A parents guide to supporting siblings whose brothers or sisters have autism

Author: Assistant Psychologist at Options Barton - Imogen Wilson, and the Clinical Team at Options Barton

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Introduction

Having a family member with autism can place difficult demands on siblings and on the family as a whole. Understandably, in order to meet the needs of a family member with a disability this often means that there is less time for parents to spend with their other children. Some of the stressful issues that siblings may have difficulty experiencing include:

- Dealing with challenging behaviours
- Being the target of aggressive behaviours
- Feeling that their sibling gets away with things
- Not feeling included
- Lack of attention; or jealousy over the amount of time parents spend with the other sibling
- Being a young carer

Despite these stressful issues, most siblings cope well, and growing up with a brother or sister with autism can add positive experiences and a unique bond to the relationship. Recent studies have also indicated that siblings may in fact benefit from growing up with a sibling with a disability (Bellin & Rice, 2009; McHale & Gamble, 1989), showing an increase in qualities such as:

- Optimistic self-esteem
- Assertiveness
- Empathy
- Affection
- Compassion and the desire to protect

In this issue we offer advice and suggestions about how siblings and families who look after children and young people with autism, can be supported through the challenges that are presented to them in everyday life.

We have also included some useful resources at the bottom of this help sheet to help offer further advice to parents in their role of supporting siblings.

Sharing attention

Siblings of individuals with autism may feel left out if there is more attention from their parents being directed towards their brother or sister. It is important for parents to find regular, separate time for other children in the family. Putting the needs of the sibling first from time to time, and letting the sibling choose an activity they would like to do to prevent jealously and avoid feeling left out or ignored.

Inclusion

It is important to include siblings in their brother or sister's care to help them to feel reassured that they are just as important and loved.

- It might be beneficial for siblings to be included in meetings, hospital visits etc, to find out information and learn more.
- Parents can ask their child for their input and idea's so that they feel like their opinion is valued.

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Explaining autism

Parents may find it useful to engage in open conversations with their children to help them to understand their sibling's conditions better.

- Autism means that your brother or sister learns or acts differently than you
- Children are born with autism
- Children with autism might show their feelings in a different way
- You can't "catch" autism like a cold or flu
- Autism is nobody's fault

Explaining autism can help siblings to gain a better understanding about why things might be different for their brother or sister, and the reasons why they might need more help from their parents.

Explaining to siblings about their brother or sister's condition may also help improve sibling relationships by enabling them to develop a better sense of what their needs are or why they might behave in a certain way.

Building relationships with siblings

Due to the nature of autism it can be difficult for siblings to form a relationship with their brother or sister because of barriers such as communication, displaying affection and finding common interests.

To encourage positive relationships between siblings, simple skills can be taught to help siblings to engage with their brother or sister, play together well and have a happy relationship together. These skills include:

- Making sure they have their siblings attention
- Giving simple instructions
- Praising good play

It can also be helpful to facilitate opportunities to play together and find common interests.

Time Alone

For many siblings of children with autism, finding time alone can be difficult. Time alone for siblings allows for:

- Developing hobbies and interests outside the family
- Developing independence and identifying roles outside the family if they are a young carer
- Their own needs to be met first, rather than second
- Accessing activities that might usually be difficult to take part in
- Preventing feelings of guilt and a chance to make sense and manage feelings outside the family environment.

Support groups

Siblings may benefit from talking to a friend or someone from outside the home environment. Being in touch with other siblings provides opportunity for sharing experiences and can be comforting to know that they are not alone.
The National Autistic Society have an Autism helpline to find your local support group: 0808 800 4104. There is also a list of qualified counsellors and advisers that are able to provide support for siblings.

There are also various online forums, websites, and social media pages available for siblings to safely express themselves and talk with others going through similar experiences.

Resources

Books: What about me? The Autism Survival Guide (Koutsis, Clercq & Galbraith, 2006)

Facebook Blog: @diaryaboutharry. Sibling of a brother with autism blogging about her experiences.

Websites: 'Over the wall' – Run free activity camps for children with disabilities, siblings and their families. **www.otw.org.uk**

'Sibs' - An organisation dedicated to helping the siblings of individuals with special needs, including autism. **www.youngsibs.org.uk**

'Anna Kennedy Online' - A charity offering lots of information and advice for parents and carers of children on the autistic spectrum. Anna Kennedy is the mother of two children one with autism and the other with Asperger syndrome. **www.annakennedyonline.com**

Conclusion

Although growing up with a sibling with additional needs can be challenging and place stressful demands on the family, it can equally influence siblings and families positively. Having a brother or sister with autism can bring something special to the life of a sibling and can impact the bond and effect each sibling differently.

Having support available to siblings can enhance the experience of growing up with a brother or sister with autism and make everyday challenges more manageable to deal with.

Spread the word...

Our help sheets are produced monthly and written by our in-house clinical team. If you found this information useful please feel free to distribute this help sheet to your own contacts parents, carers, social workers, or anyone who you feel may benefit from them.

If you would like any further information please contact us:
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If you need help looking for services for an individual with an autism spectrum condition, we can help. Click below for the Autism Placement Support Service.