

HELP SHEET

HELP AT A GLANCE

Supporting Siblings of Children with ASD

Siblings of children with ASD are an important group to consider for support. For many parents, exploring resources for siblings may not be a priority, considering the many intervention services that they are already trying to organize for their child on the spectrum. Generally, the literature has shown that the outcomes for siblings of an individual with ASD are variable, and it is dependent on several factors including, socio-economic status, family size, or the severity of ASD (Meadan, Stoner & Angell, 2010).

Siblings of children with ASD may experience challenges such as:

- Confusion about the ASD diagnosis and their sibling's differences.
- Resentment because attention feels unequally distributed by their parents.
- Loneliness when family time is taken up with intervention and therapy appointments for the child with ASD.
- Difficulty creating a sibling bond or relationship due to developmental differences.
- Feeling overwhelmed at times with additional responsibilities due to the needs of their sibling with ASD.

- Mixed emotions; at times feeling supportive and protective of their sibling and at other times feeling embarrassed or sad.

Siblings of children with ASD may experience positive outcomes such as:

- Enhanced sense of empathy
- Increased knowledge of differences
- Problem-solving skills learned through supporting their sibling with behavior or social challenges experienced at home or in the community.
- Attainment of skills which can be assets for their future such as, alternative communication methods, first aid, and mentorship.

Research suggests that siblings of an individual with Autism should be included in family interventions. Since the sibling relationship generally extends over the lifespan, for an individual with ASD their sibling may play an integral role in their life. Enhancing support strategies for this sibling population is recommended (Petalas, Hastings, Nash, Dowey & Reilly, 2009).

Strategies to support siblings:

- Encourage open communication, welcome questions from your child about their sibling with ASD.
- Find opportunities for 1:1 parent time. Spending this protected time together may help your child feel special and acknowledged.
- Explore activities that your child with ASD and their sibling would enjoy attending or doing together.
- Seek out peer connections, such as finding a local ASD sibling support group in which your child can participate. Another option is engaging with other families who have a child on the spectrum with a sibling around the same age to encourage a supportive connection.

Additional considerations for supporting siblings who are in their late adolescent years:

- Discussion about the future and what their caregiving role may be for their sibling.
- If they show interest in having increased involvement, offer the opportunity to join team meetings and medical appointments to learn more about the needs and supports required for their sibling with ASD.

Resources:

Guides and Workbooks

- Autism Speaks. (2018). **A Sibling's Guide to Autism: An Autism Speaks Family Support Tool Kit [PDF file]**. Retrieved from <https://www.autismspeaks.org/sites/default/files/2018-08/Siblings%20Guide%20to%20Autism.pdf>
- The Autism Program at Boston Medical Center. (n.d.). **Sibling Resource Packet [PDF file]**. Retrieved from https://www.bmc.org/sites/default/files/Patient_Care/Specialty_Care/Pediatrics%20-%20Autism/Sibling-Resource-Packet.pdf
- The Organization for Autism Research (OAR) '**Sibling Support Initiative**' has produced helpful resources for young children, teenagers and parents to support and guide the sibling experience <https://researchautism.org/how-we-help/families/sibling-support/>

Community Supports

- **The MCFD Autism Funding** (6-18 years old) allows family counselling/therapy as an eligible expense. Some service providers and organizations provide sibling groups facilitated by a therapist that could be covered. Inquire with the Autism Funding team **1- 877-777-3530 (toll free)**, if you are unsure about the eligibility of a service.
- **The Sibling Support Project** is a resource for siblings of individuals with special needs, which includes online forums, education, and more <https://www.siblingsupport.org/>
- **Canuck Autism Network Family Events** are available for the whole family to enjoy various activities together and could provide an opportunity for siblings to make connections with others

<https://www.canucksautism.ca/programs/family-events/?ages=family>

References:

Meadan, H., Stoner, J., & Angell, M. (2010). Review of Literature Related to the Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Adjustment of Siblings of Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Journal of Developmental & Physical Disabilities*, 22(1), 83–100.

Petalas, M. A., Hastings, R. P., Nash, S., Dowey, A., & Reilly, D. (2009). "I Like That He Always Shows Who He Is": The perceptions and experiences of siblings with a brother with autism spectrum disorder. *International Journal of Disability, Development & Education*, 56(4), 381–399.