Gopen Fellowship is sponsored by the Massachusetts DD Network:

- Institute for Community Inclusion at UMass Boston
- Eunice Kennedy Shriver Center
- Disability Law Center
- Massachusetts Developmental Disabilities Council



E.K. Shriver Center



Disability Law Center, Inc.



[www.communityinclusion.org/sibsupport](http://www.communityinclusion.org/sibsupport)

MASSACHUSETTS DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES NETWORK

# SUPPORTING SIBLINGS OF EXPLOSIVE CHILDREN



## EXPLOSIVE CHILDREN AND THEIR SIBLINGS

Explosive children, as described by Dr. Ross Greene, are chronically inflexible, easily frustrated, and prone to extreme behavioral outbursts. Growing up as the typically-developing sibling of an explosive brother or sister can be confusing, embarrassing and scary. “Walking on eggshells” is not a healthy way for anyone to live.

All too often, the explosive child in a family receives the bulk of parental attention, leaving the needs of siblings largely unmet. Some siblings internalize their pain and identify as the “easy” child in contrast to their explosive brother or sister, while others act out, seeking attention and approval. These siblings need support so they can learn to express their complicated emotions in appropriate ways and develop into well-adjusted adults.



## THE SIBLING EXPERIENCE

The lives of most siblings are filled with fun, friendship, fights and rivalries, but siblings of explosive children tend to experience a wider range of highs and lows. Children who grow up with an explosive brother or sister may experience the following:

### CONFUSION

The unpredictable behavior and rapidly shifting moods of explosive children can be very confusing to their siblings. Often the explosive child is held to a different set of expectations and rules of discipline which may feel like a double standard to their siblings. Another confusing dynamic is when relatives and family friends interact with the explosive child in a different manner than they do with the siblings.

### SAFETY

Siblings of explosive children are often subject to physical and verbal aggression. Sometimes the explosive child has alarming conflicts with caregivers, and sometimes the explosive child threatens to harm him or herself. A sibling's concern for his/her own safety or the safety of family members can lead to generalized anxiety, sleep problems, impaired concentration in school and many other issues.

### SHAME

Explosive brothers or sisters often have difficulty controlling their behavior at home, at school, and in the community. Siblings might feel embarrassed by this behavior, which can translate into reluctance to invite friends over, to be seen in public together, and to participate in extracurricular activities.

### PARENTIFICATION

Due to dysfunctions in the home environment, some siblings assume adult responsibilities before they are developmentally ready to do so. Taking on the role of the “little mother” or “little father” in the family can be the siblings' way of managing stress, as well as an indicator that siblings are missing out on their childhood.

### INDEPENDENCE

Accustomed to less parental attention, many siblings of explosive children are more independent than their peers. Young siblings are often capable of tasks that typically exceed their age range, such as putting themselves to bed, completing homework without help, and preparing meals.

### OVERPROTECTIVENESS

Many siblings sense the vulnerability of their explosive brother and sister and come to their defense when criticized. They may try to protect them on the playground, in family arguments, and try to cover up for poor choices the explosive child has made. The flip side of overprotectiveness is avoidance, when siblings become distant and withdraw from their explosive brother or sister.

### COMPETING FOR ATTENTION

Explosive children require unusual amounts of attention, and some siblings resort to negative behaviors of their own in order to attract parental attention. Other siblings see how emotionally taxed their parents or guardians are, don't want to add to the perceived burden, and end up keeping too many personal problems to themselves.

### WORRY

Younger siblings might worry they will “catch” the problem, or may see signs in themselves that they are developing the emotional disability of their explosive brother or sister.

### ANGER AND RESENTMENT

It can feel unfair when the explosive child is held to a different set of standards than the sibling or when siblings' opportunities are curtailed due to the needs or demands of the explosive child. Many siblings harbor great resentment over seemingly preferential treatment for the explosive child, not understanding the difficult choices made by parents and guardians.



## WHY SUPPORT SIBLINGS?

Siblings need to know that it's not acceptable to be treated poorly by someone they love or who loves them. When siblings accommodate themselves to their brother or sister's unpredictable rages, they learn an unhealthy model for building relationships in the future. Siblings of explosive children require timely and reliable support so they can address their conflicting feelings about their complicated families and minimize the risk of entering abusive relationships as adults.

It's also important for siblings to develop an understanding of their explosive brother or sister's behavioral challenges during the childhood years. Research shows that many explosive children carry a diagnosis of developmental disability (such as autism, nonverbal learning disability or obsessive compulsive disorder), mood disorder or other emotional impairment. As they age, their siblings tend to become their primary advocates; this is especially true of siblings who are sisters. The more support siblings receive growing up, the more likely they are to advocate alongside their brothers and sisters later on, with awareness and compassion.

In cases of extreme physical and verbal aggression, some siblings develop symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder. Ongoing support interventions for these siblings can help mitigate the onset of PTSD symptoms. Siblings need to understand that they are not responsible for their brother or sister's explosiveness; it's not their fault nor can they fix it.

Knowledge is power. By examining and recognizing the complexities of their families, siblings can develop a strong sense of self and self-worth.

## HOW TO SUPPORT SIBLINGS

### GIVE SIBLINGS THE OPPORTUNITY TO EXPRESS THEIR FEELINGS IN A SAFE AND NURTURING SETTING.

The most effective intervention is for parents or guardians to talk openly with siblings at an early age, acknowledging the challenging family life in age-appropriate language. Help the sibling figure out what to say to friends and relatives about the brother or sister's behavioral issues. Individual and/or family therapy with a trained clinician can be extremely beneficial for siblings. Sibling support groups with adult facilitators can also provide a welcoming environment for siblings to talk with other sibs who appreciate what they're going through. Siblings shouldn't have to harbor painful secrets about their home life.

