

The DeLanney family poses for a recent family portrait. Pictured (l-r) are Katelynn, Rachel with baby Samantha, Joshua, and Natalie.



Like siblings everywhere, children in active duty military families learn to share their parents' attention and affection with their brothers and sisters. When one parent is absent due to deployment or other circumstances, the remaining parent faces the challenges of meeting the children's needs on his or her own. If one sibling has an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or another special need, the typically developing children often have even less attention available to them.

## Survival Guide for Families: **Meeting the Special Needs of Children with Autism and Their Typically Developing Siblings**

By Patricia Ladew and Melissa Chevalier, M.S., BCBA

### Four-year-old Natalie

DeLanney, whose family is stationed at Fort Benning, Ga., is fortunate that her father Joshua, an Army mechanic, has been working state-side for the past two years. Her mother Rachel, formerly an Army cargo specialist, is a stay-at-home mom who is determined to give all three of her daughters as much attention as

she can, and distribute that attention as equally as possible.

When Natalie's sister Katelynn was born, Joshua was in Iraq and unable to return home until after Katelynn's first birthday. When Katelynn was 21 months old, she was diagnosed with autism; a few months later, the family's youngest child was born. Meeting the special needs of all their children

became a daily challenge for these young parents.

### **Keeping Things "Fair"**

Katelynn's autism diagnosis meant that she would need help with communication, social and behavior skills, self-help skills, and learning skills such as imitation and attending. So Rachel got busy scheduling the necessary services for



Katelynn and dad Joshua spend time together during a coloring activity.

upstairs and do things together while the therapist worked with Katelynn. That was very helpful for me. It gave me time with Natalie.”

Rachel had to schedule Katelynn’s ABA therapy around speech and occupational therapy sessions as well as around her own OB/Gyn appointments before Samantha was born. Sometimes the therapist would work with the girls at the child care center they both attended.

Katelynn’s therapy was put on hold last summer while Joshua was away on a training mission. Rachel and the girls went to her parents’ home for a few months before and after baby Samantha was born.

When the DeLanney family reunited, Rachel resumed her role as the family’s

### What to do when a child is jealous of a sibling with special needs

By Lauren Solotar, Ph.D.

Sibling jealousy is a difficult reality for many families, and can be more complicated for the brothers and sisters of children with special needs. The fact is that children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and other developmental disorders require extra attention from their parents. This usually comes at the expense of the time available for other children in the family. Occasionally, typically developing children may feel jealous of their sibling with special needs.

Sibling jealousy can manifest in a variety of ways. A once compliant and agreeable child may become argumentative and combative and may begin to act out to get his or her share of attention – even if it is negative attention. In some cases, these frustrated children may even become verbally or physically abusive. On the other hand, some siblings of children with special needs may become overly helpful, feel guilty about their own good health, and try to make their parents happy by being “perfect” children. All of these behaviors are cause for concern.

#### **What can parents do?**

First, listen to your child’s concerns. Ask her to share her feelings with you. Let her know that it is OK to feel angry if and when her sibling gets more attention. It is important for typically developing children to understand that their needs and feelings are just as important as those of their siblings with special needs.

Make your typically developing child an ally. Take him into your confidence and explain his sibling’s condition and needs in language he can understand. Although you do not want to make him feel inappropriately responsible for his sibling, it may be helpful to enlist his assistance in the family goal of

helping your child with special needs become as self-sufficient as possible. Helping this child learn new skills and function as independently as possible should be a team effort for all members of the family.

Do your typically developing children have chores around the house? If so, don’t let your child with special needs off the hook – make sure he or she has appropriate chores as well. Try to make household duties a cooperative rather than a competitive effort. After the work is done you can play together. Reward your children with a game, a special television program, a hike, or a picnic – an activity the whole family can enjoy together.

While most parents acknowledge that it is impossible to treat all children equally, you should try to be as fair as possible about giving individual attention to each of your children. It is a good idea to try and spend some time alone with each child every day – even if it is just a few minutes.

In some instances, the feelings and emotions resulting from sibling jealousy can get out of hand and cause problems that require professional family counseling. Watch your typically developing child for signs of depression or anxiety, disturbances in appetite or sleep patterns, or headaches or stomachaches that continue for several weeks. These symptoms may be indicative that he or she is in need of professional support.

With your encouragement and support, your typically developing child can become a more loving and understanding person because she has a brother or sister with autism.

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schedule coordinator, working Katelynn's therapy sessions around the new baby's eating and sleeping schedule and Natalie's new school routine.

### **Big Sister, Big Helper**

Rachel's organization, determination, and dedication have paid off. Over the past nine months, Katelynn has made tremendous progress with her toileting and communication skills. Big sister Natalie plays an important supporting role in her sister's progress.

Because Natalie likes to be the "teacher," the May Institute therapist encourages Rachel to set up situations where Natalie can help teach Katelynn things like identifying shapes and colors. Natalie also helps Katelynn practice social skills such as turn-taking and sharing, and has shown her how to enjoy make-believe play with their little kitchen set at home. Natalie models a behavior and Katelynn imitates it.

Of course, there are times when Natalie has to wait while her mother attends to the younger girls' needs. When Katelynn has a "meltdown," Rachel asks Natalie to sit on the couch and let her talk to Katelynn. "Katelynn needs to calm down," she explains.

"At this point, Katelynn is repeating just about everything Natalie is saying, and doing everything she's doing," says Rachel. "So, lots of times if there's an issue with Katelynn, I try to have Natalie help me out. "Talk to your sister, I'll say. Tell her that everything's going to be OK."

Before Katelynn began receiving therapy, she was not talking and did not gesture. With the help of her therapists and the example of her big sister, she is now verbal and can name colors and shapes and ask for items that she wants in a way her parents can understand.

Katelynn recently had a speech evaluation and tested at an "age-appropriate" level. Once inwardly focused, she now initiates play with other children and makes eye contact when she talks with them.



**Katelynn smiles heartily for the camera.**

Building on these successes, Katelynn's therapist will continue to work with her on other goals in her treatment plan including daily living skills such as hand-washing, toileting, and dressing; communication skills such as building vocabulary and responding and requesting appropriately during playtime; and social skills such as sharing and developing patience. She will also continue to work on pre-academic skills such as learning letters, colors, and shapes.

### **Looking to the Future**

Although Natalie will continue to be an important role model for Katelynn, she, like all siblings in all families, may experience sibling jealousy when Katelynn's needs supercede her own. There are a number of strategies Rachel and Joshua can employ to cope with sibling jealousy (see sidebar on page 62), if and when that problem arises.

Other issues that sometimes surface for older children include embarrassment because their sibling is "different" from other

children; impatience when he or she does not learn as quickly as they do; and resentment when they are expected to do more than their sister or brother to help out around the house. They may also rebel against always being their sibling's "helper."

Older children who have siblings with special needs sometimes benefit from attending a "sibshop," a special workshop or program designed to help children of different ages understand and support their brothers and sisters. Held in locations throughout the country, sibshops provide these typically developing children the opportunity to connect with other children in similar family situations.

Connecting with other military families who also have children with special needs may be helpful for Rachel and Joshua. Rachel especially may need extra support when Joshua is deployed to Korea next February. She has decided to stay state-side with her girls so she can be close to extended family and have access to the services that Katelynn will need.

Katelynn's therapists agree that Rachel and Joshua have done an excellent job not only of meeting Katelynn's special needs, but also in helping Natalie and Katelynn begin to build what will be a very special life-long relationship.

Being the sibling of a child with special needs can be an incredibly positive experience. Studies show that these children are more likely develop insight, empathy, and tolerance at a young age. Like Natalie DeLanney, many siblings in this situation grow closer as they grow older and develop a strong sense of family loyalty. •

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