

Sibling Issues and Conversations

Discussing Autism with Siblings

Children love to ask why. Why is the sky blue? Why does my ice cream melt? Why does my sister do that with her hands? The “why’s” in relation to autism are an inevitable factor, and for that reason it is important to decide how you will answer these queries before they even pop up. It is really important that you are ready to discuss autism with your children, even if you think they won’t fully understand. Children are inquisitive and intuitive beings, and if you try to avoid their questions, they will only become more insistent, so be prepared!

While the phrase goes “Timing is everything”, there is no perfect time to begin the autism discussion. However, starting early and revisiting the conversation often to clarify and expand will ensure that they have a foundation knowledge of what autism means for their sibling. This is especially important before they enter school, as it will prepare them for the inevitable questions from peers about their brother or sisters behaviour.

The age of the sibling will obviously play a huge part in the detail which you go into with them. Younger children can be given a broader explanation, such as “your sister learns differently to you, so she needs those pictures to help her to understand”, but an older sibling may need a more expansive explanation “Your sister learns differently because of her autism. She finds words much harder to understand, so when we use pictures, she can communicate what she wants or needs, and understands her options”. It is important to be as specific as possible and provide as detailed an explanation as your child’s age will allow. When explaining behaviour, try to give as much detail for the reasoning behind them as possible. Referring to how they express themselves when they experience emotions might help. For example, “when you get excited smile and say that you can’t wait, when your brother gets excited he flaps his hands and makes that sound”.

It will be very important to check that they have understood what you have told them, and periodically engage in the conversation to see if further detail is now required. When children are provided with age appropriate information, it can help them to feel more comfortable and confident when they receive questions from their own friends about their sibling. It will also help them when interacting with their sibling, and understand why they do certain things, especially when those behaviours are more unusual or perhaps challenging.

Teaching Siblings to Respond to Challenging Situations

As children, we are taught the basics about violent behaviour, namely that inflicting an injury on someone else is wrong, and any kind of violence is completely unacceptable. However, the lines of acceptance can become blurred with a sibling with autism exhibits some aggressive behaviour. Siblings may ask why their brother or sister is hitting out or behaving aggressively, and may ask why they can get away with it when it would not be tolerated from them. This may lead to feelings of confusion, frustration and even fear. Explaining this type of behaviour can be a very sensitive conversation which will need to be approached delicately. It may be worth explaining to your child that when their sibling engages in this behaviour, it is because they are hurt or overloaded and they find it difficult to express that. The end result is those emotions can come out as outbursts, and they are often unintentional. Though it may be tempting to say something like “your brother/sister can’t help this behaviour”, this may make the sibling feel like their safety is not your priority, and that you are simply excusing the behaviour. You can help to ease and allay fears by listening to concerns, providing explanations for behaviours, and making plans to help prevent the behaviour occurring in the future, or making plans to help the sibling feel safe in the face of the behaviour.

Challenging situations are called challenging because they challenge the individual experiencing the melt down or tantrum, but also those around them. It can often be difficult to see past the behaviour and notice the vulnerability of the person exhibiting the behaviour, but once we look for the why, the solution can come far easier. For more information on the intricacies of behaviour, please see our behaviour section.

While we can easily become caught up in the situation, and forget those around us, it is important to keep in mind that small eyes are always watching. Keep in mind that children will often mirror their parent’s reactions, and if they notice you responding calmly, and with compassion, when circumstances are challenging, they are more likely to respond in a similar manner. We can all slip up at times though, and it is important to discuss this with your child so that they also understand that you reacted differently than you usually would. We are all human, and mistakes happen!

If your child’s sibling questions what you did and why, be sure to answer with as much detail as possible. For example, “I got down to her level so that I wasn’t towering above her and I could make eye contact with her. I tried to stay calm so that she could see it was okay, and I showed her how to breathe in through her nose and out through her mouth to help her to slow her breathing and calm down”. This will help them to know how to cope if this happens in future and a parent is not to hand. Even if they only pick up part of what you have said, it may be enough to defuse the situation or momentarily calm their sibling.

Sibling Interaction

Siblings of children with autism are as diverse as their brothers or sisters, so it is important to remember that each of your children will experience having a sibling with autism differently. This experience is influenced by a number of factors, including their age and their gender. Your daughter may take on a nurturing role, and your son may want to engage in rough play, or vice versa! You may also find that younger children may mimic the behaviour of their sibling and may not understand if they are chastised for this. Keep in mind that children differ greatly, and the way one of your children reacts will be completely different to that of another. Keep your expectations flexible, and try not to assume that one child's reaction will be the same as another's. While one child's reaction may be more outwardly caring, it may not be as easy for your other child or children to be as compassionate. Ensure to acknowledge and validate each child's efforts and each child's feelings. Doing so will help them to find their way through some of the more challenging aspects of having a sibling on the autism spectrum.

It is only natural that siblings will be embarrassed by their brother or sisters' behaviour at some stage, with or without a diagnosis, but when the embarrassment stems from an autism related behaviour, it can leave them feeling conflicted. They may feel embarrassed but also guilty for feeling this way. It is important to stress that all emotions are okay, and we only feel them because the thing that they are attached to is so important to us. If they feel comfortable, they can explain their sibling's behaviour to their friends, so it is important that they have been equipped with enough information and confidence to do this. You can also explain to your child that they don't have to do anything at all if they are not comfortable with it, and you are okay with either way of handling the situation. Some people will be rude and stare, it is perfectly okay to ignore them. There will always be people who don't understand, but your child can control their reaction and their attitude in the face of this situation.

One to One time

One to one time with siblings can be very important, as they may feel left out when you leave them to bring their sibling to appointments. While you understand that these appointments are necessary and essential, they see you spending that time with their sibling, and leaving them behind.

While you can explain that these appointments are not “fun”, it is also essential to plan one to one time with them so that they get that face time with you to discuss any problems or issues they are having, as well as to share successes they have experienced. This one to one time can be as simple as a walk in the park or a little more of a treat like a lunch or hot chocolate date, it's completely up to you! Keep your child in mind when you pick the activity, as it will need to be something that they will actually enjoy.

If you are a single parent, it may be necessary to plan this when their sibling is at school, in home tuition or day services. If none of the above is possible, maybe a late evening movie treat when their sibling has gone to bed is an option? If a family member or friend has previously offered to help, take them up on it, even if it's only for an hour. If you have no other option, try to set up a safe activity that your child will engage with in a separate room, and have the one to one time then. Look at your options, and choose what is best for you.

Negative Emotions

Children will often be embarrassed by their parents and or siblings behaviour. Anything which sets them apart from their friends or behaviour which seems out of the norm may cause them embarrassment. This is a perfectly natural emotion, and will be echoed by thousands of tweens and teens around the country at any moment, with or without a special needs child in the family. When the embarrassment does stem from a developmental difference, there can be a conflict of emotions for siblings, as they know the child cannot help their behaviour. This can lead to siblings experiencing feelings of guilt about their emotions. They may resent when their sibling engages in self stimulatory behaviour in public or experiences meltdowns, drawing unwanted attention. These behaviours can appear “odd” to strangers, and it can be extremely difficult for siblings to deal with this attention.

It is important that you let your child know that all emotions are valuable, and it is okay to feel embarrassed. Emotions are there to let us know that things are important to us, and feeling like this shows that you care about your sibling, and don't want people to look at them differently. If they feel confident, you can urge them to explain autism or the behaviour that their sibling is engaging in to the person. You may need to guide them on how they can be helpful rather than defensive when discussing autism. If they are not comfortable to discuss it, then that is perfectly acceptable too. Some people will be rude and stare, and it's best to ignore this. Even if you explain, some people will still not fully understand, but the one thing that your child can control is how they react to these people.

Other negative emotions which siblings may experience can include, anger, resentment, guilt, loss, and jealousy. Children may not understand how to cope with these emotions, and will need reassurance and direction. As with embarrassment, it is important to affirm that it is okay to feel any emotion at all, positive or negative, this is a natural part of being human.

Try to keep the lines of communication as open as possible, and be careful not to shame them for experiencing an emotion. Affirm that it is okay that they feel like that, and then look for ways to help alleviate the emotions. The most important thing is to acknowledge the emotion, and not brush it to the side, or make the child feel guilty for experiencing this emotion. It may be an idea to discuss times when you felt similarly and how you managed to cope. Open communication can foster emotional acceptance rather than resistance, and can normalise negative emotions for the child.

Nurturing the Sibling Relationship

While sibling relationships will naturally have their ups and downs, it is a very special bond. Autism can make it a little harder for brothers and sisters to bond, as it is harder to connect socially, but this doesn't mean that a strong bond cannot be forged. Some children will have no difficulty developing a close relationship, but others will find it difficult to overcome autism's major relationship barriers. These barriers include communication, displaying affection, as well as finding common interests. Siblings often feel rejected or distant from their sibling with autism, and may feel guilty for not having a close relationship with them. They may see friends experiencing this close bond with their typically developing siblings, and feel jealous of this bond. It is often the case that siblings can experience great love for their sibling, but also feel a sense of loss that their relationship is not as developed as they would like.

Fostering a relationship between siblings can be as simple as finding ways that they can play together. Finding shared interests is also a great starting point. While this may take time and patience, it will be worth the effort. If your child has a more obscure special interest, such as the roads of Ireland, perhaps you could ask the siblings to map a day trip that everyone could enjoy. If your child's special interest is a particular character, and your other child enjoys art, perhaps you could arrange an art session with that character as the central theme. While you will need to be creative and search for overlapping interests, the fruits of your labour will prove its worth. You cannot force them to experience a good relationship, but there are ways that you can foster the development of a stronger sibling bond.

Family Gatherings, Special Events and Socialising

While we can all find family gatherings stressful at times, and they are not always straight forward, having a child on the autistic spectrum can bring extra challenges due to sensory issues and their struggles in social situations. Some siblings may not notice this, but others may be acutely aware, and may feel stressed before the gathering even commences. They may find it more difficult to relax and enjoy the event, as they may be anxious that a meltdown could occur, or that their sibling may be left out by family members with less understanding.

It is important to discuss with them before the event, and discuss possible strategies that you will engage in order to support their sibling through the event. Knowledge is power, and when your child knows what is happening, it may make it easier for them to relax and enjoy. You can also give them something that they can do to help if something occurs. Be careful when deciding on this, as some children will love having the responsibility, while others will feel it is a burden and actively resist it. Only you can judge the best way to approach your child, so use your own instinct in this regard. If they are upset because they anticipate gatherings or parties being cut short to accommodate the needs of their sibling, be sure to acknowledge this, and to perhaps suggest another get together with a cousin or an outing with them in the near future. This can lessen the blow for the sibling.

When attending school plays, dance recitals, or football games, it may be necessary that one parent stays at home with your child with autism, as the crowd and noise, as well as having to stay seated and quiet, may be a challenge for them. It may be difficult for their sibling, who is staring in the performance to understand why both parents cannot attend, or why the entire family cannot be there for their big moment. It is important to have the conversation prior to the event and ensure your child understands why you have made this decision. Telling them that one parent will video the performance for them may be an option, but it is advisable to check with those organising if this is permitted. You could also suggest that they put on a performance in your home for family members, and you could present them with a cup or a medal at that event. In this respect your child with autism can attend, and may be more comfortable in their own surroundings and familiar supports.