

ASD & Siblings

Addressing the Needs of Neurotypical
Siblings of Children with Autism Spectrum
Disorders: A Guide For Parents



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About this Toolkit

For parents, taking care of a child with special needs can present some difficult challenges. Yet, being a sibling of a child with special needs has its own challenges, which can sometimes go overlooked. Most parents understand that having a sibling with autism can be overwhelming at times for their neurotypical (NT) child, but the immediate nature of the needs of their child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) may get in the way of helping their NT child cope. This can sometimes lead parents to experience feelings of guilt and failure. This guide was created by siblings as a way to help parents address the needs of neurotypical siblings of children with autism.



Explaining Autism

Educating your neurotypical child about ASD can help them gain a better understanding of their sibling's needs and behaviors. If your neurotypical child is young, it may be important to explain that autism can sometimes make certain things hard for their brother or sister, and that they need help and support from everyone in the family. As your child ages, you will be able to explain ASD in more detail. If meltdowns are an issue, be sure to mention that your child with ASD may have meltdowns because they're feeling overwhelmed or frustrated. If your child with ASD is nonverbal, help your NT child to understand that behaviors can be a nonverbal form of communication. Be sure to give your child the opportunity to bring up any specific concerns or questions they may have.

TIP

"How do I explain autism to a sibling?" is an insightful article by Maureen Bennie that provides tips on discussing ASD in three stages, depending on the sibling's age. To view the article, visit autismawarenesscentre.com.

Recognizing Feelings

In addition to the love and pride a sibling often feels, it's perfectly natural for siblings to experience other feelings as well. It's important to keep an ongoing, open dialogue with your child so you can recognize these feelings and help them understand what they are experiencing, as well as how best to cope. According to siblings, these feelings can include:

Resentment: The neurotypical child may feel resentful toward their sibling, their parents, and even toward strangers. They may resent their sibling for having loud or inappropriate behaviors, or for preventing their family from living a "normal" life. They may be resentful that they cannot have friends over, sleepovers, or go on family vacations. They may feel resentful towards their parents for expecting them to watch their sibling, or for seemingly spending more time with their sibling. They may resent having to explain their sibling's behaviors to peers, or the possibility of someday having to take on the responsibility of guardianship and overseeing the care of their sibling with autism when they are older.

Guilt: Resentment can lead to guilt. They may feel guilty that they have negative feelings toward their sibling, or even harbor feelings of guilt that they are neurotypical and their sibling is not. Other times, they may feel guilty for wishing their parents spent more time focused on them instead of their sibling. It's also been said that neurotypical children may feel uncomfortable talking about their struggles because they don't want to give their parents additional worry.

Embarrassment: Siblings may experience feelings of embarrassment at times when their sibling with autism engages in difficult behavior in a public setting, or when they have friends over. They may be embarrassed when their sibling is loud, or draws negative attention through their behavior.



Anxiety: Siblings may be anxious that their brother or sister's behaviors might draw attention from strangers. They may experience anxiety relating to their perceived need to be perfect in their parents' eyes in an attempt to reduce their parents' level of stress.

Concern: Siblings may find themselves in a state of worry about the safety of their brother or sister with autism. They may worry that their sibling will not progress or that they are suffering emotionally and physically. They may also worry about their parents' wellbeing, as many children are intuitively aware of their parents' stress levels as they try to care and advocate for their children's needs.

Sadness/Despair: Your child may feel like nobody understands what they are experiencing growing up with a sibling with special needs. They may feel sad that their parents always seem busy attending appointments, talking on the phone with doctors, or researching treatments for their child with special needs. They may also feel sad that their sibling is struggling to progress, or that they may never have a "normal" relationship with their sibling.

Fear: They may fear their sibling due to aggressive or unpredictable behaviors, or be unsure of how to play with their sibling in a way that's fun, but not overly stimulating. They may fear the reactions of strangers, and the possibility of their sibling or themselves being bullied.

Addressing Concerns

Be sure to acknowledge and validate your child's feelings, and make sure they understand that it is perfectly normal to have such feelings and concerns. Let them know they are not alone, millions of other kids are going through the same situation. In fact, reiterate how proud you are of them for sharing their feelings.

If you are concerned that your neurotypical child sometimes fears your child with autism, speak to them about their fears. Reassure them that you will keep them safe. Make a plan if your child with autism experiences meltdowns, such as designating a safe place for your neurotypical child if needed.

Discuss how strangers may react to their sibling, and how to react to strangers. If they stare, mock, or bully, tell your child how you think they should react. Encourage them to educate others if possible. If they are willing, empower them to be an advocate for compassion and understanding toward not only their brother or sister, but for all people with disabilities.

Above all, make sure they know that the opinions of bullies are meaningless, ignorant, and should be ignored. True friends will always be kind and understanding.



If your child feels like they are alone, you may be able to ask their school to share your information with other families that have a child with special needs and neurotypical siblings. Your child may be able to connect with others who are experiencing the same things as them. They may feel more comfortable discussing their feelings with a peer their age.

If it applies, talk to your child about perfectionism. They may feel like they need to be perfect in order to “make up” for their sibling with special needs. Explain that they do not need to be perfect, they just need to be themselves and they are loved beyond measure.

If your child is hesitant to tell you how they're feeling, discuss with them healthy ways of dealing with emotions through activities like exercise, singing, dancing, art, sports, and talking to trusted friends and adults. Reassure them that you are always there to listen and will never judge them.



Research indicates that the majority of neurotypical kids cope well with their experience of having a sibling with ASD. However, that doesn't mean that they do not encounter particular difficulties. While having a sibling on the spectrum is a challenge to the siblings, it is certainly not an insurmountable obstacle. Talk to your physician if you see any of these warning signs in your neurotypical children as they try to cope with a sibling on the autism spectrum:

- withdrawal (e.g., hibernating in their bedroom)
- talk of hurting themselves
- poor self-esteem
- poor concentration
- physical symptoms (e.g., headaches or stomachaches)
- loss of interest in activities
- hopelessness
- frequent crying or worrying
- difficulty separating from parents
- changes in eating or sleeping (e.g., too much or too little)

From the article, *Helping Your “Neurotypical” Children Cope with a Sibling on the Autism Spectrum*, myaspergerschild.com

Offering Support

Take Time to Connect

Time to bond and engage with your neurotypical child can be difficult to come by, but what's most important is to spend quality time together, when your attention can be focused only on them. If outings alone aren't possible, try to dedicate some time to them whenever you can, even if it's just a few minutes of reading together at bedtime or playing a game. Do something together that the child enjoys, like video games, makeovers, or sharing a favorite meal.

Give Guidance

Younger children who want to play with their sibling with autism may need guidance. Encourage fun play time for both siblings. Demonstrate play that will not be overstimulating for your child with autism. Activities like Play-Doh, train sets, Legos, coloring/drawing, video games, blowing bubbles, or playing outside on a trampoline or swing set can be fun activities for all kids. Encourage good behaviors like sharing and taking turns.

Offer Sources of Support

If you think it would benefit your child, talk to them about sibling support groups or counseling. If possible, allow them to occasionally have time away from home to enjoy a sleepover with a friend, or a stay at a family member's house for the weekend.

Always Remember

Sometimes parents worry that they do not spend enough time with their neurotypical child in relation to the time they spend with their child with special needs. This often leads us as parents to feelings of guilt. But the reality is, we can only do our best – and that is enough.



Suggested Reading

My Brother Charlie by Holly Robinson Peete & Ryan Elizabeth Peete

What About Me? A Book By and For An Autism Sibling by Brennan & Mandy Farmer

The Autism Acceptance Book: Being a Friend to Someone With Autism by Ellen Sabin

A Friend Like Simon by Kate Gaynot