

Supporting Siblings

Siblings face a unique set of differences as they grow up with an autistic brother or sister. Like any sibling relationships there may be good days and bad. It is important to take some time though to consider the needs of siblings, which is why we have put together this brief information sheet.

Challenges siblings face include:

- Embarrassment around peers
- Jealousy: it may be that your time as a parent is mostly directed towards the autistic member(s) of your family. This may cause feelings of jealousy and guilt on the part of the parent.
- Frustration over different ways of communicating, the sibling may be trying really hard to understand and connect with their brother or sister.
- Being a target for their autistic siblings' behaviours or aggression
- Concern about their future roles as carers for their sibling

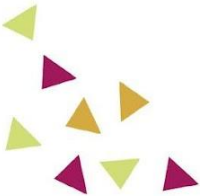
Some ways in which you can support siblings are:

- Cultivate an environment of difference not deficit.
- Provide opportunities for siblings to meet other siblings in a similar position: this could be attending support groups or youth clubs, in some areas there are specific sibling groups.
- Give siblings one-to-one time with yourself. While we appreciate this can be difficult in a busy life, scheduling individual time with the sibling can help. This does not always have to be big trips out, but something as little as 10 minutes of alone time at bedtime, reading a story together can be just as valuable.
- Use tools like family contracts which can help outline boundaries within the family home. Make use of door signs which can be used to show when people would prefer to be alone.
- Support your family in their understanding of autism: read books about autism and create an environment where they feel comfortable to ask questions about autism and ensure you answer these questions honestly.

If you don't know the answers to some questions, be honest about this but provide reassurance that you will try to find an answer. Siblings need communication from you that is open, developmentally appropriate, and ongoing.

If your family has more of an understanding of autism it can help prevent negative views about their autistic sibling because they will have a greater insight into why they may be doing certain things.

Equipping your family with confidence through knowledge will also help them if they ever feel they need to explain their sibling's behaviours to others.

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- Encourage sharing emotions and to talk about their feelings: validate any feelings or experiences, create an open line for communication, and create opportunities for them to share these feelings. Provide strategies on how to deal and cope with different emotions to help build their own self-regulation.
 - Foster a good relationship between your sibling and their autistic brother/sister: do some fun things together.
 - Where possible give siblings' choices on their involvement: a lot of responsibility can unknowingly be placed on siblings.
 - Create a safe space for siblings: this could be somewhere that they can keep important toys or items that they would like to be kept separate. This could be in a room that the sibling can use as a safe retreat from their autistic sibling.
 - If possible, facilitate opportunities for siblings to have some respite / time away: for example, visiting friends or staying with grandparents.
 - Prepare siblings for possible reactions from others towards their autistic sibling: help prepare them on what to do in situations where they may face judgement or embarrassment.