

Sibling Interactions for Children with Autism

Introduction

In this module you will learn about how children with autism interact with their siblings, and how you can support these interactions so all your children feel confident in their relationships with you and with each other. Caring for a child with autism can be very time consuming, and many parents find themselves struggling to balance the needs of their neuro-typical children and their child with autism. Siblings of children with autism also often find themselves faced with extraordinary demands both as children and as siblings. Let's take a look at how having a child with autism affects other siblings and the family as a whole and review some ideas on what you can do to create positive interactions between siblings.

Here are several ways to create positive interactions.

Make Time.

Make Time for your children. The time commitment needed to attend to your child with autism is very real, and between therapy sessions, physically caring for your children, and running a household, you may find yourself left with very little free time to attend to your other children or to yourself. Siblings definitely notice the amount of one-on-one time your child with autism get from you and their other caregivers. Therefore it is important for you to make some one-on-one time for them as well. This need not always be a child-centric activity and can include tasks such as household chores.

Here are some ways in which you can do that:

- If you drop your child with autism off for any clinic-based therapies, or other therapeutic activities, you can use that time to do something with your other child.
- If your child with autism has therapy sessions at home, you can do a special activity such as an art project, or play a favorite game with your other child during that time. Having a routine with your child will ensure that they have something to look forward to.

- Make regular household chores fun by finding age appropriate ways for your child to join in. For example, you can say something like "Let's put on our special laundry music while we sort our laundry out."
- If you have someone to watch your child with autism, you can take your other child on a grocery run or to do small errands alone with you. Make it fun by letting your child check items off a list, or play "I spy" for items that you need to buy at a store. You can also take them for a walk to the park to get some exercise, or to the library to pick out books as a way of spending time with your child. Be sensitive to jealousy that your neuro-typical child may feel as a result of the amount of time you spend with your child with autism and allow them to talk about it, and what they may want to do with you as a special outing or activity.

Have Consistent Rules.

Although you may use a number of special tools for your child with autism, try to have consistent rules for each child. You can use tools such as visual schedules, token boards, chore charts and checklists with both children, so your child with autism does not feel singled out and all children feel that you have a fair way of rewarding positive behaviors. You may be targeting different behaviors/goals with each child, but everyone can have something they are working on, including parents.

Avoid Burdening Siblings.

Many siblings of children with autism will compensate by taking on roles beyond their years. They may take on the role of a caregiver, even though they are still a child. While everyone in the family will be expected to help out, it is important to avoid burdening the neuro-typically developing children with excessive responsibility for managing the behaviors of their brother or sister with autism. Siblings of children with autism may also be tuned into parental stress and may feel anxious. You may want to consider

individual or group counseling that includes your neuro-typical child. Counseling can provide them with tools to deal with their anxiety or frustration. Be sure to organize play dates or activities where your child can interact with other neuro-typical children their age. And as your child gets older, allow them to find appropriate ways in which to express their frustration or feelings without censoring them.

Give Support to the Siblings.

Children with autism have social deficits which also impact their relationship with their siblings. They may appear indifferent to their siblings, and a sibling may need support engaging with them. Support this relationship by having the sibling offer your child with autism their favorite foods or toys or doing certain preferred activities with them. This is a process called pairing, where you pair a neutral stimulus, in this case the sibling, with something positive, such as getting a favorite toy. By doing this, your child with autism may show more positive behaviors towards their sibling and may begin to approach them independently. You can use pairing for your typically developing child by having your child with autism be a source of positive things for your typically developing child. , Also, teach your neuro-typical child ways in which to interact successfully with their sibling. For example, teaching your child how to get their sibling's attention can be useful. When appropriate, teach the siblings how to use and understand any alternative communication systems being used by your child with autism.

Build Confidence.

Some siblings may feel embarrassed by their brother or sister's behavior, especially in public or in front of their friends. It is very important to talk to them about autism, and explain what it means in terms of behaviors. You can include them in their sibling's therapy sessions when appropriate, so they can see how you can work with your child on certain behaviors. You should also talk to them about when it is appropriate to get adult help in a situation that they are not able to manage or are uncomfortable with.

You can help increase their confidence by teaching them what to say when adults ask them

questions about their sibling. If you are comfortable sharing your child's diagnosis with people who are not part of your family, you can teach their sibling to explain the diagnosis. If you would prefer to keep that information private, you can teach your child to say something like "My brother has trouble talking and needs some extra help to learn new things." If that doesn't work for you or your children, you can also teach them to deflect questions, and say things like "You can ask my daddy about that." Avoid asking children to lie or keep secrets about their siblings.

Listening to your child's concerns and frustrations and talking to them about their sibling will allow them to be open with you about their feelings over the years. , While your family's practical and emotional resources are naturally focused on a child with special needs, it is vital to stay tuned in to the unique needs of your neuro-typically developing children as well. Not only do they face the ordinary challenges of childhood and adolescence, they also see caregivers devoting extra attention to the sibling with autism and must learn to navigate communication challenges with their sibling.

Conclusion.

Children may face extra social hurdles as a result of having a sibling with autism if their peers are not comfortable around children with different abilities. Fortunately, with some creative scheduling, structured interactions, external support, and social coaching, siblings of children with autism can learn ways to connect with their brother or sister and grow up confident of their abilities, value within the family, and relationship with you. We hope you have found the ideas in this module useful. You can find additional resources on our website:

www.porchlighteducation.org.