

Supporting the Siblings of Neurodivergent Children

“Understandably, when a child is diagnosed the thoughts and advice flow to the parents, but people do have a tendency to forget about the siblings and how it can impact upon them too. There are many difficulties that can be encountered, however these are equally measured with the good times and memories that can be created.” — [Sibling]

Other children will often find things difficult too. They may find it difficult to understand the behaviours of their neurodivergent brother or sister. They may feel rejected if their sibling does not want to play with them, or does not respond to their social advances in the way they would like. Sometimes other children can feel as if you are not giving them as much attention, or even as if you do not love them as much. Children, especially younger ones can find this difficult to explain to parents. Their feelings may be displayed in the way they behave which may not be how they would usually behave or how parents / family like. Sometimes other children start to behave differently as a means of securing parent’s attention. Providing siblings with information about autism will depend on their age and level of understanding. There are different ways to give information and this will depend on the needs of the individual child. For example, some will prefer to read a book; others would rather watch a DVD, whilst others will be happy to discuss it face-to-face with you or someone else. It may be helpful to provide them with a basic overview and then answer questions as and when they arise, giving simple and specific information.

“Aside from what can seem as the bad part of living with an autistic sibling there can also be good times, just like living with any other person.” — [Sibling]

Some top tips to support siblings

- Talk about their feelings, tell them that it is okay for them to feel angry, sad, etc and that they may need some support themselves to deal with this
- Give them the opportunity to discuss their feelings with someone else they trust / feel comfortable with — sometimes young people would like to talk to someone else because they don't want to worry you
- Reassure your child(ren) that having to spend more time helping their brother or sister does not mean you love them any less
- Encourage them to interact with their sibling
- Help them to understand their sibling's behaviours and difficulties, but also explain their strengths and the things they are good at
- Acknowledge their role in the family — they are an important part of the family and whilst they are not their sibling's carers, they may want to be involved in helping and supporting you and their sibling
- Give your child(ren) the opportunity to have their own space — older siblings may appreciate privacy to do homework, have friends round, etc without interruptions.
- Allow them to have a safe place to keep important items, particularly if their sibling is prone to breaking things
- Make individual time with your child(ren), just 10 minutes a day can make a difference — explain that this is their time rather than simply excluding their neurodivergent sibling
- Think together about activities which can be done as a family and what you can do with them on their own
- Remember to praise your other child(ren)'s positive behaviour. Look for things to praise such as sitting quietly, sharing, getting dressed without help. This will give attention and stop them seeking it in other ways.
- Explain to siblings that other people may not understand what neurodivergence is or know their brother / sister so may react differently towards them