Family Ties: Fostering Sibling Relationships with Children on the Spectrum

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Many children with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) experience social and emotional deficits that keep them from meaningfully interacting with their families and peers. Children with autism, by nature of their disability, have self-indulgent interests that can not only prevent them from developing relationships, but also expose them to ridicule if their classmates, peers, or siblings do not have an understanding of ASDs. I have found that these problems are most pronounced with siblings, since by living in the household they experience the full impact that the disability has on the family. Although there have been quite a few studies concerning the prevalence of autism among siblings, there have been limited studies regarding the extent to which the disability affects the sibling relationship (Buckland, 2014).

Social Interactions

Children who fall on the spectrum typically have restrictive social interactions. They may prefer to be isolated or, when they do involve themselves in an activity or conversation, they may dominate the entire exchange with their own topics of interest. These children are more inclined to seek adult interaction than to engage with others their own age. Typically, children with ASD do not associate with any particular groups, preferring to follow their own interests rather than to be member of a team. In the family dynamic, they are often withdrawn from their siblings, causing tension in the relationship. While siblings may be sympathetic, there may still be some element of resentment or feelings of isolation that may get even stronger as they grow older.

Emotionality

The inability to connect emotionally is another outcome that may affect children on the spectrum. Some lack empathy and have no direct or apparent response to basic emotions like pain, happiness, sadness, or grief. On one end of the spectrum, the child could refrain from intimacy, rejecting bonding moments such as hugging or saying, "I love you." At the opposite end of the spectrum the child may be overly emotional, seeking intimacy often or being easily brought to tears over the slightest impasse.
Sibling Relationships

For many children with autism, building relationships with siblings may require using activities that are specifically designed to encourage bonding. Siblings may face a range of emotions stemming from their interactions with a brother or sister with a disability. Intentionally or not, parents are more prone to devote more attention to a child with a disability (Roland, 2012). Many siblings resent this. Likewise, many brothers and sisters also resent it when the family's daily routine is disrupted by doctor’s or therapy appointments, or when even simple daily activities like getting dressed, leaving the house, or entering the school building become problematic. Owing to the time and attention devoted to the child with ASD, the nondisabled sibling is sometimes referred to as the “invisible child” (Cain, 2012) because much of what he or she does goes unnoticed by parents who are consumed with caring for their brother or sister with special needs. While nondisabled siblings may know that their parents love them, they may nonetheless feel isolated from the family unit. They may also resent being forced to gain a sense of independence as a means of survival. Hence, while these children may feel an immense amount of love for their disabled siblings, the time they spend with them is more related to caregiver support (Buckland, 2014) than to interactive sibling activity.

Bonding Time

Since sibling relationships are often fraught with difficulty, bonding time is very important in fostering and supporting them. This should not be a time in which the nondisabled child serves as a quasi-caregiver to his or her sibling, but rather what we characterize as quality time in which the siblings can connect. While bonding should not be forced, there may be a need for it to be encouraged through therapy or by creatively organizing activities that will allow a gradual, natural relationship to develop. It may be rough-going in the beginning, as the child with autism may be resistant to the idea of sibling interaction; however, as time passes, there will likely be a gradual level of acceptance.

In the early stages of implementation, bonding time can be as little as five-to-ten minutes and gradually increased as the child with ASD becomes more comfortable. Typically, interactions become more natural over time. Bonding time could encompass something as simple as watching a segment
of a movie or television show, sharing a picnic lunch, or playing with toys. Planning ahead will take away some of the anxiety, especially if parents have alternate activities available or another option in mind if the first one does not go well. These types of bonding experiences should be scheduled as frequently as possible so that both children come to expect and appreciate the time they spend together.

Suggested Readings


Gorrod, L. My brother is different: A book for younger children who have a brother or sister with autism. National Autistic Society.


References


Bio

Dr. Grant is a special education teacher, advocate, and parent of a child with autism. She
has written several articles related to disabilities, including *Empowering Parents in the Special Education Process* and *Inclusion Doesn't Always Mean Included*. For more information about Dr. Grant, you can visit her blog [mylifemyautism.blogspot.com](http://mylifemyautism.blogspot.com) or reach her by email at drmarquisgrant4@gmail.com.