

Baby & Child

I'm healthy but I need care too

In the third part of the Children With Cancer series, **Judith Tan** finds out what troubles healthy siblings of children with cancer, and what can be done for them.

Nur Ashikin was only seven when her younger sister, Siti Nurdiana, was diagnosed with cancer of the adrenal gland. Her worried parents focused all their attention on Siti, who was then one-and-a-half years old, and had little time for Ashikin.

Said her mother Nurlaila Mohd Salleh: "Ashikin was practically left home alone with the maid most of the time."

Ashikin, now 10, was flooded with feelings ranging from anger and concern to jealousy and love. She felt alone and abandoned.

Things came to a head in 2003, two years after that initial diagnosis. "First, Siti's relapse was announced on Ashikin's eighth birthday. We cancelled the celebration," Madam Nurlaila said. "Then, Siti's wish to feed and pet a koala bear and a kangaroo was granted by Make-A-Wish Foundation.

"Although Ashikin got to go on the trip to Brisbane, she showed her displeasure by not smiling in all the photographs the media and the organisers were taking of the family. She complained that the photographers wanted to take pictures only of Siti and not her," she added.

A senior counsellor and child life specialist with the Children's Cancer Foundation, Ms Liow Hwee Hsiang, said such reactions are normal and result from a feeling of loss.

"The loss of normal life as the child knows it as, the loss of a playmate because the sibling is too weak to play with him or her, the loss of time with parents as parents spend more time caring for the sick child," she explained.

"Siblings who adjust well are found to have greater capacity to empathise, among other qualities, and those who do not adjust well may develop psychosomatic illnesses."

International studies found that such fears and unhappiness can be quietened by accurate and appropriate explanations from parents, medical staff or social workers.

Social workers at the foundation broach the subject by talking about general things first or about the children's interests to break the ice.

"Then we ask what they know or heard about the sick sibling, and why they think they need to be in the hospital," said Ms Liow.

"Then, if we assess that the children are prepared to discuss or learn more about their sick sibling and his or her condition, we discuss cancer and its treatment."

Exhausted parents often are not aware of the strong feelings of their healthy children, sometimes assuming that the youngsters understand that they are loved.

The situation is worsened when these children do not share their feelings because they love their parents and do not want to place additional burdens on them.

Even when parents make a conscious effort not to be preoccupied with the ill child, siblings still perceive that they are not getting their fair share of attention and feel rejected.

This is what happened in Ashikin's case.

Madam Nurlaila said: "We tried talking to her to try to make her understand, but I guess sometimes she doesn't."

A social worker and research officer with the foundation, Ms Aaqilah Abdul Latiff, said that the better adjusted the sibling is, the less aggressive is the behaviour he exhibits.

"I only fight with my sister when she grabs the toys that I'm playing with at the moment or the book I am reading. I get so angry with her," Ashikin said.

And when that happens, her parents sometimes let the girls fight it out, intervening only when it gets bad, believing that they will be closer when they grow up.

To let healthy siblings feel they too are cherished, the foundation organises activities like excursions only for them, whom they call Very Important Brothers and Sisters (VIBS).

The foundation also encourages these youngsters to accompany the child with cancer to the hospital during the school holidays so they can spend time together in the playrooms.

Healthy siblings are counselled at the foundation's play activities to help them cope better with their sibling's illness and to overcome the pain, distress, anxiety and other emotions they experience.

Assisi Children's Centre also includes the siblings in activities such as a twice-yearly party for its children and a Christmas party.



TAN SUAN ANN

'I sometimes feel sad for my sister. But I feel a little jealous too. When I do, I go into my room to read a book or do colouring.'

— Ashikin, whose sister was diagnosed with cancer of the adrenal gland