

Mental Health & Wellbeing - A Guide



Supporting the siblings of children with autism



For Parents

First and foremost, it's important to make sure that you have in place the support that you need. Balancing the different needs of siblings is always a challenge, but if one of your children has autism this can be even more demanding. Identify your support network - family, friends, or support groups of other parents who have children with autism. Sometimes these are run by schools or charities such as Contact (<https://contact.org.uk/help-for-families/listening-ear/>).

Below is a checklist of practical things you can do to support the wellbeing of your child. It's important for children to feel 'heard'. Often they can equate this with feeling loved. A great way to do this is through having special 1:1 time. This can be as simple as going to do the grocery shop just the two of you, or going to get something to eat together. When you have this 1:1 time, ask open questions about how they're feeling and then listen non-judgementally. Don't worry about trying to 'fix' things or what you might say in response. Simply listen and acknowledge what they say and how they feel. You could also ask open questions such as 'what would you like to change about that?' or 'what would make that better for you?'

Take the time to have a conversation with your child about sources of stress for them. It might be that they feel the target of their siblings aggression, they might feel their own grief and worry about their sibling being autistic and what it means for them, perhaps they feel they need to act as an 'extra parent' or feel pushed out or sidelined. Every child is individual, as is their relationship with their sibling, so it's important to not make assumptions about they feel. Connected to this is establishing what their boundaries are. What does feeling respected look like to them? It might mean having a space that's private, even if that's just a corner of a room, or it might mean that not every outing is a family one, for example if they're in a school play and their sibling would struggle to sit through it quietly.

Often, conflicts arise through misunderstanding. Position yourself as an observer in your family. Notice the different ways family members show affection or irritation through their body language, facial expressions or actions. Translate these non-verbal cues to your children. Perhaps they don't realise that their sibling is trying to show affection when they barge into his/her room. Maybe they don't notice that their sibling needs space when they start to close down and become very quiet.

Finally, offer your child some practical coping strategies for when their sibling has a meltdown. Where can they go? Can they watch TV in their room or put headphones in? Reassure them of the steps you take to deal with the situation, as they may not be obvious or visible. Communicate with school to ensure support is in place for your child, particularly if it is a stressful time at home, homework time is interrupted or sleep is interrupted.

- Have special time
- Identify sources of stress
- Establish what their non-negotiable boundaries are
- Support siblings to learn each other's 'language'
- Plan responses to meltdowns
- Communicate with school



For Younger Children

Sometimes, people with autism might do things that seem strange.

They might scream, or rock backwards and forwards, or flap their hands. Or perhaps they do something else that seems different.

This might be because they are:

- Excited
- Nervous or scared
- There's a lot going on
- They are trying to relax

What's something your brother/sister does that you don't understand?

I think he/she does this because

Now, ask your parents! They can help you to understand

Did you know...?

1. People are born with autism, and no one has figured out what causes it.
2. Autism means that your brother or sister learns or behaves differently than you and your friends do.
3. You can't "catch" autism like a cold or the flu.

It can be hard when it feels as if your brother or sister doesn't have the same rules as you do, or if they do or say something that upsets you. Make a plan for times when you feel mad or sad - what things make you feel better? Can you ask your mum or dad for some special time?



For Teens

Your relationship

It can feel hard not to have the same relationship with your sibling that your friends seem to have with their brothers or sisters.

Remember though, every relationship is different, just like every person is different.

Often, people with autism have a special interest - something they're really passionate about. Could you share in that interest with them? Or find another interest that you could share, for example if you both enjoy the same kind of music, you could spend time together listening to your favorite singers or bands, or maybe you both love cars or football. Whatever it is, try and do things together around that interest. Even if it's something you'd never do with your friends, it's worth giving it a go. If you enjoy it, you could broaden your own horizons as well as having something special to share that's just for the two of you.

Talking to parents

If you find yourself feeling resentful about your parents not seeming to have time for you, it's important to say something. It can be tricky to have this kind of conversation, so here are some tips:

1. Decide what you're going to say - maybe even write it down beforehand. This can help you to explain yourself in a calm way.
2. Stick to the point. Be really clear about what's bothering you and try not to get sidetracked.
3. Think about what your parents might say in response. Think about how you might respond to their feelings.
4. Know what you want to change - what do you want to get out of the conversation? How can your parents help you to feel better?
5. Listen - remember your parents might have ideas about things that could help too, so keep an open mind.

Boundaries

It's important to feel like you have a safe space in your home, where you won't be disturbed or have someone messing with your things.

If your brother or sister invade your space, they might not be doing it do deliberately upset you. Try these ideas:

1. Explain clearly which spaces and things are yours.
2. You might need to explain boundaries several times to get your sibling to understand what you mean.
3. Calmly explain it as many times as necessary, without shouting or getting angry.
4. If you still feel your brother or sister is overstepping boundaries, talk to your parents. Maybe you can install a lock on your door, or find a safe place for things you don't want your sibling to touch.

