Linking sibling support to different stages of development

When I speak to parents, I endeavour to show that there is often a link between the common feelings and experiences of siblings and different stages of development.

In simple terms, young siblings’ concerns about their brother or sister’s disability are often quite different from those of teenage siblings. It is also important to understand that not all sibling challenges are related to disability. Typically, we know that all brothers and sisters disagree from time to time, whether disability is present or not.

Young siblings will not always be able to express and manage all their feelings and concerns about their family situation. For instance, they may not be able to fully understand why their parents may need to spend more time with the child with a disability. Young siblings may sometimes assume that their parents care less about them than their brother or sister with a disability, especially during challenging times, such as when their brother or sister is in hospital, or attending intensive early childhood intervention. Also, it is not uncommon for young siblings to assume they may catch the disability, or that they are responsible for causing the disability.

Such assumptions may result in a range of conflicting feelings for siblings: anger, resentment, worry, protectiveness, loneliness and guilt. Clearly, young children will not have the cognitive development to successfully cope with such a range of conflicting feelings without support and understanding.

Parents can support siblings by listening to their feelings and thoughts, and by clarifying any false beliefs or assumptions they may be holding on to. It is not only important to validate siblings’ feelings, but also to offer regular age-appropriate explanations about their brother or sister’s disability. The following examples demonstrate age-appropriate explanations of disability for younger siblings:

“I told them that it was something he was born with, that it is not anyone’s fault, and it means that he is slower to do the things that they do, such as walking and learning to speak.” Parent

“We explained that her brain and some parts of her body were built differently to ours and that’s why she is unable to talk and has other difficulties.” Parent

Parents once again have the perfect opportunity to offer simple age-appropriate explanations about their child’s disability and, if possible, to find activities that siblings can happily share together with their

Community safety with Victoria Police

Deputy Commissioner of Victoria Police, Lucinda Nolan, and parent Elizabeth Curran talk about their work to promote community safety for children who abscond.

Can you tell us about your personal experience of having a child who absconds, and how you came to team up to support other families?

Lucinda: My eldest child, Liam, has Aspergers syndrome and was a prolific absconder from the age of about three to 12 years old. He is still a bit of an absconder but the dangers around him going for a walk or travelling on public transport have significantly reduced with age, his growing maturity and responsibility.

The stress of having a preschooler or early primary school child disappearing from home is enormous — particularly when it happens repeatedly and there seems no end in sight. The difficulty for any parent in this situation is that you don’t know what to do, how to stop it, what action to take when it happens, and who to turn to for help. Most parents see it as a problem they need to solve by themselves.

My position at Victoria Police now enables me to let parents and carers know that this isn’t their problem alone. It is a community safety issue that Victoria Police shares responsibility for and we are here to support and help them when needed.

I think that being a parent who has experienced the stress and strain of dealing with these problems makes me — and Victoria Police — more aware and understanding.

I came to team up with Elizabeth through her sons going to the same school as Liam. We started talking one day and here we are! That said, Elizabeth has incredible drive and tenacity, so too bad if I hadn’t wanted to get involved!

Elizabeth: I am a sole parent with two sons on the autism spectrum: Marcus 22 and Caden 21. Marcus is very rigid in his thinking and behaviour and Caden has been an ‘absconder’ since he was young. I have had to contact the police several times since he was about 7 years old and involve my local community to look out for him.

In 2001, I began working with our local police and invited them to our school to give us strategies about safety in the community for our children. We also had an article published in our local paper to highlight the difficulties in communicating and recognising a child with autism when the police find them.

When my sons were in their teen years we asked the police to come to the school again to discuss safety tips for teenage students and to teach them that the police are our friends if they become lost.

When my boys turned 18 and were now considered adults ‘I became concerned again about how they would cope in the community. I knew Lucinda from the boy’s school and I contacted her to ask if she could speak to our family forum group on safety in the community now that our children were facing the new challenge of adulthood.

Lucinda and I have begun public speaking at schools and local councils to let people know there is support for families if their child absconds. As two parents with a great deal of experience with children absconding, we are very aware of the stress this can cause the whole family.

How can the police support families of children who abscond?

Lucinda: Police receive training and have procedures for recognising and responding to people of all ages who have a disability, so families should not hesitate to contact police for assistance. There are a number of ways we can provide support:...
What is the Personal Warning Flag Tool?

The central police database (LEAP) records information about individuals who have had contact with police, whether as a victim, a witness, a person in need of help, or an offender.

Families can choose to volunteer information to assist police in any future contact they have with the child or adult with autism.

The sort of information that is relevant is:
- typical behaviours/trigger
- effective communication strategies
- known risks
- appropriate contact person
- other information sources

Police will record this information on the LEAP database where it can be seen by authorised police and 000 call-takers. To discuss this option, families can contact their local police station. Police will explain how this information will be stored, used and removed.

For more information see the Voluntary Disclosures of Personal Information Regarding a Disorder or Disability fact sheet on the Victoria Police website www.police.vic.gov.au

Elizabeth: It’s reassuring to hear that the police treat working with people with intellectual disability and mental illness as ‘real police work’ and that they are entitled to the same level of service as any other Victorian. The police need as much information as possible to assist with communication if a person is lost or absconds. The Personal Warning Flag tool is a good way to record details of your child in the event they could become lost or absent. This information can include the person’s preferred form of communication, how they might respond to eye contact or physical touch or if they have a fear of police.

As Lucinda said, the police force is reflective of the general community and many police officers have first-hand experience of caring for someone with a disability. This gives them outstanding skills beyond their training and police experience. They can also influence and support other police officers.

What can families do if a situation of abscending escalates into a case of missing persons?

Lucinda: Families should report a child as missing as soon as they have concerns for their safety or welfare — they do not have to wait a certain period before reporting.

Police will ask for the following information:
- the child’s full name, date of birth and address;
- a description of their physical appearance, the clothes they were wearing and a recent photograph;
- any health considerations (eg. taking medication) or vulnerability (eg. has autism);
- the circumstances surrounding their disappearance (eg. location where last seen, significant events leading up to their disappearance).

features that may influence how police approach the child (eg. if they can communicate, know their own address, or will respond to police calling out to them);
- their mobility (eg. distance they could walk, familiarity with public transport, carrying money/mymki/credit card/identification);
- any steps the family has taken (eg. contacted family and friends, searched likely places);
- their interests (eg. destinations/places of interest, fixations, previous locations), and
- whether they pose a risk to themselves or others.

Police will determine the appropriate steps to take, including whether to make an appeal via the media. Police will actively search for a missing person until they are found, and will prioritise searches for children and people with a disability. It is therefore important that families notify police if they subsequently have contact with or locate their missing child.

How do we balance everyone’s rights and responsibilities, especially as children become adults?

Lucinda: Police have specific and limited powers to intervene in the lives of any Victorian. Where police are authorised to act, the law, our policy and procedures, and community expectations require us to use the lowest level of intervention appropriate for the situation.

This means that police recognise that adults with autism have the same rights and responsibilities as any other adult, including the right to privacy and to make their own decisions. Where necessary, police have additional supports to enable the person to exercise their rights and responsibilities (eg. they will arrange for an Independent Third Person or family member/guardian to sit in on interviews with a person who has impaired capacity).

Elizabeth: We’ve had a good response to our presentations. Our intention is to give hope and encouragement, to inform, support and empower parents/carers/professionals about this difficult issue and to promote the Personal Warning Flag Tool to make communication easier for both families and the police.

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Community safety tips

- Reinforce personal safety messages – repeatedly!
  - Identify their personal vulnerabilities (eg. crowds, noisy places, easiness to please);
  - Develop preventative strategies (eg. identify travel routes that avoid stressful situations, visit places at less busy times, set rules about giving away possessions); and
  - Discuss potentially risky scenarios and good responses with the child (eg. what they may encounter and what they can do).

- Explain inappropriate / harmful behaviour
  - Explain what is appropriate behaviour by others in common situations they are likely to encounter (eg. on public transport, in public places);
  - Explain what is appropriate behaviour by others (eg. what constitutes bullying or victimisation, and who the child should tell if they experience it); and
  - Update this information as the child moves through each life stage (eg. finishing primary school, entering their teens, becoming an adult).

- Instil positive views of police and other safety guardians
  - Engage with local police so that the child is confident and comfortable with approaching police; and
  - Identify other people that the child can approach (eg. neighbours, teachers, trusted shop staff, public transport officers).

- Assist police to provide informed responses
  - Consider providing information for a Personal Warning Flag/ response plan; and
  - Develop non-verbal ways to communicate that they have a disability (eg. a card outlining tips for interactions).