

## Brothers and sisters

*Meaghan Sweeney*

Brothers and sisters have a vital role to play in each other's lives. We share a family history together that has a powerful effect on who we become as adults and how we relate to the world. Many studies have been done and books written on family structures and birth order and the subsequent life experience of adults. The importance of family relationships and their impact are even more profound in families where a child has a disability. A healthy happy family with close bonds between children is possible with the presence of disability.

Our family has had a particular focus on the relationship between our children since they were little. Daniel is the eldest with Joscelyn following 16 months later, then our baby Monica, 2 years after. As the children were so close in age, the difference in how they were treated by the world was profoundly obvious to Todd and to me. From birth, Daniel and Monica enjoyed a positive welcome with talk of joy and opportunity; however, Joscelyn was received with a sense of sorrow and concern, certainly not joy and opportunity. As her parents, we resented this enormously. We were under no illusions about the difficulties she may face in her life, however, we cherished her as much as our other children and had great expectations for her future and our family as a whole.

One of the greatest roles we have as parents is to provide for and protect our children. It was important for Todd and me that all our children were given a fair go and that the integrity of our family, positive and thriving was not undermined. We became vigilant in providing all of our children the same opportunities in the same places as other typical families and protecting Joscelyn from being separated from her brother and sister. We chose family day care where all the children went together over a separate respite service that was offered for Joscelyn. The children attended the same preschool in our neighbourhood and then regular class at our local primary and high school. Attending all family events, taking the school bus, playing in the street or local park, visiting neighbours, parties and play dates were the norm in our house for all our children.

As the children grew older, Joscelyn's capacity became more obvious to her brother and sister. We let the children lead conversations about her difference and we were always honest in discussions about disability and the impact this had on her life. Conversations often included the children's friends and families so the community

grew in understanding as our family did. The overall message was that although Joscelyn had some challenges that others did not face, her life was precious and valuable.

New to high school, very early in year 7, Joscelyn liked to catch the first bus that then looped back to the school for a second wave of students at the end of the day. One day she missed the first bus and became very distressed with lots of tears. One of her big brother's friends on the bus saw Joscelyn's despair and sent a text to another friend who went to get Daniel. The word spread and by the time Daniel arrived Jos was being comforted by many of his friends. I know this happened as a result of the children growing together, being educated together in the same schools in regular classes as a typical family. Joscelyn was not "that Downs" she was Sweeney's sister and that's what sparked concern amongst her brother's friends, their sense of ownership towards her.

Now young adults, Daniel and Monica remain very interested in Joscelyn's life and wellbeing. They are young people with a deep sense of social justice and understanding of the unnecessary limitations our community places on people with disability. With her brother and sisters encouragement, Joscelyn has developed age appropriate maturity and has a great understanding of the world that only comes from being a valued sister. Now Daniel has moved away to Uni, it is a joy when they get together. They have a shared history of stories, of holidays, embarrassing moments that are usually about Todd or myself, 'in jokes' that we aren't privy to and a loving concern for each other.



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