

**Emma Durman, Outside - Supporting Siblings
(Neurodivergence Wales Parents & Carers Virtual Advice Sessions)**

I came to the subject of autism because I have a younger sibling with the demand avoiding profile. He's 10 years younger than me, so from a young age, growing up with a sibling with additional needs was a big part of my life. Fast forward, I now have a teenager who's 16 who is autistic and has ADHD. And their diagnosis led to my late diagnosis of autism and ADHD. And that happened the same week that I was accepted to university to study for Master of Science in autism and related conditions. I met my founding business partner of Outside when I was at university, she was guest lecturing and eight years later Outside are still going. I would say that my role primarily is developing and delivering the training. And so all of our training has kind of that professional academic aspect to it, but it also has the personal insight which I hope is, you know, particularly helpful to you. So I come with a range of hats. I come as a neurodivergent person, a professional, a parent carer, and somebody that has been a sibling to somebody, with somebody, with additional needs as well.

So when we're talking about having a neurodivergent sibling or really a sibling with any additional needs, what are the considerations that we want to think about? Well, first of all, is the sibling able to understand their brother or sister's diagnosis? Do they feel different from other children their age? Because of what's going on at home and in the family unit, and actually the whole family unit often is impacted as you know. It can put sort of different lens on everyday life. So they may potentially be adjusting their life as well to help the siblings needs, and we'll talk more about these in depth as we go through. Sometimes they may even take on a caring role or responsibility. They may be helping their parents more. They may be needing to understand the sibling's condition more and being able to employ strategies and accommodations themselves. And that can grow as they get older. And potentially they may be looking forward to the future and whether they will have a caring role further on into the future as an adult as well. Parents I know often feel a massive strain in dividing their time equally where they have one or more children with complex or additional needs. There's often a lot of guilt and stress around trying to make sure that people that their children get treated kind of fairly and equally and it's a real struggle where one sibling has kind of these intense needs. It's a lot higher, perhaps, than the other sibling. Also a lot of the time in families, you know, you'll have siblings going to

the same school. Often there's this guaranteed element that if one sibling attends a school, the other sibling will be given priority to be accepted to that school because it makes a lot of sense with drop-off and pick-up and all those kinds of things. As well as the catchment area that you're in. But where there are additional needs and the sibling will be going to a specialist school or a specialist unit it can mean that you know you've got children in different settings. There is often a very different developmental trajectory, so they're often not kind of developing and meeting milestones, and having the same life experiences at the same time. And there may be very different social opportunities as well.

So how might a sibling feel about all of this? Well, sometimes they might feel jealous. And I know that is a big concern for lots of parents and they feel like a lot of their emotional energy, time and effort does get diverted where there are these really high needs. And sometimes the sibling that doesn't perhaps have those high support needs can feel quite jealous because of that. They might feel scared or worried. You know, they might be frightened about what this means for the family if they don't understand the diagnosis. They may not understand what that means in terms of health. You know often children can kind of think things through, and maybe they might put two and two together and get 5 in some cases, and so they might have misconceptions about what this means, and they might have these worries about it. They might be worried about the future as well. And you know what? What is that gonna look like? Particularly if there are really high support needs where it's not certain if you know this. The sibling with additional needs or neurodivergence is going to be able to live independently, they might be worried about what that means in terms of their future, and making sure that their siblings are right. So there can be a lot of worries. You might feel really proud. So, you know, often there is this real sense of championing their sibling and being their kind of greatest cheerleader, if you like.

And I think as we go through this list of emotions, a lot of them, you might be familiar with as parents and carers as well, actually, because it can be difficult sometimes living with all of these additional stresses and considerations perhaps that you didn't plan for, and so sometimes we do get angry and we do get upset. And I think that is true for siblings as well. You know, maybe if there have been behaviours that have been difficult. Or they've had some of their possessions damaged or things like that, then they may feel angry about it. Often they're very loving and protective over their

siblings, though. They might be just making sure that they're OK. Making sure that nobody kind of makes fun of them or says the wrong thing, so they often do take that kind of protective, almost parental role at times. They may feel guilty as well, so they may feel guilty, perhaps, that they're able to do things that their sibling isn't able to do, even if they're sort of the same age. Or even older than them. So I know that these emotions can be flipped as well in a way.

So I've worked directly with Neurodivergent teens and young people, and I had one who's a 15 year old girl who said, "my brother's 14. And he gets to go out on his own with his friends and things like that. And I've never been able to do anything like that. And so I'm quite sort of jealous of him." And then, you know, in turn the sibling then kind of feels guilty that they're able to do these things that their sibling would really like to be able to do. But there are additional considerations that may make that harder or prevent that from happening. Sometimes they might feel embarrassed. And I think this can be the case where they're around their peers or people their own age and perhaps their sibling is behaving in a way that people may not understand. Perhaps they're having a meltdown, or perhaps they're stimming and they're worried that people are not going to understand that behaviour. Or perhaps it's drawing a lot of attention to the family unit and they find that embarrassing and they're not sure how to deal with that. Sometimes they might feel lonely, and that can be because they maybe are not connecting with other children their own age in the same way because their life feels quite different, really. You know, they might be a lot more mature because they're dealing with things that other children their age are not dealing with, and so they might not perhaps connect on the same level with children their own age that are experienced in those things. And they can feel overwhelmed as well, as we do as parents and carers - it can be overwhelming at times. And so they may feel overwhelmed by that as well. So there's a real kind of mix of emotions going on.

And then where you've got more than one child that has additional needs that can complicate things in some way. So particularly where there are conflicting sensory needs, so if you've got one autistic child perhaps is very noise sensitive and then you've got another child that perhaps has ADHD and is very loud or very active, very busy. That can kind of trigger the other child sensitivities and so it can almost be like chalk and cheese, with them struggling with these conflicts that are almost emphasised more because of those additional needs. Also. what I've talked to parents about a lot is where

one sibling's behaviour kind of is escalating, and then they have a meltdown, often that can trigger meltdown or shut down in the other sibling or siblings as kind of a domino effect. So that the intensity of that happening escalates the anxiety and the overload in the other people. And of course it can do the same as well, where parents are neurodivergent and so, you know having multiple people who are neurodivergent in one house has its strengths, but it also has its challenges. As I said before, you know it can be difficult for siblings if perhaps they're their possessions get broken or things like that, but where it is, possessions relate to an intense interest. We know that they're of particular importance to neurodivergent people, so autistic people may have intense interest where they collect items like Funko Pops or Lego or something like that. And they may have them displayed in a very specific way, in a very specific order, and they may struggle not only with things perhaps being broken, but even being touched or moved, or in extreme cases even things being looked at and they might be highly protective over them. So if another sibling comes along and is impacting those, then that can cause problems as well.

So there are lots of different impacts of siblings. We've already talked about the time of the parents. Often that can be taken up by the sibling who has the highest support needs. There is an impact on family finances, often as well, where you have additional needs, so it can be that there is a higher cost of living for people with disabilities, for a start, and that's why there are disability benefits out there such as DLA and PIP. It can be that you spend a lot more on food, on clothing, replacing items or specialist items so that takes a toll, but equally often one or more of the parents or carers might have had to reduce their working hours or even stop working to fulfil their caring role, and so there is often a big impact on family finances as well, and that can impact the whole family unit. It can be difficult sometimes to take holidays or trips, or to enjoy certain activities. And again, this is a big source of guilt and frustration and worry for a lot of parents. If they have multiple children where there are additional needs, often they feel like the sibling that perhaps doesn't have the high support needs is missing out, because actually it's a real struggle to go out for a family meal or to go out maybe trampolining or riding bikes, or you know, on a picnic or go on holiday and things like that. And so often what happens, the whole family is unable to do those things. Or if there's more than one parent carer in the family, often you end up kind of splitting those things up. So one of you will take one sibling that's able to do certain things and do those, and the other parent will kind of do whatever suits the sibling that has the

additional needs and so it's not as much as a family unit. It's often sort of tag teaming and splitting things up, which can work really well, but obviously it has an impact. It can have an impact on friends so some siblings, they may feel like "oh, you know, I can't bring people over because we're dealing with really different behaviours and things at home." Or it may be really difficult for the neurodivergent person to have other people in their space in in their home. It could be that there are perhaps children their own age, they just don't really understand what's going on. And so it's difficult for them to kind of make those strong friendships. That's not always the case, but those can be considerations. It can impact school life in a multitude of ways, so sometimes it is perhaps a level of embarrassment that they are in the same school and people see behaviours from their sibling and are coming back to them and teasing them where there's a lack of understanding. Or it could be that they're in the same school and they feel really, really protective and worried and they feel like they're taking that almost parental caring role and feel like they have to kind of look after their sibling all the time when their parents aren't there. It impacts privacy and belongings, so kind of feeling like you have space for yourself is really important and feeling like you have a space as well where you have your items that are respected and not touched or damaged. And I know from personal experience how difficult it can be to deal with that. So as I said, I was almost 10 years older than my younger sibling, but he had really high support needs and he did damage lots of things. He could be quite aggressive. And so, you know, we didn't have a huge amount of money when I was growing up. And I remember one day coming home and I saved up to buy this really beautiful yellow bedspread, which was very special to me. And I also had I think 5 CD's, you know, which was all I could afford. And I loved them. And I got home one day and my sibling had kind of got into my room and poured baby oil over everything and snapped my CDs in half. And so that was really, really difficult to deal with. And of course there was always this expectation that I would understand, and not be angry because he had these additional needs and his behaviour wasn't always in his control. And I completely appreciate that. But, you know, I was still a young person myself too, when it was difficult, sometimes always going "OK, you know, I'm not going to be mad or I'm just going to be OK with it." So I think that's really that's really difficult and you know they do need to be consequences and ground rules, even where there is understanding of how the condition affects somebody can affect their behaviour. But having those safe spaces for the person that doesn't have as high support needs is really important. It can disrupt sleep for the whole family. So this is a particular issue for parents and

carers, of course, who are going to be the ones that you know are maybe getting up and kind of looking after the neurodivergent person that is struggling with sleep, but it can disrupt the whole family. So again from personal experience. I remember a few days really struggling to stay awake in school. Because my brother was struggling to sleep, he was awake and screaming a lot through the night or, you know, shouting and making lots of noise. And so it's waking the whole family up. And I think that can be even more challenging where siblings have to share a bedroom. So it's even more difficult to minimise any disruption to them where sleep is an issue. And we know that sleep is a particular issue for neurodivergent people. Coping with anxiety, anger, meltdowns and shutdowns can be really difficult and we will talk more about how maybe that can be done successfully as we go through and as I said, they might be worried about their parents so often they see the stress on the parents and they will kind try and step in and do what they can to minimise that. Or they may feel like they have a lot of responsibility, perhaps not to cause their parents any additional stress or worry. And again, those worries about the future and what that kind of looks like for the whole family.

That all sounds very difficult, perhaps, and maybe negative, but there are lots of positive impacts too. So often what we get is young people who are very mature and very independent. So it can really help instil these positive qualities and attributes as well, like empathy, compassion, kindness and patience. They may be protective, not just of their sibling, but of other people that have disabilities as well. And actually be understanding of difference, and people who are marginalised in society, in lots of ways, so they might be particularly understanding of issues such as race and sexuality and things like that as well. That empathy is kind of often built from a very young age. And actually, there's some research that shows that growing up with a sibling with additional needs can mean that the sibling has these really positive career choices. Often careers like doctor, nurse, teacher, things like that. So it can have really positive impacts and outcomes as well.

With all that being said, we need to be able to explain additional needs of neurodivergence, and the way to do that is to be honest and factual. To make the generic information particularly relevant to their family member and also to think about the child or young person, that we're explaining it to and what their age and developmental level is and tailor it to that. So there's no one-size-fits-all, there's no

"I'm going to say to you this is how you explain it." It's going to be based on your values as a family. It's going to be based on your ethos. It's going to be based on their level of understanding. But what you want to do is make it clear and direct. And there are lots of resources out there to help you. We'll talk about those a bit more in a minute. I think that we have to be honest and acknowledge that neurodivergence can sometimes bring challenges. There's no getting around that. But I think we need to be balanced, you know, because neurodivergence obviously isn't all negative. It also brings lots of positives, so it can be really useful to reinforce that everyone has different strengths and challenges, likes and dislikes. You might do family profiles where you might do like a little diagram of each family member you know with a brain and going through their likes, dislike, strengths and challenges. And often just thinking "OK, those things are perhaps calibrated a little bit differently for somebody who is neurodivergent, but actually often there are really high levels of strength that come with it as well." And so making it kind of a whole family exercise isn't kind of singling out the neurodivergent person in a negative way, you know it's just saying that everybody has strengths and differences, but sometimes neurodivergence can highlight that.

As parents and carers, we should be open to questions and able to validate concerns. Now I don't know about you guys, but often I find the timing of these questions is not ideal, and I feel like I'm always in a weak spot to be able to answer when the big questions get thrown at me. So it's often like midnight when you're just dropping off to sleep and it's like "oh mum, could you tell me what the meaning of life is?" Or, you know, maybe I'm driving in the car. Something gets thrown at me in the supermarket check-out queue when these really big questions happen. We can say "look, I hear you. I want to answer you, but actually I want to be able to devote the time and space to be able to do that properly. So let's pop a pin in it and then we're going to answer it a bit later." But make sure you do come back as soon as possible. So ideally the same day, if at all possible, you know and set some space aside, but do think through how you want to answer a question. If you're not sure you know, don't feel pressured to just blurt out an answer. You should absolutely feel free to go "look, I hear you, but I need to take some time and come back to you and think through what you want to say." If you don't know the answer, you can say you don't know the answer and you can say "well, let's find out together." Or you can say "I'll find out and I'll come back to you." And I think that's absolutely fine.

Sometimes there might be these kind of questions and concerns that seem silly to us, but it's really important that we listen and we validate what the sibling is asking and answer it in that honest and factual way. Everyone can experience different reactions to a diagnosis. Sometimes it's an emotional rollercoaster for family members, and that includes us as parents and carers. It includes siblings and the person themselves who is neurodivergent or has additional needs. And so for some people, it's amazing. They're thrilled when they get the diagnosis. And for some other people, perhaps it's really difficult to deal with. They're not sure what to make of it. They don't know how they feel. For some people, they don't want the diagnosis, and it takes time to come to terms with it. So everybody reacts differently and there are often waves of emotion that can kind of come and go for years. You know, I was diagnosed 8 years ago. And sometimes I feel like I'm still processing it all. So it's a process, it absolutely is. And it can take time. Prepare yourself beforehand, so if you are thinking "right, I need to have a conversation with them about this", think about what you want to say, how you want to explain it. Think about what questions they might ask. And what's important for them to know at this stage? It is really good to think through in your mind. You don't have to make yourself anxious about it. But I think it is useful to just think it through rather than just winging it. It can help longer-term and remember there doesn't need to be one big one off conversation. It's more about just making it an open conversation. It's not something that is taboo or off limits, it's just something that you talk about as a family and you can kind of drip-feed information over time in that way. Just having conversations about neurodivergence in the family. You know, just normalise those conversations. Make it just part of daily life if you like. Use resources to help you so you don't have to explain it all by yourself or try and help them understand all by yourself because lots of people have put lots of work into lots of resources that are out there and a lot of them are freely available. For example, there's a really great video called [Amazing Things Happen](#). And that's won one lots of awards. I think it's Canadian, but it's a little animation and I think the beauty of it, it actually talks about autism. The beauty of it is that it works for a lot of different age ranges. So I think it can work from a relatively young age in terms of understanding, but it also doesn't feel too sort of infantile. I guess. For older teenagers or even adults.

So that's a really great one to watch, to explain autism going back in the day a while, there was a Newsround special called [My Autism and Me](#), which was Rosie King talking about how she's autistic and her sibling's autistic. But it presents quite differently in

both of them and how their family life is, things like that. That's about 15 minutes long. But there are lots of books out there. There are lots of leaflets. Lots of media representation now there are lots more autistic people and neurodivergent people on social media, so things like YouTube or Instagram or Tiktok? You know, there might be people on there that are talking about how being neurodivergent impacts them. It might work really well for younger people to watch that as well, rather than reading a book, you know, to get that information.

There is professional support out there at times, so sessions like this, but also parent-carer groups where you can link up with other parents and carers and, you know, discuss your worries and concerns. And also there are often young carers groups, where siblings can go and meet other young people in the same boat as them, where they they've got a family member that has neurodivergence or an additional need. Again, there are a lot of media representations out there. Sometimes you'll think "I can really relate to that, and I agree with the way they've been represented" and other times you'll maybe be offended or you'll disagree with how something's been presented. I think regardless of that, it can open up those conversations in the family, in a more indirect way, in a more natural organic way. Then you go "right, we're all going to sit down around the table and discuss this." You might watch this show and go "oh, do you think that's realistic? or "what do you think they could have done better?" or "do you do you identify with that?" I watched a couple of seasons of [The A Word](#) which is displayed there on the BBC, and I think one thing one thing that really stood out to me as positive for that show was the relationship between the siblings. And I think again with [Atypical](#), I did like the portrayal of the relationship between the siblings. And they both have autistic characters in them, but obviously there are more and more media representation now, so I think again you need to kind of watch these things first and see how you feel about them. But if you're comfortable, you can watch them as a family and they can start those discussions and help portray it from other perspectives as well perhaps. Key concepts for you to explore when you're explaining it. Explain that neurodivergent people often have social differences, in the ways that they communicate, interact, experience and process the world socially. They might have different sensory profiles and needs, so they may be hyper- or hypo-sensitive to sight, sound, smells, tastes, touch. Their balance and their spatial awareness can be impacted. And they may even struggle with those internal signals. What we call interoception. So whether they're hungry, thirsty, full, hot, cold in pain, need the toilet,

all of those things. And they can confuse those bodily sensations and needs with their emotions a bit as well. So, you know, sensory differences are a really key part of being neurodivergent, particularly if you're autistic. And so I think that understanding that is really important, explaining intense interests and how importantly, specific passions are and why perhaps they have this particular importance for neurodivergent people. Explaining it as perhaps being differently wired. So having a Mac computer versus a Windows computer, it's a brain that works and develops differently, but it is not necessarily a brain that there's anything wrong with. It just means that you have to use different software. You have to deliver information differently. It gets processed differently. But actually, with the right tweaks and adjustments and accommodations, often it will be able to do all the things that your Windows computer can do etcetera. So that can be a really good analogy for explaining it in a simple way. Again, highlighting strengths as well as difficulties, and this is a tricky one. Sometimes explaining that equality doesn't always mean that everyone gets the same thing, but that everyone gets what they need. And so sometimes for siblings, it can be challenging because they can feel that there's one rule for them and one rule for us, and they get away with doing things wrong, that I would be told off for or punished for. Or you know, feeling that their sibling gets perhaps special treatment of things like that and it's really difficult sometimes to explain why you may treat your children differently, and I think that can be true. Whether there's neurodivergence involved or whether it's different personalities and learning styles or other things, but often people respond to different things. They might act in different ways. They might need, you know, different kind of intervention. So it is explaining that we're not talking about a one-size-fits-all approach.

And that that is probably the real sticking points that I see for parents, but I think starting those conversations from a young age and understanding that everybody has their own adjustments that they need, you know. And explanations of why certain things can be particularly difficult, such as regulating their emotions, completing tasks. So as I said, even where questions that come up seem random or silly, we need to be able to validate curiosity and worries and explore them openly, honestly and factually. And encourage that ongoing discussion so say "please come to me if you have a question or if you have something new that you're thinking about or concern. Or perhaps sometimes things might happen in school that you don't know about." Do you want them to be able to come to you and say "you know somebody said this to

me actually?" Or "this happened in school today, and I saw this happen with the sibling." You want them to be able to come to you with any of that. Give them safe space to share their emotions and feelings and discuss other people's perceptions and reactions, both positive and negative.

It can be useful to arm siblings with handy responses or simple explanations or stock phrases. So for example, if they come across people when you're not with them, and perhaps one of them says "well, your siblings autistic, what does that mean then?" or "I hear that your brother or sister has got ADHD and how does that affect you?" You might help them have some explanations to these kinds of questions, ready to go. Or equally, how to deal with negative comments in a healthy way. Extend this discussion to any other diagnosis your child or children may have, and what the impact of these co-occurring conditions is as well. Often neurodivergence doesn't come alone. Particularly in terms of autism, there are lots of common co-occurring conditions that range from epilepsy to autoimmune to mental health. So often there are other conditions as well. So it's important to have a kind of holistic view and talk about it all. Equip them with strategies for successful communication as well. Things like, if you're trying to communicate with your brother or sister, then use their name first to get their attention to know that that is a communication for them. To perhaps speak more slowly and clearly, and to allow that process in time for them to process what the sibling has said and to respond. Get them to say one thing at a time and break down information into manageable chunks. Say what you mean, and mean what you say, so being very clear in what you say, and if you're making promises or plans then stick to them as much as possible. And using visual supports to help as well, making that a whole family strategy. It's really helpful to have protected time and attention, so set aside special time with the siblings wherever possible. Prioritising events and activities that are important to them. So where there's something that is specifically really important like, for example, they've got a role in a play. Say you know you've been able to perhaps have childcare for the sibling with additional needs for you to be able to be there and devote your attention to them for that special event is really key. And I know it's not always possible, believe me. And, you know, growing up, I had that struggle where, you know, it was really difficult for my parents to juggle things with my sibling and sort of be there and be focused on me. You know, I remember it particularly that I was in this one play. We you know, there was no childcare for my younger siblings and my mum had to bring him along and unfortunately, he was very

loud and disruptive, and it was very distracting while I was on stage and then in the end my mum just had to leave and she was devastated, bless her. And it was nobody's fault. It was just one of those things. But I think if you are able to have at least those special events, where you are able to dedicate that attention to them? That's key.

And making sure that they kind of have some respite as well. So having their own time and space away from their neurodivergent brother or sister to decompress sometimes so as parents and carers, often we need some time to ourselves. And that can be the case for siblings as well. That can look a lot of different ways. It can be that they perhaps go for tea at their friend's house or even a sleepover, or it can be that you say "OK, go up to your room. I'll make sure that you're not bothered for two hours" It could be that the neurodivergent child perhaps has respite for a few hours. It depends on the support that you have, but kind of having that space is important, whatever that looks like. Encouraging them to express their emotions and devote special time to this, when you can focus on them and engage without distraction if possible. Equipping them with relaxation strategies, so often I'm doing sessions for parents and carers where I'm giving them all of these strategies for emotional literacy and anxiety management and an energy management for the neurodivergent person. But I also say use these for the whole family. So things like mindfulness, listening to music, ASMR is really helpful for siblings as well. And it is important to boost the sibling self-esteem whenever possible. So express your appreciation for their support and their understanding. Or if you see that they have communicated really well with their brother or sister or they've stuck up for them or they've been really understanding or they've helped you out then just say to them "I see what you did there and I really appreciate that." Sometimes it's tricky to be able to have those conversations, so at the end of the day you might scribble down little notes, you know, really brief little notes and sort of fold them up and put them in a jar. And then they've got this jar of positive things that you've noticed about them that they can go into and read. So there's lots of different ways you can do it, whole family strategies. I think everybody has to be on the same page for the best success, so using visual supports as a family, using family visual schedules around the house. All using the same communication aids and social stories is helpful. It's also really helpful to have house rules or family rules or a family contract, if you like, and that often is really helpful if you have all created that and contributed to that together. So that the children feel like they've got some ownership over it as well. They're much more likely

to buy into it if they feel part of it. So it might be something you create together having clear routines with calendars, calendars and things. Practising and promoting turn-taking and you can do that with really simple games to begin with and kind of building that up, giving space and time when needed. So I think that's a common theme that you're seeing through here again. It's really important to have that space and time when they need it, so that could be before or after school. It could be at bedtime. It depends on your situation. Using rewards and motivators. It's really key that everybody is consistent, knows the plan, is 'singing off the same hymn sheet' as they say, because that consistency is really what makes strategies a success. Being with each other? Well, actually, sometimes that can be challenging. And so what's really important is that they do have dedicated spaces of their own. So they may have their own bedrooms, for example. Sometimes that's not the case. Sometimes they have to share, in which case it can be really useful for them to have their own zone, so it's kind of a clear delineation of which area is theirs and which is the siblings. And you can do that with the decor that you use or a visual kind of division of the space of some way kind of 'right, that's your area.'

Or it could be that even when they're sort of downstairs in the living room or the dining room, that they've got a spot that they tend to use. Giving out rewards, being kind and compassionate with each other, modelling good behaviour. Allowing them to safely store treasured belongings. So this was really key for me. In the end I had to padlock my bedroom door literally. When I was a teenager, I kind of this massive clasp with a padlock on my bedroom door in the end, but it meant that my belongings were safe and that was really important to me. So it could be that you have a room that locks or it could be that you have a cupboard that locks or you have a little chest that locks, for the most important things. But it is really important that they have somewhere that they feel like they're most treasured. Belongings are safe if there's an issue with breakages and things like that.

It's really useful to have their own dedicated technology items if possible, because I think a lot of arguments happen over technology and who's using the PlayStation or the switch or the iPad and things like that. That isn't always possible, you know, financially and for other reasons. They may be sharing items, and if that's the case, then I think you need to have clear rules and maybe a schedule where there's kind of protected times, so you might say that each sibling has half an hour of screen time per

day, you know or whatever the rule is within your family and ensuring that they get equal access. And that they're not just fighting over it or "I'm using it now", It's "this is your half hour, this is your half hour," things like that. Encourage activities of both siblings. Enjoy finding a common thread and capitalising and encouraging that. And promoting games that do not have a focus on winning or losing. So often competitiveness is a real struggle for neurodivergent people, so having games that are just fun and perhaps nobody's winning or losing is less likely to cause conflict and more likely to be enjoyable, hopefully, in terms of managing.

Expressing emotions, you want to create opportunities for siblings to talk about and express how they're feeling, and I think that sometimes as parents and carers we feel like we have to be really strong and really in control and so perhaps we don't share our emotions as freely with our children. It's my personal opinion that it actually benefits our kids to get a bit of insight into how we're feeling. You know, we're not perfect and that sometimes we struggle with our emotions and our anxieties as well. And that we get frustrated or overwhelmed and that kind of gives them the space to not have to be perfect, you know, and that they feel like "OK, they understand, you know, and I can talk about this. They're not going to judge me or think I'm silly", it builds that connection. So share how you're feeling with them too. And that can help them open up. And I think that it is just about me getting emotional literacy and these kind of discussions are part of family life, daily life.

Focusing on the positives as well. I keep saying this as well as the challenges, so something that I use a lot when I work directly with teens is I often use three good things, where you just name three good things that happen that day. But I think the favourite one that I use, and the teens that I've worked with have loved this is the rose exercise. So the idea behind it is you think of a rose and OK, the flower is something good this happened. The thorn is something that was difficult or not nice. The bed is something you're looking forward to. The gardener is somebody that supported you, and that's a really lovely exercise. And I think that, you know, even if you might do that daily, you might do that once a week, you go round and you all share something, you know, and making sure that's part of family life. Again, use books, TV shows, movies, or experiences of your own to help explore feelings, and you can use literally any TV show from like all the way from like Thomas the Tank or Peppa Pig, all the way through to much more complex adult storylines and things like that,

you know. It could be seeing Thomas the tank and saying "well, James was really upset that he got mad and then the other trains laughed at him for being upset. And what do you think went on there and how do you think he could have handled it better?" There's always a lesson. But rather than you going "right, let's sit down and we're going to talk about feelings or we're going to talk about behaviours", it's much more organic and there's less pressure sometimes to kind of raise those questions from TV shows and books. And use other visuals to help you with this too. So things like social stories again, emotional thermometers. I love the movie [Inside Out](#) by Pixar and there are loads of free visuals online that you can download and print that help with emotions based off of that.

So I think a really key thing that is good to have as a family is a meltdown or shutdown plan. So meltdowns or shutdowns obviously happen where a person is overwhelmed and overloaded or feel threatened or scared to the point where their fight, flight or freeze mode is kicking in and they're kind of losing control. Meltdown is the very external presentation of that, where somebody might be aggressive, they might be shouting. They might be lashing out, they might be damaging things or hurting themselves and a shutdown is kind of the polar opposite presentation. It's the same thing that's going on internally, but actually they're freezing up and they're losing the ability to communicate and things like that. So explaining what a meltdown or shutdown is really key. But also having this plan where every family member has a defined role. So for a sibling it could be that they know that where there is a meltdown or shutdown at home, for example, their plan is that they go to their bedroom and shut their door until you tell them, "OK, everything's calmed down." Or if they're not able to be on their own, it could be that perhaps there's another older sibling there, or there's another parent and maybe they say "right, you go in the kitchen with Dad and I stay in the living room and help calm your brother or sister down." In that meltdown or shutdown plan, you also want to include information about things that can cause anxiety or overload, the potential triggers. Explaining what behaviours they might see or experience. And also considering what different actions or strategies might be needed in different environments. So when we go out and about as a family in my family we I call our car our 'mobile safe zone', that's what I call it. So if there is a melt and shut down, the plan is to get to the car as quickly as possible and to use that as a safe space to kind of get through that meltdown or shutdown if at all possible. But if you're in a family member's home, it might be a different strategy. You know, so

thinking about that as well. What's really important is that you don't have everybody sort of chipping in and trying to deal with it, because often that prolongs or extends it. So for example, if my brother was having a meltdown and then my mum is shouting and my dad just saying "oh, calm down, let's do this instead" and then my Nan is saying "oh, I never would have put up with this in my day." Or when everybody is shouting or talking or getting involved and it's all very confusing and overwhelming, it's just increasing that person's agitation. So having a family meltdown or shutdown plan where you are kind of reducing sensory overload, talking triggers, you know, everybody offering different suggestions. All of those things can really help to minimise that meltdown and or shutdown rather than extending it. And it ensures as well when you've got this plan that you know there's safety precautions for siblings where there needs to be as well.

As I said, planning for the future is key because sometimes a neurodivergent person may not be able to live independently, particularly if there's co-occurring conditions. Things like a learning disability that impact their ability to be independent. Maybe as a sibling you worry about that, you worry about what's going to happen when my parents aren't able to take care of them anymore or when it's just us. And so, even though it might seem like miles ahead in the future, and it's often a really horrible thing to think about, it's important not to dismiss that. It's important to talk about it. Often it's impossible to know exactly what the future holds. You might have an 8 year old and you think "I don't know if they're going to be able to live independently or not." And things could look completely different in two or three years time. But you can say "OK, well, this is what we think is likely. But we don't know for sure. We're going to come back and reassess, but if this happens, this would be the plan. If this happens, this would be the plan." So it is really hard to talk about and even think about but it absolutely is important that you do it. And look for local or online support. So as I said, siblings can feel isolated or different, so it's important they have networks of others. I'm sure that as parents and carers you've found it really helpful to connect with other parents and carers, who are dealing with the same issues and things, who just get it and you have that bond and that's important for siblings as well. Look at local care centres, [National Autistic Society branches](#), or social services. You know, there's often lots of things out there that perhaps we don't know about. Sometimes social services will have schemes where they take the sibling out and take them to the cinema or things like that, you know, so they've got some kind of special time and time away

doing things they enjoy as well. Sometimes there are local, you know, young carers, groups or they might be online forums. There's lots of young carers networks out there, both locally and nationally, and they can be really helpful. So it's been able to talk to other people that they're going through similar things.

But remember, you can't pull from an empty cup if your cup runs dry. You can't pull for anyone else. So actually, taking care of yourself is not a luxury and you shouldn't feel selfish for taking care of yourself. It's a necessity. And I know in reality that it is hard to do. It's hard to find the time to spend on yourself. And little moments of self-care, you know, go easy on yourself if you can. And with all of that guilt and confusion you may be feeling. Just remember, you're doing a really difficult job as well as you can. So, you know, try to be kind to yourself in terms of us, you can find more about Outside on our [website](#). We're also on Facebook. We've also got something called [Autcasts](#), which are our autistic led video podcasts, which are available via our website, social media and on YouTube as well.