



The Exceptional Advocate

A newsletter for military families with special needs

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Supportive Group Therapy Available for Siblings

Raising a child with a disability or special need has unique demands that can drastically affect the family dynamic, especially when there are other siblings. It is not uncommon for the siblings of children who have a disability or special need to feel guilt, sadness, fear, and even resentment.

Supportive group therapy is now being offered for siblings as a result of the School Behavioral Health (SBH) program, and a partnership between Fort Belvoir Community Hospital and Fairfax County Public Schools (specifically Ft. Belvoir Elementary School). A needs-based assessment conducted at Fort Belvoir Elementary School identified an unmet need to support siblings of children with physical and emotional disabilities, says Renee Kavanagh, LCSW, founder and facilitator of the sibling support group.

Children enrolled in the program meet once a week at school to talk, and participate in therapeutic art and games tailored to their individual needs. Supportive group therapy provides the opportunity for the children to express themselves and also lets them know they are not alone. "The children have opportunities to interact with children who have siblings with Exceptional Family Member Program status," says Kavanagh.

When a child is nonverbal or immobile, siblings may experience feelings of sadness about their family member's disability. Children may also feel like their parents are not emotionally available to them on a daily basis because of the demands of taking care of the sibling with the disability. "It's important to normalize, or validate, the child's feelings," says Kavanagh. Feedback received from the children enables Kavanagh to let parents know how their child is feeling and to share recommendations so they can address the challenges their child is facing. "It lets the parents know where the child is coming from," she says. Kavanagh recommends that parents try to spend time alone with each of their children every day, such as reading a book together for ten minutes.

Supportive group therapy for siblings is just one of the programs offered through the SBH program. SBH strives to remove barriers to behavioral health services and promote students' availability for learning through prevention, evaluation, early identification, intervention, and treatment for military children and families. Ultimately, these efforts are aimed at promoting soldier readiness, as well as military family wellness and resilience. "Service members can often be distracted by family needs," says Kavanagh. "Programs like this contribute to military family wellness and resilience by helping families to resolve their issues and allowing service members to focus on their jobs." Although the supportive group therapy program for siblings is in its early stages, already feedback from parents, student, and school administrators has been positive, says Kavanagh.

School Behavioral Health Services are available at select military installations. Visit the [School Behavioral Health Program](#) website for more information.



Fort Belvoir Elementary School is offering supportive group therapy for siblings of children with disabilities.

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