

Supporting siblings

Siblings have a unique relationship, and a diagnosis of autism does not change that. Autism can be hard to explain to children or young adults, there is a lot of complex information to understand. However, it is important to explain their sibling's needs. This will help them understand their sibling more and resolve any questions or hesitation they might have towards their sibling.

Parent interactions

Create a safe space where you can talk to the sibling without any interruptions and where you can give them your full attention. Explain what autism is in language they can understand and interpret. Allow for open conversation to happen by answering questions they may have honestly. Be open with them about some of the differences they may see; don't hide things from the non-autistic siblings. Having this conversation is not a one-time thing; actively create opportunities for conversation.



It is normal for the sibling to have some negative feelings. Here are some of the common feelings:

- Not knowing how to connect with their autistic sibling
- Lack of attention from and alone time with parents
- Concerns about privacy
- Stress from increased responsibility
- Being the target of aggressive behaviour
- Embarrassment
- Worrying about their parents or the future¹

The sibling may feel that they are treated differently than their brother or sister. Explain to them it is only because their brother and sister might need more help to understand the world, but how it is important that we also see the world as they do. Show them ways in which they can support their sibling as well. Acknowledge their negative feelings and work on solutions.

It is also important to take time to listen to the non-autistic sibling regarding the autistic sibling, they often have a unique insight. You may find that your autistic child is more sociable and vocal with their sibling.

Highlight the positives!

Encourage them to see that autistic people have many skills, and talk together about their sibling's strengths. Make it clear to your non-autistic child that they have a choice in their involvement in caring for their sibling (if they should need any care).

Use visual planners to show the sibling when as a parent you can have special time together that is just for them.

Explain what autism is in language they can understand and interpret

Sibling to sibling interactions

Siblings have a special bond, and will find ways to be creative and play together. Sometimes, sibling interactions occur naturally, other times you may have to encourage them to happen. Encourage play with games that they both like. You may have to play with them at first but make sure to fade yourself out as soon as you can. Teach the non-autistic sibling how to interact and speak to the autistic sibling. Give social praise when you witness positive interactions.

Siblings can find ways to be creative and play well together.

Siblings of autistic children or young adults often learn positive life lessons; they develop maturity and have a wider understanding of individual needs. Encourage the non-autistic sibling to have their own interests that are just for them such as afterschool clubs and sports.

There are also support groups for siblings with autistic children, such as 'SIBS' www.sibs.org.uk.



References

1. Marcus Autism Center. (n.d.). Promoting Positive Sibling Relationships. [online] Available at: <https://www.marcus.org/autism-resources/autism-tips-and-resources/promoting-positive-sibling-relationships#:~:text=Growing%20up%20with%20a%20sibling>.