

PFA Tips Siblings

“It’s not fair!” “Why does HE always get....?” “I don’t want him around my friends. He’ll do something weird.” Sound familiar? Although these could be the complaints of any children, they take on a different – well, almost a different level of validity when they are coming from the siblings of children with autism. So while we’re busy trying to meet the multitude of demands associated with autism, how do we keep siblings from feeling left out?

Don’t make autism a secret or a mystery

Our other children don’t need us to tell them that there’s something “different” about their brother or sister. But they do need us to tell them what it is. If you try to keep autism a secret, they might interpret that to mean that it’s something to be ashamed of. Depending on the child’s age, it may or may not be appropriate to go into the neurological description of autism. But you can tell your child that his brother’s or sister’s brain thinks differently and that is why he does things that may not seem “normal”. If your family uses a special communication system, or if there are routines that your child with autism must follow, make sure your entire family is familiar with them.

Emphasize the positive traits

“Aren’t we lucky that we have Bryce to show us how our DVR features work?” Try to instill a feeling of being fortunate for having a sibling like Bryce. There will be lots of times when our other children may be embarrassed by tantrums or different idiosyncrasies, so look for opportunities to point out our kids’ very special and unique talents and characteristics. And when those embarrassing moments do happen, our other children will look to us to see how we react, whether it’s with shame or if we can find the humor in the moment. Here’s your chance to smile at each other and share a look that says, “here he goes again....”

Make special time for all your children

Easier said than done. Especially depending on how many children you have, how crazy your schedule is, whether you are a single parent. But that special time sends the message to your child that you value them just as much. It can even be as simple as sorting socks together, painting toenails or driving together to pick up milk as long as it’s just you and your child. If you need to, hire a sitter or arrange for respite care. It probably is not realistic that you can spend as much time with your typically developing kids as you do with your child with autism, but fair does not mean equal, and sometimes our other kids are going to be cheated.

Celebrate having built-in playmates

Our kids with autism need lots of help with social interaction. So if you have other children, you have round the clock social-teaching opportunities. (And so often it IS round the clock, isn’t it?) Find something they both (or three, or four) have an interest in and then start with simple games they can play together. Remember, we’re not born with etiquette knowledge, so your typically developing children will benefit from the extra social instruction as well. You may need to reassure them that your child with autism is doing the best he can even though he may not be able to play with the same skills or have the level of interaction the sibling wants. Let the siblings take on the role of teacher if they want it, showing the child with autism how to play.



And remember, teaching opportunities go two ways. If your child with autism knows a lot about a topic, or has a unique skill, or simply a skill the sibling lacks, let him be the teacher.

Tell your kid to get a life

Encourage your children to have friends and a social life. It’s too easy to let autism make you feel isolated. Be conscious not to cut out the things they like to do. They may be embarrassed to have a brother or sister with autism. Give them non-preachy tools (PFA Tips: Explaining Autism Using Everyday Examples) to educate their friends about autism. And when they say they are embarrassed by their sibling with autism, point out the “quirky” things THEY do.

Don’t make the sibling another parent

When we need an extra set of hands or eyes, it can be so easy to turn to our next child. But we have to let them be kids first. The sibling may very well one day have to take on that parent role; don’t start too soon. If your child is someone who acts like

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a little parent, suggest, “Your brother does sometimes need your help, but you don’t have to make decisions or feel like he is your responsibility.”

Create a safe place

This is especially necessary if your child with autism is aggressive. You may even need to go to the extreme of locking the door on your other children’s rooms to keep them safe. If this is the case, address the aggression. Search our provider directory for Behavior Assessment and Intervention; Psychologist and/or Psychiatrist.

The sibling may need the support of a therapist or group

Look for signs of stress, frustration, depression, resentment and guilt. Your children may benefit from Sibshops, support groups for siblings of children with autism or other disabilities.

Remember, not everything the sibling does is in reaction to your child with autism. Jealousy, sibling rivalry, competition, etc. are universal. After all, what parent hasn’t threatened, “Don’t make me turn this car around!”

Additional Resources

PFA Tips: Understanding Autism Using Everyday Examples

<https://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/newly-diagnosed/parent-tips-explaining-autism-using-everyday-examples/>

PFA Provider Directory

<https://pathfindersforautism.org/providers-services/>

Sibshops through Mt. Washington Pediatric Center

<https://www.mwph.org/health-services/rehabilitation-therapy-services/classes-support-groups>

The Puzzle Pieces of Autism by Justin Birkelien

This is a wonderful short book written by 10 year old Justin, and sibling to a brother with Autism. It’s full of encouragement for other siblings.

<http://pathfindersforautism.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/The-Puzzle-Pieces-Of-Autism-by-Justin-Birkelien.pdf>

Sibling Support Resources compiled by the Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council

<http://www.md-council.org/resources/sibling-support-resources/>

Autism, Asperger Syndrome and Siblings, by Dan Coulter

<https://nevadaautism.com/autism-asperger-syndrome-and-siblings/>

Written by Shelly McLaughlin,
Director of Safety Programs,
Pathfinders for Autism

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