



Whatever Happens to the Brothers and Sisters of Children with Autism? The Good News...

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We stand at the brink of a revolutionary concept-

that those with mental or physical challenges have a capacity for growth and abilities that may transform the current view of them as liabilities into the increasingly accepted attitude that they may indeed become assets to society. All well and good.


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But what about their brothers and sisters?




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Overview

- ♦ The "forgotten" sibling
- ♦ The "well child"
 - Needs no special attention
 - Physically and mentally capable to perform "normal life tasks"
- ♦ Normal sibling relationships
- ♦ Sibling relationships in a family with a child with autism

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Vocabulary


"Brothers and sisters of children with disabilities stand with one foot in the world of normal classmates and the other in their exceptional family."

#Featherstone, Helen *A Difference in the Family: Life with a Disabled Child*, Basic Books, Inc. New York, 1972, p.146.

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Siblings Across a Lifetime




- ♦ Although we choose our friendships, our brothers and sisters are imposed on us, and even if we are emotionally distanced from them, they remain part of fabric of our lives.
- ♦ It is helpful to understand that there are a variety of styles of sibling relationships which are normal.

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Sibling Bond

- **Access** - factor that creates emotional bond between children
 - High access (strong sibling bond)-most likely to occur when children are close in age, of same gender, have shared many activities
 - Low access (subsequent weaker bond)- widely separated in age, have spent little time together, and are of different gender



A strong bond does not mean a happy bond.

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Early Childhood

- A good relationship at age 5 will be different at age 15
- Nevertheless, foundation for connection is laid down in early childhood




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Reaction of older child to birth

- You can no longer devote all your energies to older child
- "This is my new wife."
- Role of parents-crucial in this adjustment



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Not just one but two...



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3 to 4 years old : One of most important transitions in interactions of brothers and sisters happens




- By this age, children have skills that make them increasingly desirable companions for childhood play
- Skills include complex language, motor abilities, and social repertoire that make them attractive playmates for their older brother or sister

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3-4 years old




- Young children who are closer in age are likely to experience more quarrels and tension than are children 4 or more years apart
- However, they are more likely to form a close personal bond

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 Overall quality of family life has important impact on how siblings get along with each other

- Parents who have a good marriage and effectively resolve difference between themselves are more likely to have children who can do the same.



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 Similarly, parents who are effective caretakers for their children are likely to have children who relate well to one another.

- Findings highlight how important for parents to maintain healthy marriage, not only for themselves, but for their children as well.




© Jenkins, J. 1993. Sibling relationships in delinquency: parent, deviant behavior and protective effects. In F. Buell & J. Buell (Eds.), Children's sibling relationships: Developmental and clinical issues (pp. 125-138). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum Press.

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 **MIDDLE CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE**

- 9-12 years: interactions between children become more equal and balanced
- By 12 years old: Shift in dominance-younger child achieving more equal footing with older one




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 **Parents play central support role until 6th-7th grade**

- After that age, family members decline in importance, as friends, romantic relationships grow in meaning




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 **ADULTHOOD**

Sibling relationships more important today than 100 years ago


- Increasingly smaller family sizes
- Longer life spans
- Greater probability of divorce




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 **ADULTHOOD- Our brothers and sisters remain our sole link with our past**

Friendships may be lost in moves, marriages dissolve and parents die, but sibling relationship may endure




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What happens to normal course of development when one of siblings has autism and is unable to respond in usual fashion to joy, play, and rough and tumble of childhood?




- Children of any age may begin to doubt self-worth and importance when parents seem preoccupied with sibling with autism
- Of course, these kinds of frustration are not unique to just a family with autism
- Important to recognize difference between normal frustration and special impact of sibling



Reassurance:

- Most siblings learn to handle experience, show no major ill effects
- Nevertheless, special demands are made of child
- If you understand these burdens, you may be able to ease them.

©Morris, K.R., Smith, T., & Schumann, S.L. (1984). Sibling relationships of children with autistic, mentally retarded, and nondisabled brothers and sisters. *Journal of Abnormal and Developmental Psychology*, 13, 399-411.



Older Sisters/Younger Brothers


- Early research: birth order (first born, middle, last)
- Older sisters and younger brothers were **SOMETIMES** found to be at greater risk for emotional problems than other children.

©Gilligan, M., & Darling, R.D. (1988). *Gender studies: special children: A systems approach to childhood disability*. New York: Guilford Press.




More recently...

Between ages of 6-15: mostly positive things to say about bother or sister




Siblings gave varied responses

Negative group- <ul style="list-style-type: none"> worried about future of brother/sister believed parents favor that child 	Positive group- <ul style="list-style-type: none"> viewed both parents and peers as responding positively to child's disability had a good factual understanding of disability, tended to have more positive relationship with sibling.
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Comparing siblings of autism Down syndrome normally developing brothers / sisters

- Parents of children with autism: more concerns about internalizing and externalizing problems
- Internalizing: depression, anxiety
- Externalizing: Aggression, defiance, running away




Comparing groups


- More frequent problems in children with autism: did not differ from other 2 groups in self-esteem
- Siblings of children with autism: did not differ from other 2 groups in self-esteem

© Thompson, Gilliom, & Morgan, 1997



Special Demands Need for information




Young children



- May be confused when they hear autism- can I "catch it?"
- May be afraid to ask questions



- May learn to conceal feelings, deny emotions to themselves, develop an inconsistency between feelings and actions
- Ashamed of own feelings of anger, jealousy, or resentment



Lack of understanding..

- May not have a clear sense of himself as a unique person, not as an extension of his sibling
- Can diminish child's feeling of being a unique and separate person, entitled to lead a separate life
- May overly identify with sibling and feel responsible for child's disability



What to do...

- ♦ Combating ignorance and educating others is an important skill for sibling
- ♦ Ignorance about autism can breed fear, can damage relationship with sibling
- ♦ Child's age is an important factor

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In your eagerness to inform...

1. Don't make mistake of imposing too much info at one time
2. Brief answers
3. Often child will signal he is satisfied by changing subject:
RESPECT THAT

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Give them words to say to their friends...

"You think he's a dummy because you don't know him. Kirke has autism and so he can't talk well. He goes to school where he's learning lots of things. He can speak Spanish and he remembers words to songs the first time he hears them."



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IMPACT OF DEVELOPMENT ON CHILD'S UNDERSTANDING OF AUTISM

For the young child:



- ♦ EXPLANATIONS may be of little use, but concrete interventions may help
- ♦ Remember that fear, anger and jealousy are normal feelings of early childhood

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When child with autism begins to tantrum...

- ♦ Calmly ask sibling to leave the room

"Jacob is having trouble controlling himself right now. I need to work with him. It will help me a lot if you will go into the living room."



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MIDDLE CHILDHOOD: 9-12 years old



- ♦ Can understand there is problem of the brain, not contagious
- ♦ Watch for receptive moments
- ♦ Challenger baseball experience

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Brain works differently


A photograph of a white Apple iMac G4 computer monitor and its associated tower unit, both displaying a blue screen with a white Apple logo.

Important that child's concern
not keep her too closely tied to
home:

A photograph of a group of five people (three men and two women) standing outdoors in front of a white car and some trees.


This maturing
understanding of
autism has
potential to collide
with their dawning
interest in a wider
social experience

In middle childhood-become
increasingly aware their parents
are "flawed"

A cartoon drawing of a young girl with glasses, wearing a dress, and holding her head with one hand.

As a result, may
begin to be critical
of their parents
for many things,
including how
they are dealing
with child with
autism

Most of
emotional
needs will be
met by friends


A photograph of a group of people sitting outdoors on a grassy area, possibly at a park or school event.

It is not essential that children see parents as
all-knowing
To the contrary, need a realistic sense of
their parents as people who are able to cope
with problem in spite of difficulties
This provides him with realistic model rather
than superhero

ADOLESCENCE


- IT is not until now that siblings
become intellectually capable of
understanding autism as fully as
does an adult
- Factual understanding and emotional
acceptance are different processes.

A photograph of a young man in a wheelchair talking to an older man who is sitting on a folding chair.



Will need parent's support in accepting full impact of his sibling's disability

What is challenging is helping teenager understand what autism means for self, her family, and her sibling




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Helping in organizations



*Best Buddies
Special Olympics
ARC
Autism Society*

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Guy helping Kirk during ARC fishing tournament, 2006

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ADULTHOOD




Must be fully informed about behavior management, community resources, medical needs of sibling

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balancing act

Promoting a Healthy Family Life:

- Humor and coping
- Limiting childcare responsibilities
- Being alone with parents
- Issues of time and space
- Sincerely acknowledging sibling's accomplishments
- Potentially embarrassing situations
- Treating siblings equally (fairly?)



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In our home, everyone gets what they need in order to grow and develop.

Fair IS NOT Equal
and 
Equal IS NOT Fair.

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