

Supporting Children Who Have a Sibling with a Complex or Life-Limiting Condition

A psychologically informed whole-school perspective

Protective school responses:

Flexible expectations grounded in understanding, not lowering standards.

Emotionally attuned responses to behaviour.

Ensuring appropriate levels of confidentiality among adults in school.

The Child (Psychological Impact)

What they may experience:

Mixed emotions including anxiety, sadness, anger, guilt, jealousy, or fear.

Internalising difficulties (e.g. worry, withdrawal) or externalising behaviours (e.g. anger, emotional outbursts), particularly earlier in the illness journey.

Reduced quality of life compared with peers, despite often trying to appear "fine".

What helps:

Safe adults who notice emotional signals, not just behaviour.

Predictability, reassurance, and being seen as an individual, not "just the sibling."

School System

Common impacts in school:

Fatigue and reduced concentration due to disrupted sleep or emotional load.

Difficulties with homework or attendance due to competing family priorities.

Increased vulnerability to misunderstanding, teasing, or behaviour-based sanctions.

Family System

Possible pressures:

Reduced parental attention due to hospital stays, appointments, and care demands.

Disrupted routines (sleep, meals, hobbies), which can increase anxiety and reduce emotional security.

Children may avoid sharing worries to "protect" parents from additional stress.



Why this matters:

Thousands of children attend school while living alongside a sibling with a life-limiting condition, many of whom may be **hidden young carers** and not formally recognised as such.

These children may appear "coping" but still experience **significant emotional, behavioural, and educational impacts**.

School can be a vital protective space when home life is unpredictable or emotionally demanding.

How can school help:

Foster inclusive classroom cultures that promote acceptance.

Teach empathy **without labelling or disclosure**.

Provide opportunities for play, connection, and age-appropriate childhood experiences.

Peers & Wider Social World

Possible experiences:

Feeling "different" or isolated from peers.

Missing out on social opportunities due to home responsibilities or restrictions.



Key message for staff: Behaviour, quietness, or tiredness may be a child's communication of pressure – not a lack of resilience or engagement. Many diagnostic-specific charities offer sibling support guidance on their websites.

What school can help replicate when home capacity is limited:

Consistent routines.

Positive adult attention without conditions.

Celebration of the child's achievements and efforts.