

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and the family: Thinking about brothers and sisters

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Sibling relationships are important. The emotional ties between siblings are often longer than any other relationships within the family.

Having a child with ASD in the family can complicate sibling relationships, but many brothers and sisters talk about being more tolerant, more compassionate and that they have found inspiration through their sibling/s with ASD¹. Some say that caring for a brother or sister with ASD has helped increase their own self-esteem, sense of empathy and interpersonal skills. But it's also normal for all sibling relationships to include jealousy, bickering, and squabbling from time to time.

Sometimes when a child has a sibling with ASD they may have their own trouble being social with peers and getting on with others². Teaching siblings the skills to interact and play with their brother or sister can be beneficial for the whole family. Warm, harmonious family relationships lead to the best outcomes for all family members.

What can help siblings?

Siblings view their relationship with their sibling with ASD more positively when:

- they perceive minimal parental favoritism
- they are not worried about the future of their brother/sister with ASD
- they are from a larger family
- they are older than their sibling with ASD
- there is a large age difference between siblings

Parents can't change birth order or age difference, but positive relationships between siblings are better when there is:

- Parent well-being
- Family stability
- Well developed coping abilities
- Understanding of their sibling's disability – open communication
- Positive attitudes from parents and peers towards their sibling with ASD
- Appropriate resources and support for the family
- Cultural and community attitudes – inclusive communities²



Talking to your other children about ASD

Siblings need to understand what is happening with their brother or sister who has ASD. Name the condition, describe how ASD affects their brother or sister and keep explanations simple and appropriate to the sibling's developmental level³.

Pre- and primary schoolers:

For this age group, explanations need to be kept simple. The key to successful communication about ASD with young children is to remember to adjust what you say to the child's age and level of understanding.

Preschool aged children are egocentric (I'm important, the world revolves around ME!), and they may be worried that they will "catch" ASD too or have thoughts that they have caused their brother or sister to have ASD in some way. Feelings of fear, anger and jealousy are common in young children and these feelings may be focussed on their sibling with ASD. For example, children may be concerned about unusual behaviors that may frighten or puzzle them. Young children can very quickly become frightened of an older sibling with ASD who has aggressive or unpredictable behaviour. These behaviours might be explained as being part of the way that a child with ASD communicates his/her feelings and needs because he/she can't talk, but young children also need a strong message from parents that they will be protected from

aggression and harm. Feelings of anger may arise when the younger child blames a brother or sister with ASD for limiting family outing opportunities, toys and play things have been broken or taken, or social experiences with friends disrupted. Children need to have their problems and grievances listened to and know that their feelings are important to parents.

Attention should be divided as evenly as possible and younger children need to know that they have their own special time with parents.

Teenagers:

Older siblings usually have different worries. (What will my friends think of him/her? How can I invite my friends home from school if my brother can't talk to them?). Some siblings get upset when other people are unkind or judgmental about their brother or sister with ASD and they are left feeling angry or have a sense of unfairness about the whole situation.

For the adolescent sibling, concerns about their brother or sister with ASD may shift from the immediate daily concerns to worries about the future and what long term care may be involved (Will I be looking after him/her when Mum and Dad are gone? Where will he live?). Some older adolescents and young adults also start to have thoughts about whether or not their own children might have ASD. They begin to ask questions about the inheritance of ASD.

If you do not know how to answer these questions it can be a good idea to consult a Genetic counselor who will be able to give accurate information to the whole family and also provide an opportunity for you to discuss these issues as a family.

At this stage, being able to listen to your other children's concerns is important even if you do not have all the answers they are seeking.

Sibling support groups

These can be helpful in exploring the issues for brothers and sisters of the child with ASD. Siblings should not be expected to take over parenting roles or responsibilities but the sibling support group can provide the opportunity for older siblings to learn some basic management skills.

Lots of issues can be discussed in a sibling support group. Here are some examples:

- understanding what ASD is and why the child behaves as he/she does
- feelings of jealousy because of the attention that the child with ASD receives
- anger about rejection by their peers
- worry about the "inheritance" of ASD.

References

1. Kaminsky, L., & Dewey, D. (2001). Siblings relationship of children with autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 31, 399-410.
2. Hastings, R. (2003). Brief Report: Behavioral Adjustment of Siblings of Children with Autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 33, 99-104.
3. Harris, S. L. (1994). *Siblings of children with autism: A guide for families*. Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House.

Useful Websites:

www.siblingsaustralian.org.au

www.acd.org.au/siblings

www.idonline.org (planning for future ideas)

www.autism.org.sibling/sibneeds.html
(developmental level expectations)

www.yourshout.org.au (for adolescents with a brother or sister with autism)

www.autism.ca/siblings.pdf (information sheet on issues and strategies)

www.siblingofautism.com/

www.girlpower.gov/girlarea/bodywise/disability/matters/sibs.htm