Autism Fact Sheet

Siblings of children with autism

What is the issue?
Raising and caring for a child on the autism spectrum can be emotionally and physically draining for parents and have a disruptive effect on wider family life. In particular, there are a variety of challenges that may be faced by other children in the family as a direct or indirect consequence of having a brother or sister with ASD. These include:

• isolation or resentment because of the amount of time and energy parents must devote to the child with ASD;
• confusion, distress or embarrassment at the way in which ASD manifests itself in the affected sibling: for example, through volatile emotions, a disinterest in collaborative play, or inappropriate behaviour in public;
• missing out on some of the benefits of well-functioning sibling relationships, such as the growth of self-identity, social skills, companionship and mutual support.

What does the research say?
A number of research studies have explored the impact on children and young people of having a sibling with autism. Their findings have been extremely varied, reflecting the fact that this is a highly complex area in which no two families or situations will ever be exactly the same. Factors such as the severity of autism in the affected child, availability of social support, socio-economic status, degree of family cohesion, parental well-being, and individual character traits are all likely to play a role in determining outcomes for the neurotypical children of families affected by ASD (O’Brien et al., 2009).

Nevertheless, at a broad level, research has identified the following risk areas for siblings of children with autism (Bågenholm & Gillberg, 1991; Hastings, 2003; Ross & Cuskelley, 2006):

• loneliness;
• concern about the future;
• behavioural disturbances;
• poor relationships with peers;
• anger towards the sibling with ASD (particularly if that sibling is aggressive);
• vulnerability to stress and depression.

At the same time, it would appear that there are a number of factors that can act as ‘buffers’ to these risks, improving the likelihood that the siblings of children with ASD will grow up psychologically and socially well-adjusted (McHale et al., 1986; Kaminsky & Dewey, 2002; also a number of anecdotal accounts):

• the siblings are part of a large family;
• the child with ASD is younger than his or her sibling(s);
• parents show minimal favouritism, including setting aside dedicated time to spend with their non-ASD child(ren);
• parents facilitate opportunities for all children in the family to engage in shared activities;
• siblings are well-informed about the nature of ASD;
• the family has a high level of social support;
• safeguards are in place for the future care of the child with ASD.

In terms of formal interventions, research has suggested that one of the most effective ways of promoting well-being and positive adjustment in siblings of children with autism is to involve them in a group support program (O’Brien et al., 2009). Support groups and events may be targeted at the entire family, or run exclusively for neurotypical siblings. Some operate on a regular basis, while others take place more infrequently but on a larger scale. A good example is the annual Siblings Camp organised by Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect).

Children who attend these groups and events are given opportunities to meet and establish relationships with other young people in similar circumstances to their own; to learn more about their sibling’s condition and discuss issues of personal concern; to express their feelings and experience peer support; and simply to have some fun and relaxing time to themselves away from the pressures of family life (Smith & Perry, 2004). However, as beneficial as such interventions are, it is clear that they should not act as a substitute for more informal, family-based information sharing, inclusive activities, and sibling support (Giallo & Gavidia-Payne, 2008).

Finally, it is important to emphasise that there are many ways in which having a brother or sister on the autism spectrum may positively impact upon other children in the family. Growing up with a ‘special needs’ sibling may encourage qualities such as tolerance, patience, compassion and independence. Young people in this situation can frequently exhibit a ‘maturity beyond their years’, and some will go on to become active spokespeople and advocates within the disabled community.

In summary
Researchers have become increasingly interested in the question of how typically developing children respond and adapt to having a brother or sister with ASD. Given the complexity of the subject area, studies are generally limited to identifying broad trends that are in themselves highly variable depending upon the nature of individual family circumstances. However, overall the research suggests that while there are certainly potential risks to the well-being and adjustment of children with siblings on the autism spectrum, often these can be mitigated by positive family dynamics, open communication, and good levels of external support.
Ultimately it is important to keep a sense of perspective on this issue, and to remember that almost all sibling relationships, especially during childhood, will involve a mix of positive and negative feelings, of constructive and dysfunctional behaviour. The fact that one sibling has a diagnosis of autism may both exacerbate and enhance particular aspects of the relationship; but it should never be considered to tell the full story of the dynamics between children in families affected by ASD.

References


Resources

For parents

http://raisingchildren.net.au/

http://www.autismspectrum.org.au

http://www.siblingsaustralia.org.au

For siblings
http://www.livewire.org.au
An online community/forum for siblings of children with a serious illness, chronic health condition or disability