Supporting Siblings: Tips for Parents

Siblings of those with ASD are in a unique position. Their relationships are often complex and multifaceted. In addition to joyful typical sibling interaction, they may experience challenges before they’ve developed appropriate coping strategies. Siblings often display increased tolerance for differences as well as higher levels of empathy and altruism based on their experience. At the same time, due to the complexity, unpredictability, and inexplicability of ASD, siblings may be at greater risk for poor psychological adjustment. The following are tips and strategies for supporting siblings.

1. **Provide language to describe what ASD is.** You child will likely be questioned by their friends, family members, and others in the community about ASD. Provide them with vocabulary or scripts to be able to answer those questions. Reminding them that if others have questions, you can help you figure out what to say.

2. **Introduce information about ASD at a developmentally appropriate level.** With younger children, the conversation may begin with discussing how brains all work differently and understanding individual strengths and weaknesses. With an older child, the conversation may begin with a discussion around the symptoms of ASD and understanding how those impact day to day life.

3. **Discussion of ASD should be ongoing.** Remind your child they can come to you at any time with questions, concerns, or need for reassurance. Help them label the emotions they may be experiencing without judgement. Some days they may experience negative emotions towards their sibling with ASD and that is ok. Allowing for an open conversation reduces feelings of shame they may experience if they have negative thoughts about their sibling.

4. **Praise them for sharing their feelings and acknowledge understanding of what they are feeling.** Encourage them to discuss how they may be feeling and recognize those feelings could change by the day or even the hour. Be prepared for intense emotions ranging from sympathy to guilt or anger. Normalize and validate feelings, recognizing no feelings are wrong.

5. **Carve out dedicated “special time.”** Make a point of having “special time” where your child can receive one-on-one attention. This can be difficult as there are only so many hours in the day, but even 30 minutes in the evening before bed to play a game can be beneficial.

6. **Recognize not everything has to be done as a family.** Its ok not to do activities together all the time.
Resources

Books:
- *All About My Brother* by Sarah Peralta
- *Autism: Living with My Brother Tiger* by Linda Lee, Forward by Dr. Margaret Bauman
- *Autism through a Sister's Eyes* by Eve B Band
- *The Boy Who Went Away* by Eli Gottlieb
- *It Isn't Fair! Siblings of Children with Disabilities* by Stanley D. Klein & Maxwell J. Schleifer
- *Billy's Sister: Life when your sibling has a disability* by Jessica Leving, Ian Robertson, & Wiem Sfar

Other:
- Organization of Autism Research (OAR) - Sibling Support Guides: https://researchautism.org/how-we-help/families/sibling-support/

Groups & Organization:
- The Sibling Leadership Network
- The Sibling Support Project
- Siblings with a Mission
- The ARC
- The Sibling Transformation Project
- The Center for Siblings