

INFORMATION SHEET

SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

with

INDIVIDUALS ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

Overview

Relationships with our sisters and brothers, also known as our siblings, can be an important part of how we grow as individuals. Sisters and brothers help us learn how to get along with others, how others feel, and how to deal with problems and difficult situations. If we are able to spend time with our siblings and develop positive relationships as children, they can be an important source of emotional support throughout our lifetime, especially in times of stress.

Brothers and sisters are uniquely connected, but can be quite different in their personalities and interests. Relationships between siblings will grow and change through the years. Sisters and brothers may be great play partners as children; however, they may grow apart as they enter the teen years. During the teen years, it's natural for siblings to develop new relationships outside the family and spend more time with others who share their interests and ideas. As adults, siblings may drift apart as they become busy with job responsibilities, raising families and get involved in other interests. Later in life, as parents, relatives, and friends get older and begin to pass on due to old age, siblings can be a very important source of support.

So far, there have not been many studies done to help us understand how relationships may be different between brothers and sisters when one has a diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). We do know that our age, personality, how we handle our emotions and solve problems will have an affect on our relationship with a sibling with an ASD. How well we understand the disability, its severity and effect on our sibling throughout his/her lifetime is important to consider. Delays in language or behaviors that are difficult to tolerate may make it very challenging to develop a close relationship with a sibling with an ASD. Other factors that may affect this special bond between siblings might include the mental and physical health of the parents, relatives, and friends that surround brothers and sisters.

To help children develop a closer, stronger relationship with their brother or sister with an ASD, there are some things that parents and caregivers can do:

- **Share information** about the disability with siblings. Books, videos or DVDs are available that may be helpful. The information needs to be at the child's level of understanding and will change over time as he/she develops. This will help siblings to better understand the special needs of their brother or sister.

- **Teach siblings skills** to help improve the amount and quality of time spent together.

- First, consider the skills and interests of the child with ASD. Help siblings see what their brother or sister can do instead of what they can't, and what they like instead of what they don't. This will help siblings learn ways to get their brother or sister's attention.

- Show siblings how to organize a game or activity to reduce frustration. For example, they may need to use shorter sentences, pictures, or give the sibling with an ASD more time to understand or complete the activity. Siblings may need to learn to have more patience, to wait longer, to show their sister or brother how to do things, to let them have more turns to practice, or to be flexible with rules.

- **Reward the efforts** of siblings for their interactions and patience with their brother or sister with an ASD with praise, encouragement, and special time together.

- Provide time for siblings to **talk about their feelings** about their brother or sister with an ASD, especially if there are any feelings such as embarrassment or resentment.

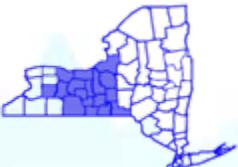
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- Teach siblings healthy ways to solve problems and handle challenges by showing them how you do it; for example, taking a break from the situation or some deep breaths.
- **Help children understand their role as a sibling** of someone who has an ASD. Siblings may be able to provide emotional support by encouraging and praising the child with an ASD when they get frustrated, or helping them to learn social skills so they can develop friendships. Be cautious of siblings who take on too much responsibility for their brother or sister with ASD, which may interfere in their own development. As siblings get older they may be involved with the whole family in planning financial and future residential goals.
- Provide opportunities for the sibling to **engage in favorite activities** with one or both parents **without the sibling with ASD** on some sort of regular basis.

○ Raising a child with an ASD can be stressful for the whole family, since much of the family's attention is focused on the care and well being of that child. Therefore, it is important to provide chances for the sibling to have some special time alone with parents in order to help them to lead healthy, happy lives.

Some siblings may have a difficult time adjusting to their brother or sister's ASD, particularly during the teen years. Parents and caregivers should watch for adjustment difficulties. If changes in mood, emotion, or behavior are seen, parents should call their child's doctor to find out about help available for their child.

Find Out More

To find out more about sibling relationships, supports, opportunities, and related information, visit our website or give us a call and ask to speak to our Information and Referral Specialist:

www.urmc.edu/childrens-hospital/autism local: 585.273.1613 or toll-free: 1.888.806.9526

Resources

Books:

Harris, S.L & Glasberg, B.A. (2003). *Siblings of Children with Autism: A Guide for Families, 2nd Edition*. Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House, Inc.

Meyer, D. (2005). *The Sibling Slam Book: What It's Really Like To Have A Brother Or Sister With Special Needs*. Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House, Inc.

Websites:

Autism Society of America: "Sibling Issues"

http://www.autism-society.org/site/PageServer?pagename=life_fam_sibling

Autism Society of America: "Resources" Download materials on siblings and many other related issues
http://www.autism-society.org/site/PageServer?pagename=shop_downloads

Sibling Support Networks:

Information on the Sibling Support Project:

<http://www.siblingsupport.org/about/about-the-sibling-support-project>

Information about "Sibshops":

http://www.siblingsupport.org/sibshops/index_html

Online "blog" for Siblings:

<http://sibleadership.blogspot.com/>