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SARA EDGAR (left) 11, of Coopersburg, Lily Dipaolo (center) 8, of south Bethlehem and Brenna DeLowery (right) 10, of Macungie, try to untangle in a game during a Sibshops workshop at Northampton Community College in Bethlehem Township.

SIBLINGS are special, too

Kids learn that everyone counts in a special-needs family

By Kathy Lauer-Williams
Of The Morning Call

The two blindfolded boys twisted and craned their necks, trying to get their mouths around doughnuts dangling on a string. Other children, waiting their turns, laughed as they called out instructions. The air crackled with the electricity of kids having fun.

It was a chance to be typical kids for the 13 children attending a workshop at Northampton Community College in Bethlehem Township. All have brothers or sisters who have special needs, ranging from autism to Down syndrome to cerebral palsy, and they are used to taking a backseat to their siblings' needs.

Sibshops, a new program offered by VIA of the Lehigh Valley, gives children ages 8 to 13 a chance to get together. Once a month, the focus is on them and their feelings, and they get to set aside the mantle of precocious responsibility so many wear.

"It doesn't seem to matter what their sibling's



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ANOOP SOODINI, 10, of Easton participates in the dangling doughnut game at a workshop.

disability is," says Marisa Nimtjen, director of VIA's children's services. "What matters is their life is different from their peers."

As the number of children with special needs

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VIDEO

See the children in action at Sibshops. themorningcall.com

increases, so does the number of siblings affected. According to the Department of Health and Human Services' National Survey

of Children with Special Health Concerns, more than a fifth of U.S. households with children have at least one child with special needs. The 2006 survey reported 10.2 million children, about 14 percent of the 73.5 million children in the country in 2006, have special health care needs. That is an increase of 800,000 children since the

VIA OF THE LEHIGH VALLEY'S SIBSHOPS

■ **What:** A series of workshops for children ages 8 to 13 who are siblings of children with special needs.

■ **When:** 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Jan. 10, Feb. 7, March 7 and April 4.

■ **Where:** Northampton Community College, 3835 Green Pond Road, Bethlehem Township.

■ **How much:** \$60 for six workshops.

■ **Info:** 484-893-5379 or www.vianet.org/sibshops

last survey in 2001.

Parents such as Susan Moran of Coplay say kids like her 15-year-old daughter Ann Marshall need the chance to say "I'm jealous," "I'm mad," or "What about me?"

Ann's sister has a chromosome disorder that causes many medical condi-

SIBSHOPS

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tions, and her schedule “dictates our life,” Moran says. She says Ann, like many siblings of special needs children, “doesn’t feel comfortable expressing normal sibling emotions.”

“She’s hesitant to express any sibling rivalry,” Moran says. “She feels she has to be more responsible and has to be a role model.”

The Sibshops program was designed by Donald Meyers, director of the national Sibling Support Project, in 1994. Today there are more than 200 Sibshops in eight countries.

“They function as normal kids but they have this big issue in their lives,” Nimtien says. “Their friends may be sympathetic but they don’t understand.”

Special needs children often have a busy schedule including therapy, special education and Special Olympics, Nimtien says, while their siblings may not get to do as many of their own things.

She says normal sibling issues take on a different significance.

“They ask, ‘My brother



BRANDON BARTHOLOMEW 9, of Palmer Township (center), and Anne Moran 15, of Coplay (right), play a group-knot game at VIA’s Sibshops workshop for siblings of children with special needs.

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teases me but am I allowed to tease him back because he has special needs?” she says. “It’s a fine line.”

Children also must deal with kids who may make fun of their special needs sibling.

“They want to stick up for their brother or sister,” Nimtien says. “Many are very brave, but some don’t say anything, because they don’t know what to say.”

At Sibshops, the children play interactive games that force them to work together and do activities that help them express emotions. During an activity called “Dear Aunt Blabby,” they

help an imaginary advice columnist answer questions that pertain to some of their concerns.

At a recent workshop, first-timer Sara, 11, eyed the group warily.

Her mother, Amy Edgar of Coopersburg, says Sara’s sister has a brain disorder that causes behavioral problems and language delay. Sara wasn’t sure if she wanted to come to Sibshops.

“Sara’s life is hard sometimes,” Edgar says. “I think she feels she’s the only one in the world, and that’s why this is a godsend. She needs it. She never talks about her

sister to anyone.”

Before long, Sara was joining in. Her face shone as she struggled with the other kids to escape from a human knot made by linking arms.

“It’s fun,” says 9-year-old Brandon. “It gets my mind off stuff.”

“I’m so impressed with this program,” says Brandon’s mother, Debbie Weaver of Palmer Township. “It’s so good for him to realize other kids are in his position.”

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