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Children or Adolescents with a Parent or Sibling with Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) Advice for Parents and Carers

For a child or an adolescent whose parent or sibling sustains a serious ABI, a life changing event is experienced. It is traumatic, confusing, and requires huge adaptation to the changes that ABI has brought about in their family member. It can have a profound impact on the child's or adolescent's relationship with the family member who has sustained the ABI. The child or adolescent is also faced with altered dynamics within the family unit.

At this confusing and difficult time, children and adolescents need to make sense of what is happening around them and deal with their own feelings, thoughts and experiences to the best of their abilities. For many children and adolescents, having a family member sustain an ABI can lead to increased behavioural and psychological difficulties. When appropriate support is provided, children and adolescents are better equipped to deal with the changes going on around them and with their own thoughts and feelings in relation to these changes. If they are fully supported through this time, they are less likely to develop emotional and behavioural problems in response to this trauma.

If you are supporting a child or adolescent who has a parent or sibling with an ABI, it may be helpful to consider the following points:

- Children and adolescents benefit from accurate, age appropriate, and timely information about ABI and its implications. It is usually helpful for them to know from the outset information regarding their family member's condition after the injury, the cause of the injury and their prognosis for recovery. As time moves forward they will require accurate information regarding the treatment that their family member may be receiving, the sorts of long term difficulties that they might be experiencing as a result of the injury and the implications of these for their life. If information is withheld from children and adolescents, they are likely to make their own guesses which may be more frightening for them than the truth.

- It is common for children to experience guilt or to feel responsible for their family member's condition following ABI, even if this is not logical or rational. During this time, they will require considerable support and reassurance to deal with these feelings.
- Children and adolescents need to be able to express their feelings. If they are not able to express their feelings with words it can be helpful for them to hear about other people's feelings to assist them to put words to their own. They may find alternate ways to express themselves such as through drawing or music; in fact through any creative process that they enjoy and that has meaning for them.
- Children and adolescents require opportunities to discuss their understanding of all that is happening around them during this time. It is helpful if adults continue to check that the children or adolescents in the family have an accurate understanding of what is going on and that they are encouraged to ask any questions to clarify their understanding.
- Children require a lot of reassurance throughout this time, especially reassurance that they are still safe and loved, despite all the disruptions to their normal life routine and the intense emotions being experienced by all those around them.
- Children and adolescents need attention. Although it may be difficult, it is important that adults make time to spend with siblings, pay attention to their needs and interests, and as such, continue to invest in these relationships.
- Children and adolescents require as much stability as possible in their lives. Despite the disruption of the trauma, it is important to try to maintain regular routines by continuing to attend as many regular activities as possible and keeping day to day life as familiar and routine as you can.
- Children and adolescents benefit from being connected to adults with whom they have positive and close relationships. This is particularly important if the person with the ABI is a parent to whom they are closely connected and if that parent is not able to be emotionally present following their injury.
- ABI can significantly impact the way people relate to each other within families. At this time there may be demands placed upon children and adolescents to act practically and emotionally as adults. It is important to be mindful of a child's capacity to cope with these sorts of demands and to allocate responsibilities and support accordingly.
- It is important not to make assumptions about a child's or adolescent's experience when a family member sustains an ABI. Every child or adolescent will experience and deal with the experience differently, even those within the one family. Adults

need to be mindful of this and proactive about understanding the individual experience of each child.

- It can be helpful for children, particularly older children and adolescents, to meet and get to know other children and adolescents who have parents or siblings with ABI. This can help to normalise their experiences, reduce the stigma they may feel and provide much needed social support from those who have a significant understanding of the impact of ABI on family life.

This information sheet has been prepared by Life Supports Counselling Service. Life Supports Counselling Service provides specialist counselling for people affected by Acquired Brain Injury. If you would like to discuss your situation with a counsellor, please feel free to contact our office on **1300 73 50 30**.

For more information sheets on topics related to acquired brain injury please see www.lifesupports.com.au/acquired_brain_injury.htm