

# Siblings

Mystery, Misery & Fond Memories



**Leanne Seaver, MA, Executive Director**  
**Hands & Voices**



Sibling relationships - and 80 percent of Americans have at least one - outlast marriages, survive the death of parents, resurface after quarrels that would sink any friendship. They flourish in a thousand incarnations of closeness and distance, warmth, loyalty and distrust. ~*Erica E. Goode, "The Secret World of Siblings," U.S. News & World Report, 10 January 1994*





# Research shows...

**A Penn State University study found that by age 11, children spend more free-time (33%) with siblings than with any other people in their lives, even more time than they spend by themselves.**

**Sibling issues stem from...**

- Evolving Developmental Needs**
- Individual Temperaments**
- Role Models**
- Special Needs**



**“Siblings are the people we practice on, the people who teach us about fairness and cooperation and kindness and caring –  
- quite often the hard way.”**

***~Pamela Dugdale***



# DHH Research Points to these Sib Issues & Themes

- Parent attention has been diverted to the DHH child's needs
- Hearing sibs struggle to be “heard” when communication is geared towards a DHH sib
- Responsibility for “helping” placed early and often on hearing sib shoulders
- Defensive, protective role among peers and “mean kids” at school & around the neighborhood



# Informal H&V Sib Survey Results

- 1. We are a normal family.**
- 2. I'm a better person for having a sib who is deaf or hard of hearing.**
- 3. It's hard to watch & experience my (deaf/hard of hearing/hearing impaired) sibling's struggle. And sometimes it's a struggle for me, too.**

# The Gift of the Sib

Siblings have a socializing effect on one another. Their interactions teach negotiation, compromise, and other problem solving skills.

The permanence of the sibling relationship makes it the most fruitful landscape for social learning.

*HVE Magazine July 2006*

© Hands & Voices 2009



**H&V: If you could change one thing about your sib (or your sib's hearing loss) what would it be?**



**“mm, well where to begin... oh wait you mean about her hearing loss, oh, ok... :)”**

***-- Cynthia, sister to Stephanie***



## Sibs Provide Practice for Social Competency

**The quality of the sibling relationship was also related to the social competence of the siblings... Previous research showed that sibling relationships provide opportunities for role modeling.**

*(McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 1993; Stoneman & Brody, 1993).*

# teachable moments...



"When we go swimming in the summer he can't hear... It's gets kind of annoying for all of us (his friends), but that's just because he keeps talking, but doesn't give us the chance to talk back."

**Molly, age 9, Riley's sister**

**“He also hates it when we say never mind because he didn’t hear what we said. I try really hard not to say never mind. “**



**-- Lindsey, age 13, sister to Anthony**

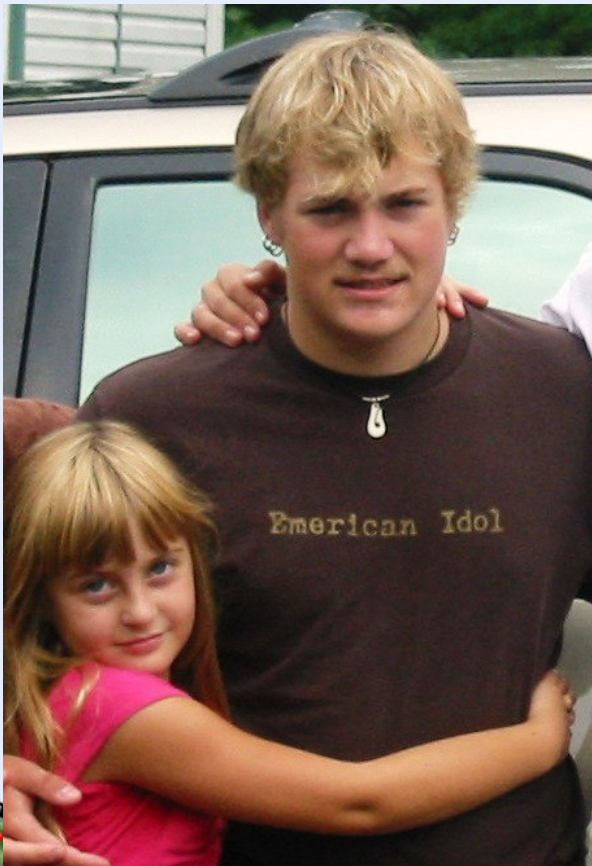
**“Family context is important in understanding experiences of deaf children and their hearing siblings. The model replaces assumptions of hearing loss as individual disability...”**

from *“Sibling Relationships of Deaf Children: The Impact of Child and Family Characteristics”*

Rehabilitation Psychology  
2002, Vol. 47, No. 1, 73–91



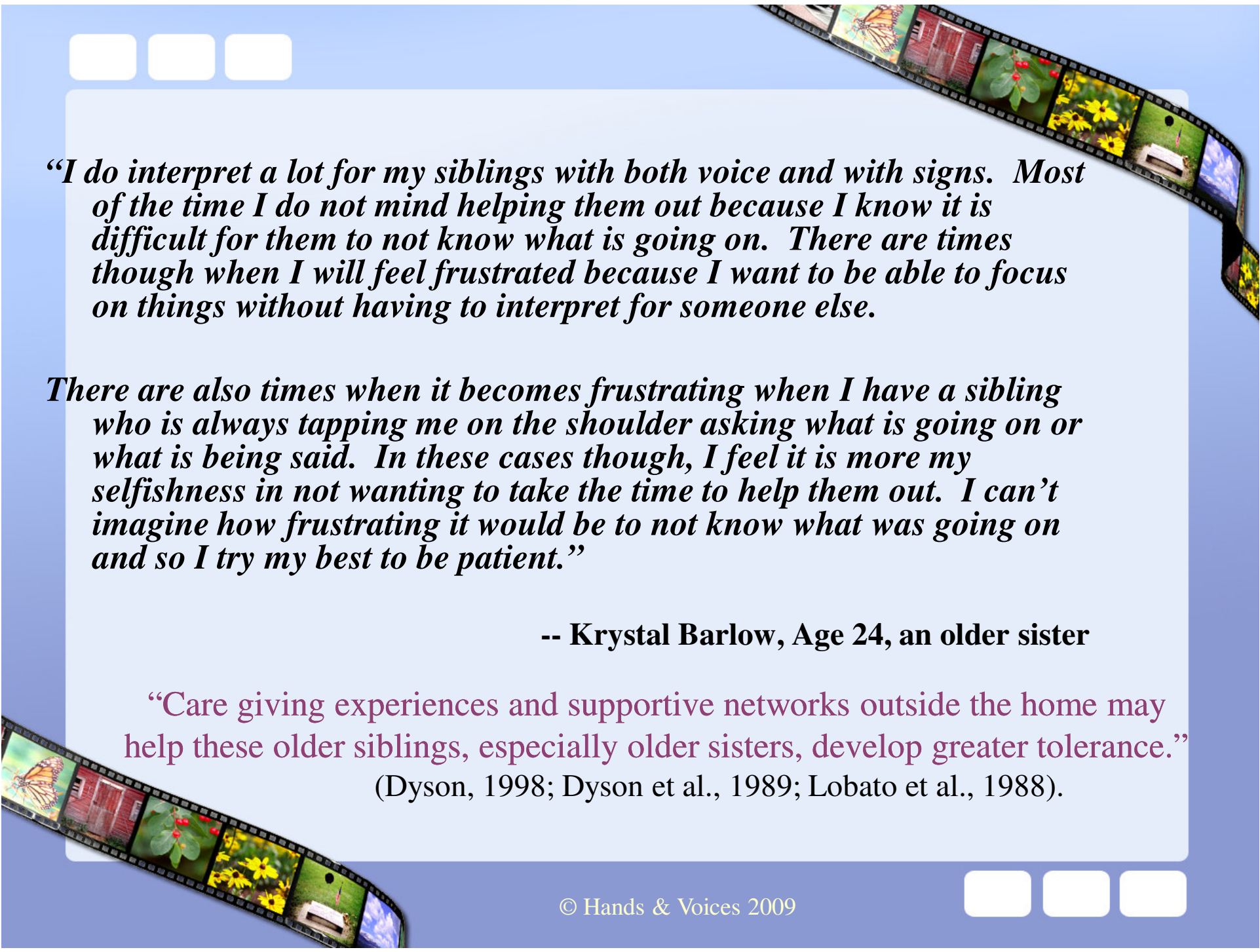
# Older deaf brother, younger hearing sister...



**“Dane takes me shopping,  
sometimes to the Puppy Pet  
Store, and he takes me fishing,  
or he takes me for a ride on his  
ATV. It’s a lot of fun when  
he’s around.”**

--

*Makena, age 11, sister to Dane*



*“I do interpret a lot for my siblings with both voice and with signs. Most of the time I do not mind helping them out because I know it is difficult for them to not know what is going on. There are times though when I will feel frustrated because I want to be able to focus on things without having to interpret for someone else.*

*There are also times when it becomes frustrating when I have a sibling who is always tapping me on the shoulder asking what is going on or what is being said. In these cases though, I feel it is more my selfishness in not wanting to take the time to help them out. I can’t imagine how frustrating it would be to not know what was going on and so I try my best to be patient.”*

**-- Krystal Barlow, Age 24, an older sister**

*“Care giving experiences and supportive networks outside the home may help these older siblings, especially older sisters, develop greater tolerance.”*

*(Dyson, 1998; Dyson et al., 1989; Lobato et al., 1988).*

# Social Stigma

(Siblings) may not want their friends to see their brother or sister with a disability out of fear that they or their sibling will be treated badly, or even just differently

*(Cmic & Leconte, 1986; Harvey & Greenway, 1984; McHale et al., 2007; McKeever, 1983).*



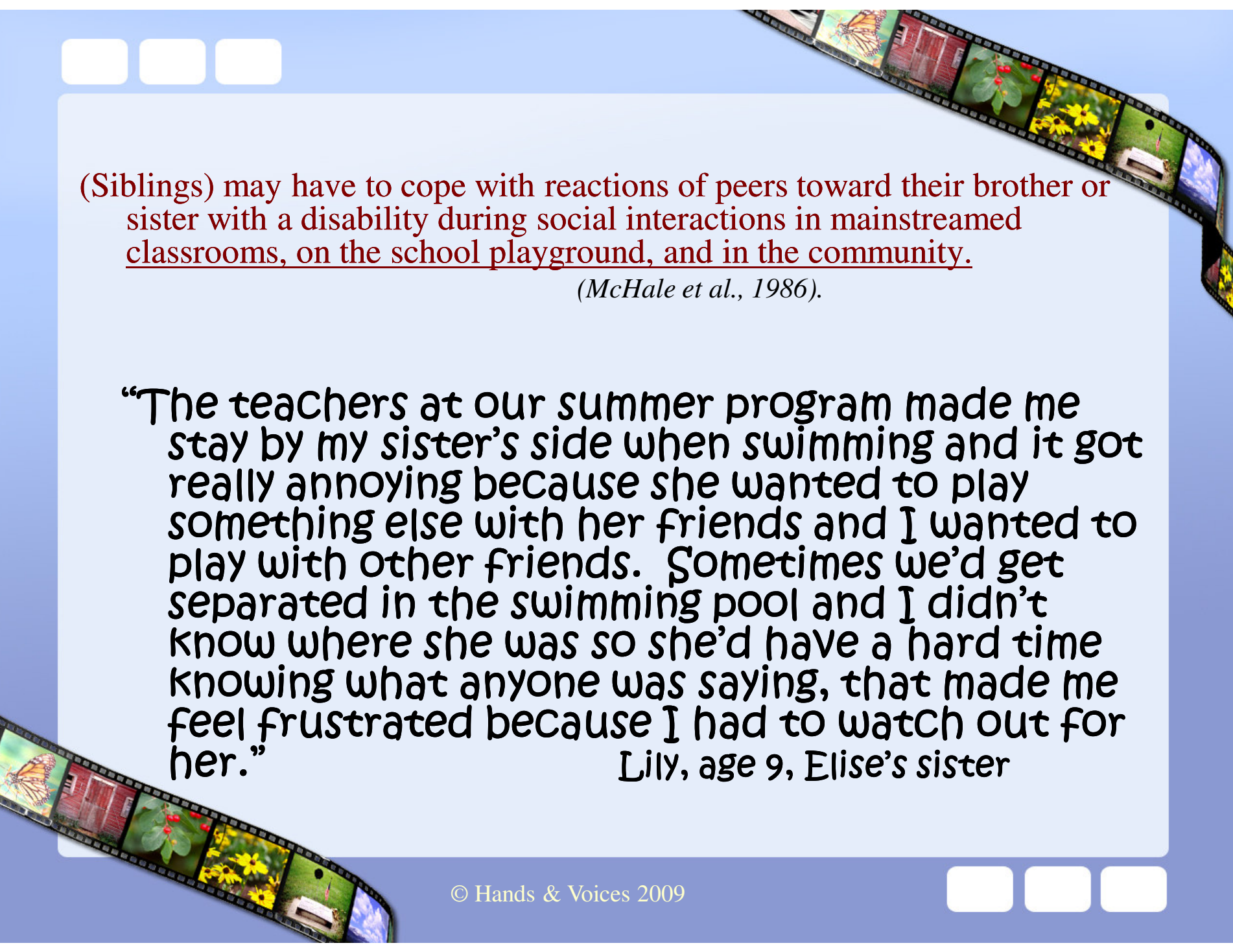


“

just to be able to talk  
to people. ometimes  
get mad if . think that  
people think he is  
mentally challenged or  
something.”

-- Dakota, age 17,  
brother to Dane





(Siblings) may have to cope with reactions of peers toward their brother or sister with a disability during social interactions in mainstreamed classrooms, on the school playground, and in the community.

*(McHale et al., 1986).*

“The teachers at our summer program made me stay by my sister’s side when swimming and it got really annoying because she wanted to play something else with her friends and I wanted to play with other friends. Sometimes we’d get separated in the swimming pool and I didn’t know where she was so she’d have a hard time knowing what anyone was saying, that made me feel frustrated because I had to watch out for her.”

Lily, age 9, Elise’s sister

# Where has all the attention gone?

“The parents’ increased attention to the deaf child ultimately leaves the other children with less interaction time than they were accustomed to.

(Luterman 1979)





## Rose Strain



Fillery (2000) highlighted the role of 'elucidator' that may be assumed by the hearing sibling; this role leads to more responsibility being placed upon the sibling and may result in irritation and resentment if it interferes with social interactions.

Siblings taking on such a role may feel they have 'lost their childhood' and identity, seeing themselves merely as a go-between (Luterman, 1987; Ogden, 1996). Gregory et al. (1995) and Slesser (1994) support this notion with the finding that 62 per cent and 50 per cent (respectively) of hearing siblings were described as having some sense of responsibility for their deaf brother/sister.

Furthermore, it has been suggested that siblings of deaf children may feel jealous and neglected in response to parental or professional attention aimed at their deaf brother/sister

(e.g. Harris, 1996; Marschark, 1997; Gregory, 1976; Slesser, 1994).

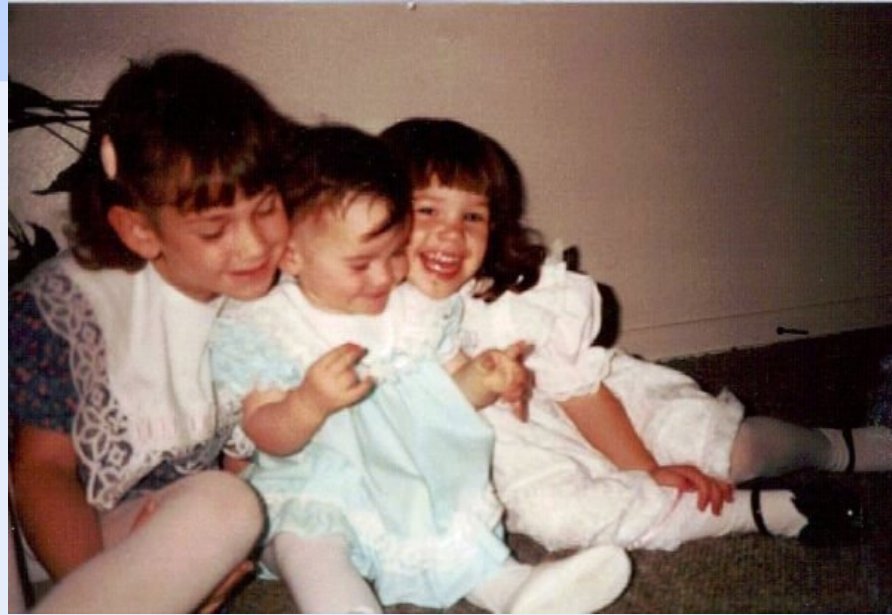


# It's Not Fair

**“But sometimes it’s really hard and/or annoying. I don’t get as jealous much any more of her, but I remember when she got her C.I., everybody was giving her presents and I wanted some too. Pretty much, I crave attention, and a lot of the time, when you have a d/hh family member you don’t get as much attention. I have even accused my parents of always paying more attention or letting her get away with things because she is d/hh.**

**She also doesn’t want to turn her C.I. up sometimes, so she won’t hear us and we have to repeat something a lot. Or, I’ll be talking about something really important (to me at least) and she will interrupt ‘cause she doesn’t want to even try to pay attention.”**

**-- Claire, age 13, an older sister**

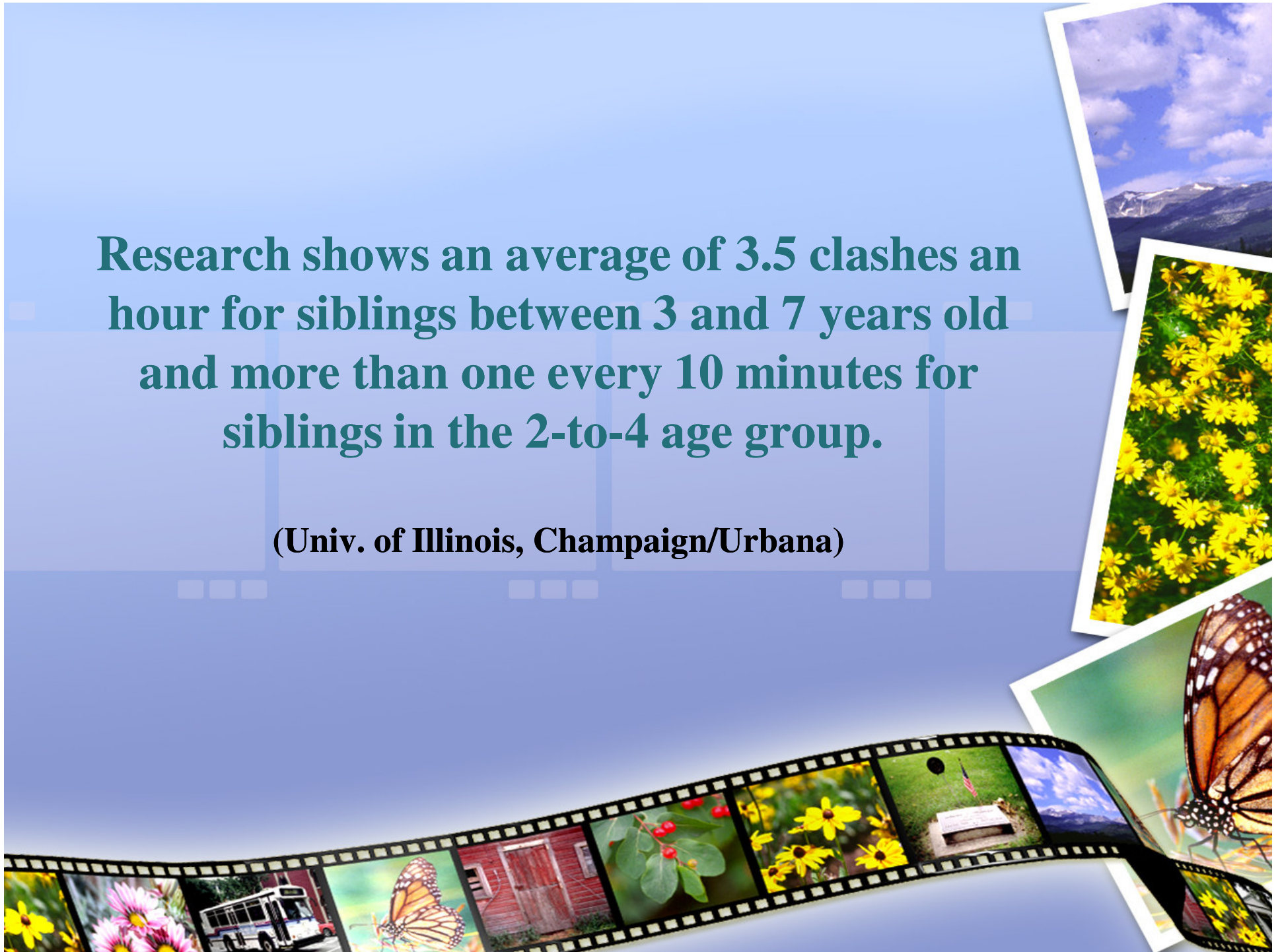


**I definitely felt my parents paid more attention to my sister. It was really hard in my family, and really hard between Sara and I. I never understood why until later on...I didn't have the self awareness to understand. There was so much attention paid to how Sara was adjusting and doing in school. It was never acknowledged that this is hard for hearing siblings, we were just supposed to be inspired by our hearing sister. Looking back, it wasn't my parents' fault, they were trying to help Sara, but it was the cause of a lot of problems between Sara and I. It did affect us. A lot of good could've come from just acknowledging how difficult this was for us as hearing siblings because sometimes I really felt resentment.**

*-- Leah, age 21, sister of Sara*

**Research shows an average of 3.5 clashes an hour for siblings between 3 and 7 years old and more than one every 10 minutes for siblings in the 2-to-4 age group.**

**(Univ. of Illinois, Champaign/Urbana)**





## Has communication with your D/HH sibling ever been difficult?

- ◇ "Yes, when I have to repeat something or if she doesn't get my signing. When she gets mad, she yells and won't look at me so I can't talk to her. I leave her alone and we take a break. We call her Mad Eye Moody."

-- Abbie, age 8,  
sister to Maddie



**...it is not uncommon for hearing siblings to develop pseudosensory deficits *to illicit more attention from the parents*...some strategies may be illness, tantrums or failures in school. The normal siblings may also carry deep-seated resentments towards the deaf child as well as the parents.” (Sharkey, 1987)**



**Hearing siblings' level of adaptation depends on their parents' attitude and response to the disability, the extent of parental availability, and their own level of maturity and understanding.**

*(Cicirelli, 1995; Dyson et al., 1989; Kramer & Bank, 2005; Stoneman & Berman, 1993)*





**“o, what . 'm  
this is your mother's fault.”**



# Parents: Attitude Modeling

“

**provide typical experiences.”**

-- Cindy, sister of Marty

**“Upon diagnosis at nine months of age, my parents were told to take her home and bring her back at age three. Of course, my parents did not go for that.”**

-- Julie, sister of Libby

# The Good News!

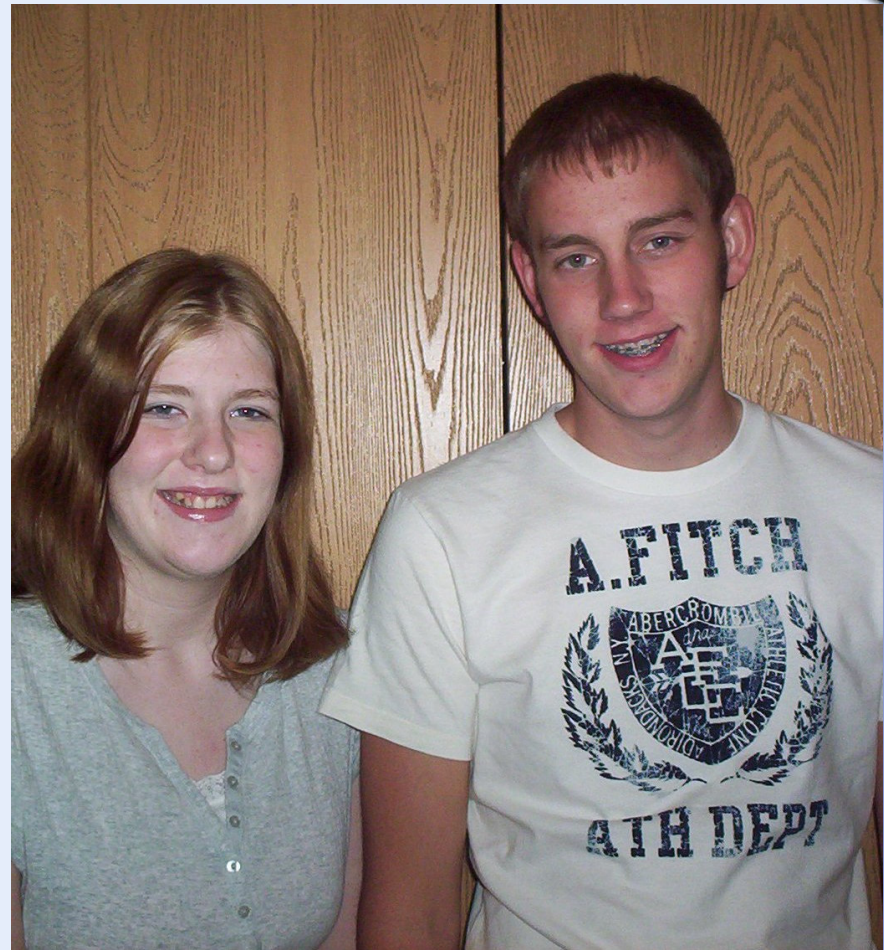
These older siblings may enjoy being interpreters, role models, helpers, and supporters and may feel a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. **Many of these siblings pursue humanitarian or advocacy professions** in adulthood (*Mindel & Feldman, 1987*).

Siblings of children who are deaf or hard of hearing may exhibit many positive traits, such as **greater levels of maturity, tolerance of differences in other people, empathy, patience, flexibility, and pride** in helping their parents with their brother or sister with a hearing loss (*Atkins, 1987*).



**“I have better communication skills with people and could communicate with D/HH people if I needed to. It’s a different side of me that most people don’t know.”**

*Cole, age 19,  
Peyton’s brother*





Children with a disability can bring out the best in their siblings, including insight, understanding, and enlightened perspectives on interactions and bonding (Crnic & Leconte, 1986; Dyson, 1998).





*Cindy, sister to Marty*

I often interpreted growing up, and it was just what I did. I was frustrated when the rest of the family didn't work as hard or when they carried on conversations and left him out. Sometimes I would just redirect his attention and we would carry out our own conversation when in a "hearing" environment.

I feel blessed to have the ability to be bilingual and don't ever feel resentful of filling the role of interpreter or communication facilitator. **It is part of my every day existence now and my contribution to "equalize access" to communication that so many hearing people take for granted.**



*Danielle, age 19, sister to Sara*

“Having sister with hearing loss is no different than having a hearing sister (except when we fight she can turn her hearing aid off and ignore me : ). I love her so much and am so proud of everything she has to endure. She is unique and it is in that where her beauty lies.”



# The bad news sandwich

**It might seem easy in the beginning,**  
**but sibling dynamics gets harder as kids age and life becomes more complex.**  
**But it might get easier again in the end.**



“They think they're pretty!”



**(“Missy, age 4, sister of Gage—both are deaf--on the topic of what people say about hearing aids, which is what she always hears at school from the teachers, and random people cause of the small amount of BLING we have on them.” -- Mom)**



from “It’s Not Fair! Siblings of Children With Disabilities”

*Richard, age 20+, whose brother is deaf:* “I never thought of thinking about my relationship to my brother until I mentioned it to Dr. Klein in a different context and he presented the idea of this discussion to me. Then I *did* start thinking about it to an extent. But this morning, **I have felt myself really holding down those thoughts...I am kind of anxious. I wonder what the hell is going to come out because I have not discussed this with anyone.**”



# “Simultaneous Views of Reality”

‘[...was that (communication) a major problem or did you just find ways round it?] *h, we found ways round it, there was no, er ... if we wanted to get anything to each other, we could do.*’

*‘ou couldn’t have any sort of conversation, that would be very difficult ... it probably tended to be more superficial.’* (Male, adult, early 30s)

**“Respondents, therefore, do not need to be judged as dishonest; they are merely presenting their version of events, an account of the way in which they have made sense of the experience of growing up with a deaf sibling.”**

*(Tattersall, Young, 2003, “Exploring the Impact on Hearing Children of Having a Deaf Sibling” Deafness & Education International, Whurr Publishers)*



**“There were challenges for my deaf brother: acquiring language, having a true feeling of belonging, occasional loneliness, making his way in the world, the occasional irritation of putting up with his siblings forgetfulness that he was being left out of a conversation. But the serious issues seemed to develop when all the siblings started to marry. It is one thing to grow up in a family that has hearing loss. It is a completely different matter to enter into that family. Even for my brother’s deaf spouse, she found our family’s expectations of the siblings to be different than what she was used to.”**

“In my particular case, my mother-in-law did not want my husband to marry me – using my brother’s deafness as the root of her concern for our marriage. **When our daughter was born with a very serious heart condition, my husband's mother suggested that his deafness was the cause.**”



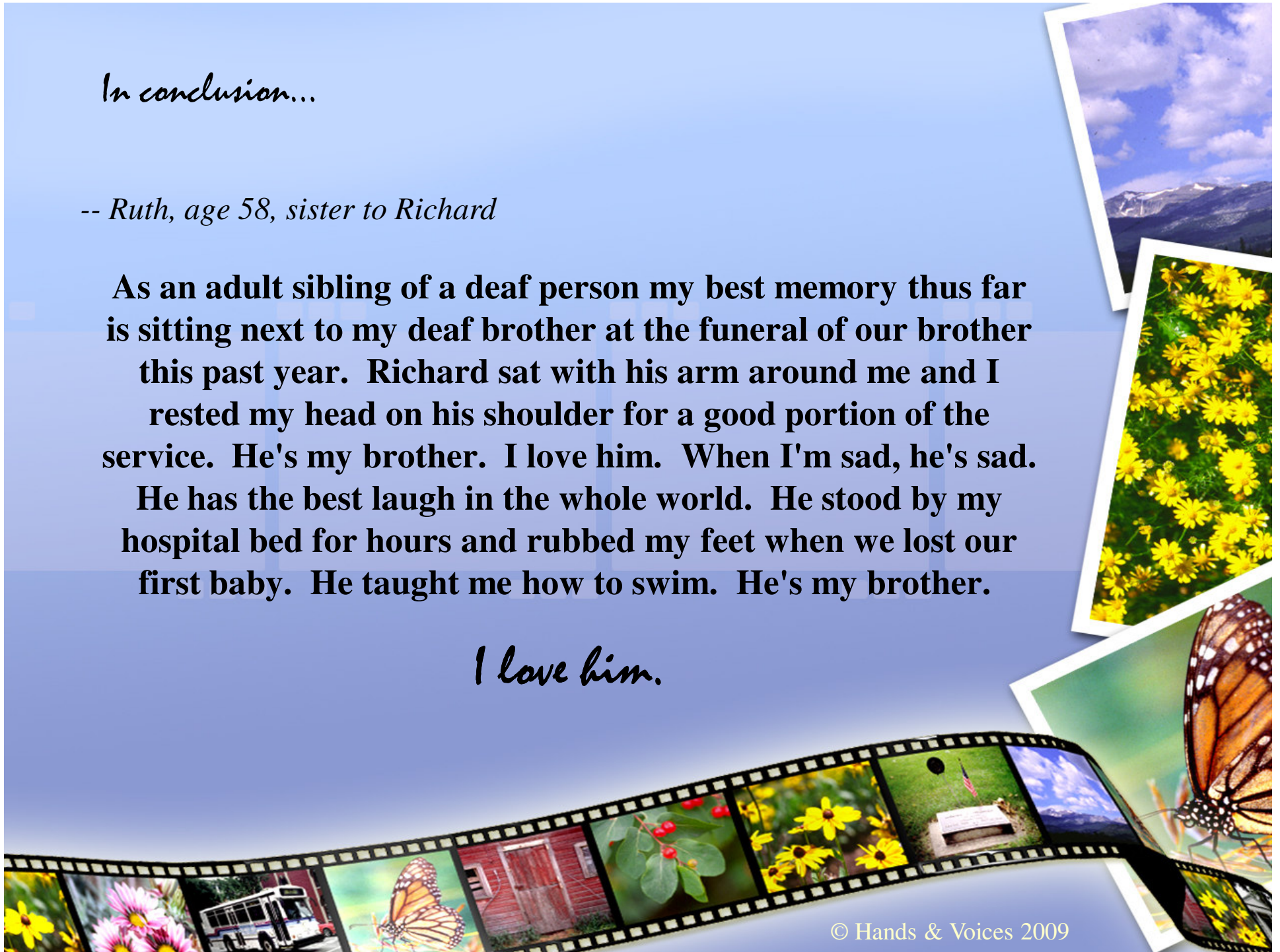
Tear-Apart Mother-in-Law Dog Toy  
Available from  
[www.dog-toy.co.uk](http://www.dog-toy.co.uk)

*In conclusion...*

*-- Ruth, age 58, sister to Richard*

**As an adult sibling of a deaf person my best memory thus far is sitting next to my deaf brother at the funeral of our brother this past year. Richard sat with his arm around me and I rested my head on his shoulder for a good portion of the service. He's my brother. I love him. When I'm sad, he's sad. He has the best laugh in the whole world. He stood by my hospital bed for hours and rubbed my feet when we lost our first baby. He taught me how to swim. He's my brother.**

*I love him.*





# Consider these strategies...

**“Mom likes him best.”**



Reaffirm your love for everybody “just the same” but acknowledge that it could look & feel like the DHH sib is getting more attention...true, *but attention isn't love*. “He may need more attention, but he doesn't get any extra love.” Make a plan for special one-on-one time.

**“I can't add to my parents' burden with my problems.”**



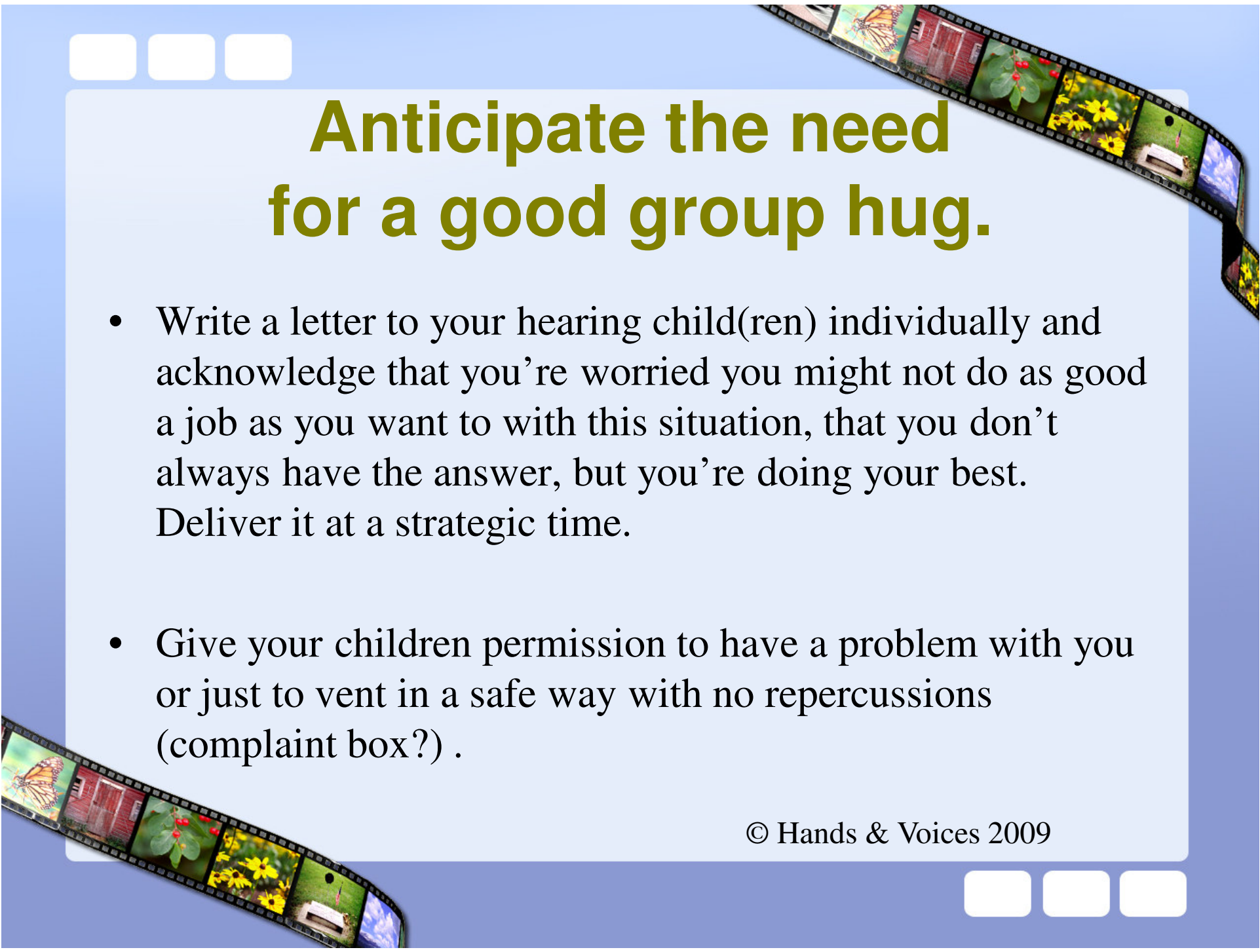
Keep a careful watch on problem behaviors or other manifestations that something is going wrong...this “cry from the wilderness” is a plea for your time and attention.

**“My children fight all the time & I think poor communication is part of the problem.”**



Separate kids until they're calm, and count to ten yourself! Sometimes it's best just to give everybody some space for a little while and not immediately rehash the conflict. Then give a fair amount of time for each kid to convey his/her side of the story, and make sure everyone understands one another. Sometimes “work it out between yourselves” isn't a great solution when communication is compromised, so offer a couple of solutions that you approve of, invite their input, then choose a solution.





# Anticipate the need for a good group hug.

- Write a letter to your hearing child(ren) individually and acknowledge that you're worried you might not do as good a job as you want to with this situation, that you don't always have the answer, but you're doing your best. Deliver it at a strategic time.
- Give your children permission to have a problem with you or just to vent in a safe way with no repercussions (complaint box?) .

© Hands & Voices 2009





## Feel their pain.

“It can’t be easy having a brother who can’t hear you...”

“... don’t think ... tell you often enough that ... know how hard you’re trying to communicate with your sister. Thank you for working hard on that.”



## “Family-Based Group Intervention”

### **SIB SHOPS:**

**Acknowledge that being the brother or sister of a person with special needs is for some a good thing, others a not-so-good thing, and for many, somewhere in-between. They reflect a belief that brothers and sisters have much to offer one another — if they are given a chance. Sibshops are a spirited mix of new games (designed to be unique, off-beat, and appealing to a wide ability range), new friends, and discussion activities. The Sibshop curriculum and more info is available at: <http://www.siblingsupport.org/sibshops>**



HANDS &  
VOICES™

[www.handsandvoices.org](http://www.handsandvoices.org)

© Hands & Voices 2009